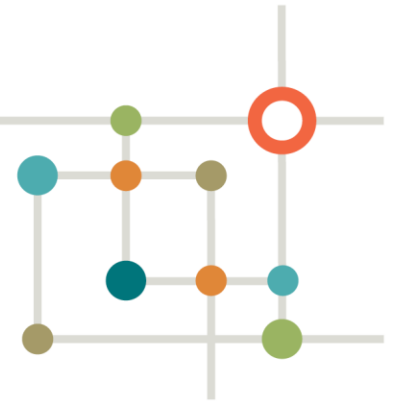


# INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION



## CASE STUDY: GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY Atlanta, Georgia / [www.gsu.edu](http://www.gsu.edu)

<b>Institutional Type:</b>	Multi-campus public research university
<b>Institutional Characteristics:</b>	National leader in graduating students from diverse backgrounds; part of the University System of Georgia
<b>Location:</b>	Seven campus locations throughout the metro area of Atlanta, GA
<b>Full Time Enrollment:</b>	52,000 undergraduate and graduate students (Fall 2016-17)
<b>Annual Operation Budget:</b>	\$993 million (Fall 2017-18)
<b>Board Size:</b>	18 members

### The Challenge: Enhancing Student Success

The 52,000 students attending Georgia State University exemplify the dramatic shift in the students served by American colleges and universities—60 percent non-white, 33 percent first generation, and 58 percent Pell grant recipients. These populations are historically associated with lower levels of achievement in the postsecondary world, and as institutions—including Georgia State University—enroll these students in increasing numbers, innovation for student success is essential.

To serve a transforming student body, Georgia State has launched [a host of integrated programs](#) intended to level the playing field and enable all students—regardless of background—to succeed at the institution and beyond. As part of this effort, the university is using predictive analytics to tackle two of the biggest roadblocks to student success: academic setbacks and financial challenges.

### Predictive Analytics Allow Key Interventions

One of the challenges confronting the university in serving its students was an outdated and overburdened advising system. Georgia State set out to revolutionize its advising processes, analyzing ten years of student data, grades, and graduation rates to create a list of 800 indicators of academically at-risk students. The institution used these indicators to develop an early-warning system for advisors, called Graduation and Progression Success (GPS). GPS updates student grades and records each night and sends push notifications to advisors about students who could be at risk based on its predictive criteria. To date, over 200,000 advisor interventions have been prompted by GPS.

Georgia State also applied predictive analytics to another crucial area impacting student success and retention: financial aid. Noticing that almost 1,000 students dropped out each semester with owed balances of \$1,500 or less, the university launched the Panther Retention Grants program to provide micro grants to these students. This program uses data to identify academically qualified students facing financial trouble and automatically transfers up to \$1,500 into their account, allowing them to remain enrolled and continue to advance towards their degree.



## Closing the Achievement Gap

These two initiatives have profoundly impacted student success at Georgia State, particularly for its student populations that demonstrate lower achievement levels at other institutions. The university now confers 67 percent more undergraduate degrees than it did six years ago, and most significantly, achievement gaps between high-risk student populations and the total student body have disappeared, with African-American student, Hispanic students, and low-income students graduating at the same rates as white and middle- and upper-income students.

Georgia State University now serves as a model for other institutions to follow. As a member of the University Innovation Alliance (UIA), the institution is helping others launch the GPS and micro grant programs with hopes that these programs—implemented across the 11 UIA institutions and beyond—can help the nation close postsecondary achievement gaps and achieve its ambitious college completion goals.

## Georgia State University's Tim Renick on Innovation

Below, Dr. Tim Renick—vice president for enrollment management and student success and vice provost at Georgia State—reflects on innovation at Georgia State and lessons learned throughout the process.

### Q: What motivated Georgia State to pursue these innovations?

When it comes to higher education, the vision of the United States as a land of equal opportunity is far from reality. Today, it is *seven times* more likely that an individual among the top 25 percent of Americans by annual household income will hold a college degree than an individual in the lowest 25 percent. White students graduate from college at rates up to 20 points above black and Latino students.

A decade ago, Georgia State University exemplified these problems. Georgia State's institutional graduation rate stood at 32 percent and underserved populations were floundering. Graduation rates were 22 percent for Latinos, 29 percent for African Americans, and 18 percent for African-American males. Pell students were graduating at rates far below those of non-Pell students.

With a student population growing increasingly more diverse—it is now 67 percent non-white and 60 percent low-income—we had to find a way to succeed with the very students that most struggled at Georgia State—and nationally. The fiscal health of the university as well as the welfare of our 52,000 students depended on it.

Thanks to a campus-wide commitment to student success and more than a dozen analytics-informed programs implemented over several years, Georgia State's achievement gaps are gone. Last year, African-American, Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation students all graduated from Georgia State at or above the rates of the student body overall. Low-income students now are as successful as middle- and upper-income students. The total number of undergraduate degrees conferred annually has increased by more than 2,800 over the past six years alone, and Georgia State now confers more bachelor's degrees to African Americans than any nonprofit university in the United States.

### Q: What challenges did you encounter throughout the process? How did you overcome these challenges?

A few years ago, fully-qualified and registered students dropped from their courses every semester because they could not cover the costs of tuition and fees. Most of these students were seniors a semester or two away from graduating. Why? Scholarships, grants, and loans all have eligibility limits and, because



almost 90 percent of our students work, many were running out of eligibility before finishing their requirements. They were dropping out and walking away without their degrees, some with balances of only a few hundred dollars.

In 2011, we launched an analytics-informed financial intervention: Panther Retention Grants. For as little as \$300, these grants provide emergency funding to allow students to stay enrolled. The program uses data and analytics to identify students who need a financial hand and awards students proactively. Last year, more than 2,000 Georgia State students were kept on the path to attaining a degree through the program.

Our data also revealed that hundreds of students dropped out of Georgia State every semester for academic reasons without ever talking with an academic advisor or seeing a tutor. In effect, we were waiting for low-income, first-generation students to diagnose their own academic problems and to reach out for help. Shouldn't this be the institution's responsibility? With tens of thousands of students from at-risk populations enrolled at Georgia State, how would we provide such proactive help?

In 2012, we launched GPS Advising. The system uses 10 years of student data to create predictive analytics for how each individual student will fare in most courses. It tracks students' decisions and academic performances and alerts advisors when a student goes off path. Advisors then reach out to help students within 48 hours. This past year, the GPS system prompted 52,000 individual meetings between advisors and students. Thousands of additional students are graduating each year, and they are taking less time to do so. Most strikingly, the number of students succeeding in some of the most difficult academic fields—biology and computer science—has more than doubled because academic issues impeding students are identified and corrected immediately.

### **Q: What was the board's involvement in this innovation on your campus?**

The principle guiding our efforts has been a pledge to improve student outcomes through *inclusion* rather *exclusion*. In the 2011 Georgia State University Strategic Plan, we committed to improving our graduation rates significantly, but not by turning our backs on the low-income, underrepresented, and first-generation students who we have traditionally served. On the contrary, we pledged to increase their numbers *and* to serve them better. The central goal that we have set for our undergraduate success efforts is highly ambitious, but intentionally so: Georgia State would “become a national model for undergraduate education by demonstrating that students from all backgrounds can achieve academic and career success at high rates.”

Pursuing these goals as an institution posed several challenges to the Georgia State University Foundation board. First, they required a willingness to deal with a level of risk. Ultimately, the initiatives that are outlined here have paid for themselves in millions of dollars of additional revenues through tuition and fees. But significant investments came first, and the revenue followed. The board has been very nimble and willing to facilitate rather than hinder bold actions. This points to another reason data are so important. We grounded our bold proposals in evidence, not intuition, making them easier for board members to support them. As the vice president for enrollment and student success, I deliver a substantive, one-hour presentation to the board annually. This is critical to securing buy-in, understanding, and advocacy.

A second challenge has been that the board has had to accept less traditional measures of excellence. During this period of immense progress in student outcomes, Georgia State *dropped* 33 points in



incoming SAT scores and *fell over 20 places* in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. National rankings typically reward elitism and selectivity, not inclusion. Our board has been fully supportive of our evolving mission, but many boards would see declines in some of these metrics as unacceptable. To such boards, it is important to point out that Georgia State has been recognized in [far more impactful and meaningful ways](#).

### **Q: What did this process teach you about developing a culture of innovation?**

Our work to promote student success at Georgia State has increased graduation rates among traditionally high-risk student populations, but it has also served to foster a culture of student success among faculty, staff, and administration. As the story of Georgia State University demonstrates, institutional transformation in the service of student success does not come about from a single program, but grows from a series of changes that undergo continual evaluation and refinement. It also shows how a series of initially small initiatives, when scaled over time, can significantly transform an institution's culture.

### **Q: What other lessons did you learn, and what advice would you offer other institutions pursuing innovation?**

Georgia State University's efforts over the past few years show that students from all backgrounds can succeed at high rates and that dramatic gains are indeed possible—not through changing the nature of the students served but through changing the nature of the institution that serves them. How has Georgia State University made these gains? Our general approach can be summarized as follows:

- Use data aggressively to identify and understand the most pervasive obstacles to students' progressions and completion.
- Be willing to address the problems by becoming an early adopter. This means piloting new strategies and experimenting with new technologies. After all, we will not solve decades-old problems by the same old means.
- Track the impacts of the new interventions via data and adjust as necessary to improve results.
- Scale the initiatives that prove effective to have maximal impact. In fact, many of the programs that we offer are currently benefitting 10,000 students or more annually.

Student-success programs are not merely the right thing to do, they are the fiscally prudent thing to do. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contracted Boston Consulting Group to conduct an ROI study of Georgia State's student success programs. BCG found that the student success initiatives at Georgia State have more than paid for themselves. We expanded the student-success initiatives during the depths of the Recession, a period when Georgia State lost \$40 million in state appropriations. Despite those losses, Georgia State University revenues increased every year. By holding on to hundreds and then thousands of additional students, the institution recovered millions of dollars in revenues from tuition and fees.

Georgia State still has work to do, but our progress demonstrates that significant improvements in student success outcomes can come through embracing inclusion rather than exclusion, and that such gains can be made even amid a context of constrained resources. It shows that, even at large public universities, we can provide students with personalized supports that have transformative impacts. Perhaps most importantly, the example of Georgia State shows that demographics are not destiny and achievement gaps are not inevitable. Low-income and underrepresented students can succeed at the same levels as their peers.



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