



GEORGIA COLLEGE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

SECTION 1. INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND STUDENT BODY PROFILE

Mission

Georgia College & State University is Georgia's designated public liberal arts institution. To fulfill that mission, Georgia College emphasizes exemplary teaching, highly intentional student engagement, leadership preparation, and diversity as part of its expansive undergraduate educational experience. Georgia College also offers select graduate programs to address regional needs and professional advancement opportunities. Georgia College strives to gain increasing national attention for its strong academic and transformational programs and become a nationally preeminent public liberal arts university.

Student Body Profile

Overall Undergraduate Enrollment

Georgia College's Fall 2021 undergraduate enrollment is 5,591 students, 52 of whom are from out-of-state and 45 of whom are international students.

First Time Freshmen Admitted

For Fall 2021, Georgia College enrolled a first-time, full-time freshmen cohort of 1507, a 10.6% increase from Fall 2020 and a "return to normal" following the COVID pandemic. The Fall incoming freshman 2021 class obtained an average high school gpa of 3.59, a 1.7% increase from last year. We also enrolled 167 new transfer students.

Retention

For ten years prior to the pandemic, our first-year retention remained between 83.11 and 85.9%. In Fall 2020, Georgia College's first year retention rate decreased to 82.33%. In Fall 2021, it further decreased to 77.98%. Although Georgia College remains third in the University System in first year retention rates, this was a disappointing shift for our institution. In addition, in Fall 2021, our second year and fourth year retention rates also declined. Repeated feedback indicates that these declines were in direct response to the pandemic. In Fall 2020, students who did not return consistently reported concerns about face-to-face instruction, lack of online and commuter learning options, and potential exposure to the virus in both housing and academic settings. In Fall 2021, students who did not return reported that a lack of connection and campus engagement during the 2020-2021 academic year and that complications from the pandemic – whether social, emotional, economic, academic, or personal – affected their decision to return.

To help us achieve national preeminence and reach our retention goals, Georgia College continues to strive for a long-term first-year retention goal of at least 90%. To accomplish this, we will need to immediately recover from the effects of the pandemic and return to a mid-80% retention rate for the class of Fall 2021.

Graduation

Despite the pandemic, Georgia College celebrated a 50.31% four-year graduation rate for its Fall 2017 first-time freshmen class, marking the second year in a row that our four-year graduation rate surpassed the 50% mark. These two classes were both advised throughout their entire college career by professional advisors in our Academic Advising Center, which was reorganized in 2016 as part of a shift to a campus-wide professional advisor model.

To help us achieve national preeminence and reach our graduation goals, Georgia College's goal is to maintain a graduation rate of at least 50%, with noticeable increases each year.

Additional Student Body Characteristics

Enrolled Georgia College students are primarily full-time, residential, and in-state. Our top feeder high schools are all from the Atlanta area. The largest number of new transfer students were previously enrolled at Georgia Military College, which is located less than a mile from our campus and with which Georgia College has a long-standing transfer articulation agreement.

Georgia College is a predominately white institution, with 82.7% of undergraduates identifying as white, non-Hispanic and 63.9% of undergraduates identifying as female. Increasing and retaining diverse students remains one of our annual admission and retention goals.

Georgia College undergraduates are predominately between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. We have 25 undergraduates over the age of 30, 16 of whom are degree-seeking students.

Georgia College students benefit greatly from the state's HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarship Programs. Unfortunately, mostly likely also as a result of the pandemic, the percentage of students who currently receive the HOPE scholarship fell from 65.6% in Fall 2020 to 59.5% in Fall 2021, However, we the percentage of students receiving the Zell Miller Scholarship increased from 14.5% to 15.6% in that same time period.

While Georgia College students rank second in parental affluence among USG institutions, the number of students receiving the Pell Grant fell from 20.5% at this point in the 2020-2021 aid year to 16% at this point in the 2021-2022 aid year. The number of students receiving federal loans in 2021-2022 also decreased by 6%, from 60.5% to 54%. Considering the current economic environment in the United States, this suggests that our economically disadvantaged students are having a hard time maintaining access to higher education. Thankfully, funding through federal HEERF funding has allowed us to assist many students with demonstrated academic need, including 3,563 students in Fall 2021 (64% of undergraduates) who collectively received \$5,244,500 in additional funds.

Over the past five years, we have seen a steady increase in the number of Georgia College students registering with our Student Disability Resource Center and receiving services from our Counseling Center, which indicates a variety of academic and non-academic concerns that could affect student persistence.

Impact of COVID-19 on the Student Body Profile.

As mentioned above, Georgia College has experienced significant variance in its enrollment over the past two years for reasons directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Enrollment concerns from students and parents included Georgia College's mandatory first-year housing requirement, preferences for face-to-face or online teaching modalities, and accommodating student health conditions. Georgia College made concerted efforts to offer as many of its undergraduate classes as possible in a face-to-face format during the Fall 2020 semester, transitioning to online instruction only to accommodate approved faculty health issues. Georgia College returned to fully face-to-face undergraduate instruction in Fall 2021. However, the changes in overall enrollment numbers, retention, and financial aid eligibility and distribution all point to the same conclusion that the pandemic had serious effects on our students and the institution that will linger for several years.

Comparison with Peer Institutions

Georgia College's 15 comparative peer institutions include colleges and universities from across the nation that share membership in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) or that have strong undergraduate liberal arts programs, including Radford University, Longwood University, and Winthrop University. Georgia College maintains a competitive reputation among this group. Based on Fall 2021 data, Georgia College ranks third in first-year retention, behind only Ramapo College of New Jersey and the State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo. With a 61.7% six-year graduation rate and a 17 to 1 student/faculty ratio, Georgia College ranks near the middle, demonstrating both an opportunity for aspirational growth and competitive advantage.

SECTION 2: IMPROVEMENT PRACTICES

Georgia College engages in a process of continuous improvement that is focused on strategic planning and unit goals. Recruitment, retention, and graduation is the first goal in our strategic plan and engages every office and department on campus. The majority of our student-specific initiatives are included in our Momentum Plan, which is described in depth in Section 3 of this report. In addition, GC has implemented or continued the following initiatives.

The Registrar's Office, the Academic Advising Center, and the academic departments continue to collaborate closely to ensure that registration is a smooth and easy process for students, that there are no barriers to completion in our major programs, and that adequate numbers of course seats are available each semester. By working closely with offices whose holds block registration, we have significantly decreased the number of students who are unable to register at their assigned time; for example, during registration for Spring 2022, only 37 students were stopped from registering as a result of significant, older parking fines.

Our Financial Aid Office directed millions of dollars in HEERF funding to economically challenged students. For students facing financial barriers, Georgia College has been proactive in encouraging the use of no-cost or low-cost textbooks and freezing additional fees.

The Academic Advising Center continues to implement an appreciative advising model. Appreciative advising has been shown to have significant impacts on student retention and graduation. It provides the framework for a strong, supportive relationship between the advisor and student and helps the student optimize their educational experiences. Over 300 peer reviewed articles in the past five years have demonstrated how appreciate advising is applicable to almost every subpopulation of students and have documented that it results in increased outcomes. We expect that this process will help students identify additional ways to be a more active participant in their education and also create stronger affective ties with Georgia College. We also believe it will reduce motivational obstacles for students by helping them identify areas of study and experiences about which they are most passionate.

To reconnect with students who stopped out during the pandemic, we have developed and implemented new processes to reenroll students and help them get back on track for degree completion. This process is initiated by the Registrar and is supported by the academic advising staff.

Recognizing the need for additional mental health services on our campus, we were also grateful to be a part of the University System's initiative to implement Christie Campus for our students.

Finally, in Summer 2021, GC began implementation of the Civitas Advising and Retention platform. Currently in the testing and validation phase, this product will have a soft launch on our campus in January 2022. Civitas will allow us to better implement early alert systems, incorporate feedback from GeorgiaView and faculty to assist students at risk, improve student communication, and help us prioritize student needs. We have a large stakeholder group that includes numerous offices across campus as well as faculty representatives from each college to provide feedback on implementation decisions, generate enthusiasm and support for the product across campus, and identify ways their departments might be able to contribute to and benefit from this product.

We look forward to the many improvement opportunities already identified for the coming academic year, recognizing that many of these need to be tailored to and designed to compensate for the challenges COVID-19 has had on our campus. We are anxious to return to our prior success rates and move forward on our path to preeminence.

SECTION 3. BIG IDEA

During Fall 2020, partially in response to Momentum Committee's work, the President, Dr. Dorman, tasked the University Retention committee as a standing committee to focus specifically on issues of retention and graduation that were raised by the Momentum Committee. The synergy of the Momentum Committee and the Retention Committee might be GC's biggest accomplishment, and this partnership led to, among other things, a redesign of the First Year Academic Seminar. The Retention Committee membership consists of:

Chairs

- Suzanne Pittman – Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management
- Chris Ferland - Associate Vice President of Institutional Research and Effectiveness
- Ken McGill - Professor of Chemistry and Physics

Committee Members

- Jordan Cofer - Associate Provost of Transformative Learning and Experiences
- Kay Anderson – University Registrar and Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management
- Shannon Simmons – Director of Financial Aid
- Shawn Brooks – Vice President for Student Life
- Lee Gillis – Chair / Professor of Psychology
- Lisa Griffin – Director of School of Health and Human Performance
- Michelle Johnson - Director of Academic Advising
- Nadirah Mayweather – Director of Cultural Center
- Nicole Declouette – Associate Professor of Special Education/Interim Associate Dean
- Brent Evans – Assistant Professor of Economics

Traditionally, Georgia College boasts a year one retention rate between 84-86%, which is a commendable rate, but strives to increase overall retention as well as student satisfaction.

Understanding the restrictions and vast complications due to the Covid-19 pandemic is a priority for this committee, while also balancing the needs and expectations of our students and families. One of the outcomes the retention committee discovered was that our internal data suggests student feelings of isolation and stress. Thus, intentional connection to the university is more essential than

ever, especially outside the classroom. GC students expect active engagement and to be involved in the campus community. The following themes were identified as priorities for Georgia College students:

- Early and meaningful engagement with faculty
- Social engagement and involvement with student life
- Meaningful attachment to campus and community
- Enhanced communication and engagement externally with our parents and families and internally with the campus community.
- Improved processes for attracting native students back to Georgia College when stopping out and additional data collection to gain insight into transfer decisions.

As a result, the Retention committee submitted the following recommendations to the president:

- Revising the First Year Experience/First Year Seminar
- Enhanced Parent Programming and Communication
- Recruit Back Program for Non-Returning Students
- More Data Required for the Withdrawal Process
- Improved Methods of Campus Wide Communication of Momentum Approach
- Coordinate with Nudge Unit to Develop Data-Driven Retention Strategies

As part of the student success strategy, Dr. Dorman tasked the appropriate areas of the college with making these changes. For the Momentum Committee, it meant redesigning the First Year Academic Seminar. This redesign, which was a direct result of our conversations at Momentum Summit IV became GC's Big Idea.

First Year Seminar Redesign

After the Momentum Committee pitched "our big idea" of redesigning our First Year Seminar, Dr. Dorman tasked a small subgroup to complete work on a curricular redesign of the Freshman Seminar courses at Georgia College, as part of the First Year Experience. This committee considered of:

- Jordan Cofer - Associate Provost of Transformative Learning and Experiences (co-chair)
- Lisa Griffin – Director of School of Health and Human Performance (co-chair)
- Lee Gillis – Chair / Professor of Psychology
- Michelle Johnson - Director of Academic Advising
- Nicole Declouette – Associate Professor of Special Education/Interim Associate Dean
- Brent Evans – Assistant Professor of Economics
- Erin Weston- Director of First Year Experience (Ex Officio)

In the current iteration of GC's first year experience, GC students not only take a First Year Academic Seminar, where they are onboarded for GC Journeys, but also take GC1Y, interdisciplinary courses led by faculty teaching on a topic of interest. The students form relationships with their academic advisors who teach their First Year Academic Seminar (GCSU 0001). While all of our assessment has shown that our GC1Y courses were successful, it is the academic seminar (GCSU001) that was targeted for improvement. Subsequently, this seminar is also where students take the Mindset Assessment. One of the first tasks of the subcommittee was to examine all the data available. As evidenced in recent surveys (NSSE 2020, 2017, 2014 and SSI 2016, 2018) and focus group discussions (Noel Levitz, 2019), the committee noticed a trend that Georgia College students desire more engagement, academic challenge, and connections with faculty in their intended majors earlier in their GC experience. Next, the committee worked with experts from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience at the University of South Carolina to discuss what an ideal seminar experience would look like, including multiple meetings with Dr. Nirmal Trivedi at Kennesaw State University, an expert in First Year Seminars. As a result, the committee created four learning outcomes for the course:

- Make connections with faculty, staff, and students.
- Explain what the liberal arts means to you [as a student].
- Create a 4-year plan, which includes the completion of a GC Journeys plan.
- Create 3 different career paths.

The committee also worked with University Communication to help re-brand the course, and ended up with TREK, with the idea that a trek is the beginning of a journey. From there, the committee recommended a pilot study for Fall 2021 to test out the new First Year Experience course. Initially, the committee expected only a few departments to join in the first pilot session, however, 17 different departments volunteered to cover 31 sections, which represented over half (55.38%) of the total sections of First Year Seminar for Fall 2021. It is too early to share any results of the pilot, which is currently under way.

Additionally, our first-year seminar includes a robust program that is now in full swing—the First Year Guides. The First Year Guides are peer leaders, often in their junior or senior year, who serve as an embedded resource for the first-year students. First Year Guides are embedded in the First Year Seminar, work in concert with the faculty, and have individual meetings and consultations with the students. They also sent out a weekly group text to students to reinforce the curricular issues in the class and to alert first year students to events and opportunities occurring across campus. As such, this has been an excellent communication mechanism.

Assessment of the Big Idea

Currently, our assessment for the pilot sections of our redesigned First Year Academic Seminar (TREK) is being assessed in several ways. First, to assess the achievement of our learning outcomes, students in the TREK sections will take both a pre and post-test. Second, the Office of First Year Experience created a First Year Seminar advisory group. This group will be a part of 3 different focus group sections, which will provide feedback on the success of these courses. Currently, the Advisory group consists of one student from each of the pilot sections. The group's first meeting was in October. Finally, the Office of First Year Experience will bring together the First Year Academic Seminar redesign committee with the faculty who taught the first year curriculum. These groups will go over the highs and lows of the course and make recommendations for the committee. Using this data, the committee will provide a recommendation to the Provost.

SECTION 4.1: MOMENTUM WORK RESILIENCE UPDATE

The Momentum Year Committee met and worked in conjunction with our Office of Transformative Learning Experiences and the newly formed Retention Committee. The following strategies were identified by the Momentum Year Committee as priorities for 2021.

- Revising the First Year Experience/First Year Seminar
- Enhanced Parent Programming and Communication
- Recruit Back Program for Non-Returning Students
- More Data Required for the Withdrawal Process
- Improved Methods of Campus Wide Communication of Momentum Approach
- Coordinate with Nudge Unit to Develop Data-Driven Retention Strategies

What has been accomplished since the Momentum Summit?

Revising the First Year Experience (“Big Idea”) took priority for our Momentum Year Committee, and we are happy to say that a lot has been accomplished. The Committee completed a redesign of First Year Experience and is running a pilot of 31 sections, as we speak. This was a huge undertaking, and is one that has taken many resources, and will require continued assessment and tweaking.

Additionally, we worked with the Office of Student Engagement to make recommendations on enhanced parent programming and communication. Ultimately, we examined some of the best practices in the USG (such as Georgia Tech) and made recommendations. This summer, the university purchased a new software package, which will help with parent communication.

Next, the Office of the Registrar worked to redesign the Student Withdraw forms to collect more student data on students who withdraw. It is our hope that as we learn more about the reasons that are students do withdraw, we can do more to retain those students.

We coordinated with the GC Nudge Unit, who made several suggestions about retention and recruitment strategies (as well as how to connect with students), we have already enacted one of their recommendations (working to get students to apply earlier).

Furthermore, we also were able to recommend that the University purchase Civitas as a student success software that will help centralize our Momentum Year efforts. We are optimistic that this will help move the needle on data-driven solutions for student success. Finally, we have been working with the Office of First Year Experience, and the Cultural Center (among others) on launching a new GC Journeys Diverse Scholars initiative. With funding from the Office of the Provost, this will serve as an academic learning community that will be cohorted together. It is our hope to, ultimately, work with our office of advancement to fundraise for support of these students' experience in high-impact practices.

How has your approach changed from your original plan?

While our approach hasn't changed significantly since the inception of our original plan (GC Journeys), our plan has evolved. Based on our assessments, our plan has tried to address opportunities to expand innovative pedagogies and experiential learning, while keeping our focus strictly on student success. The formation of our retention committee has helped to create a broader network of stakeholders for feedback, and to make our approach more granular and less broad. It has also helped to engage other areas of our university, beyond academic affairs, while helps us offer a more holistic approach.

Where are you currently challenged?

Most of our challenges are not unique to Georgia College. Obviously, the biggest challenge was COVID 19, which has impacted more than retention, progression, and graduation—it has created a fatigue, as both faculty and staff are understandably exhausted. The challenge is to motivate faculty and staff to help continue to sustain our good work, while also taking care of themselves. But Institutionally, we know that we have difficulty in campus communication since there are so many things on campus happening, that it can be hard to communicate these approaches. To remedy this, and centralize our approach, a small task force identified Civitas as a potential solution. Finally, as UGA's increased capacity for their incoming first year class and transfer classes have increased, this has drastically impacted our recruiting and retention. Yet, despite our challenges, we had the third highest retention in the USG, and our 4-year graduation numbers stayed steady and over 50% (50.31).

What successes have you had?

We've had several successes this year, great and small, beginning with winning the Momentum Year award for Excellence in Teaching and Curricular Innovation to last week's GC Journeys Symposium, which had 80 people (faculty and staff) in attendance and featured nationally-renown speakers. While these successes have varied, they include:

- Winner of the USG Momentum Year award for Excellence in Teaching and Curricular Innovation.
- Mentored Undergraduate Research and Creative Endeavors won the CUR AURA award (Award for Undergraduate Research Achievement).
- Hosted an AAC&U Webinar with over 800 people registered, focusing on our GC Journeys Initiative.
- Selected for Mellon Grant (College & Beyond Initiative) with University of Michigan
- GC Journeys presentations at SACSCOC, AAC&U, Assessment Institute, and Momentum Summit.
- Maintained 3rd highest retention rate in the USG (78%), even during COVID19, kept 4 year graduation rates at <50% (50.31%), and our six-year graduation rate slightly increased to 62.05 percent.
- Created and piloted a redesigned First Year Academic Seminar (TREK) with 31 sections.
- In process of implementing Civitas as a Student Success portal.
- Implemented a new parent communication system based on Retention Committee recommendations.
- Hosted GC Journeys Symposium (October 2021) with 80 people in attendance. The symposium focused on GC's Momentum Year plans and included Cole Woodcox (Executive Director of the Council for Public Liberal Arts Colleges) and Debra Humphreys (Lumina Foundation).

What lessons have you learned?

This year has definitely been a learning year, but COVID really accentuated the need to work together systematically across campus. The biggest lesson that our committee learned was how much work on student success was happening, but was happening in silos. We have made some steps to tear down these silos (such as purchasing Civitas, hosting regular meetings, etc.), but we know that we still have more work to do.

In what way does your work support the success of all students on your campus, including Black, Latinx, and First Generation College students?

Perhaps the biggest advantage that we have is that we know, based on McNair and Finney's work, that high-impact practices benefit all students, particularly underserved students, which is why recruiting and supporting underserved students is a university priority which shows up in our Momentum Year plans, our university strategic plan, and in our forthcoming diversity action plan. Finally, while we are in the midst of starting our GC Journeys Diverse Scholars initiative, we also applied to be a part of the Gates Foundation/AASCU Transformation Accelerator, which is a competitive two-year program that will chose 15 institutions and work with those institutions to support underserved students. If selected, we hope to become national models for underserved student success.

What are your next steps to ensure your work is sustainable and resilient?

We have built in Momentum Year into the fabric and structures of the institution. It is part of our GC Journeys initiative, it is embedded into our Office of Transformative Experiences, and in our strategic plan. Furthermore, our university retention committee is a standing committee that continues to meet regularly.