

Classroom Experience Survey and Focus Group Results Summary

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INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Starting in spring 2020, Georgia Tech made alterations to campus operations to operate safely and effectively within the context of Covid-19. These alterations to campus operations have included shifts in course modalities and service delivery in effort to allow students to continue their education safely and with as little disruption as possible. While some Georgia Tech courses were originally intended for an online environment, the alterations to campus operations made transitioning some traditionally in-person courses to a remote or hybrid environment a necessity. Because of this, the description of “remote” courses described throughout this report should be thought of as categorically different from courses originally intended to be taught online.

In fall 2020, the Academic Restart Taskforce conducted focus groups and a student survey in effort to better understand the impact of this shift in course modalities on student learning as well as the broader student experience during this time of modified campus operations. A total of 224 undergraduate students, graduate students and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), and faculty and instructors participated in the focus group sessions. Faculty and Instructor sessions were mode-specific, focusing on either residential, hybrid, or remote courses. The purpose of these focus group sessions was to gain an in-depth understanding of each course modality including challenges and best practices that might inform spring 2021 operations. A summary of focus group participation can be seen below.

Focus Group Participation		
Type of Group	Number of Groups	Total Participants
Undergraduate	13	112
Graduate/GTA	9	78
Faculty/Instructors	6	34
Total	28	224

Additionally, a total of 6,853 students participated in the Academic Restart Student Survey for a response rate of 30%. This included 2,140 graduate students and 4,713 undergraduate students. Of those who participated, 4,720 reported participating in hybrid courses in fall 2020, 4,479 reported participating in remote courses, 767 reported participating in residential courses, and 286 reported that they were not taking classes in any mode (these participants could be taking thesis or dissertation hours, co-op or internship, etc. and were not asked questions about course modes).

Students could report participation in multiple modes. Students were also asked questions regarding technology, student services, and their general student experience in fall 2020. Students currently enrolled in courses were given the opportunity to participate in the survey. Students in online master’s programs (OMS), professional master’s programs, and traditional distance learning programs were excluded from participating in the survey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students enrolled in residential courses reported the highest levels of engagement with their faculty/instructors and peers this semester when compared to hybrid and remote courses. Meaningful and safe opportunities for in-person engagement in hybrid and residential courses may improve the educational and social experiences for faculty/instructors, GTAs, and students. Similarly, virtual small-group interactions in remote and hybrid courses may ease student, faculty, and GTA sense of isolation and provide opportunities for engaging with others in an online environment.

While all course modes appear to provide similar opportunities for students to effectively learn the material, technology challenges and dual mode instruction often detracted from the learning environment, particularly in the hybrid course mode. Setting expectations around technology, including back-up plans for technology failure, may improve engagement and reduce stress. With so many technology platforms available, faculty, GTAs, and students noted “information overload” and limited expertise on any given platform. Faculty, GTAs, and students noted challenges with assessments and technology and identified a need for evolving assessment measures to match new course modalities.

Students reported that some of their courses intended to be taught as hybrid were either entirely remote or had few, in-person sessions planned. Faculty, GTAs, and students reported a decrease in attendance when students were given the flexibility to attend either remotely or in-person. Many noted the importance of setting course attendance expectations early. Students described that there was a desire for earlier and more clear guidance on what their course would look like for the term. Overall, many acknowledged the extenuating stressors of the pandemic and were appreciative of efforts to establish a sense of normalcy in classes and on Georgia Tech’s campus (both remotely and in-person).

FINDINGS

The following is a summary of important findings across four areas: Engagement Across Modes, Assessment & Effectiveness, Impact of Technology on Teaching & Learning, and Classroom & Campus Culture. These findings should be viewed within the context of alterations to campus operations in fall 2020 which resulted in alterations to traditional course modalities.

Engagement Across Modes

- Student survey respondents reported varying levels of engagement with faculty and instructors based on mode with 55% agreeing or strongly agreeing their remote courses allowed them to engage with their faculty or instructors; 59% agreeing or strongly agreeing their hybrid courses allowed them to engage with their faculty or instructors; and 72% agreeing or strongly agreeing their residential courses allowed them to engage with their faculty or instructors.

- Student survey respondents also reported varying levels of engagement with their peers based on mode with 38% agreeing or strongly agreeing their remote courses allowed them to engage with peers; 42% agreeing or strongly agreeing their hybrid courses allowed them to engage with peers; and 60% agreeing or strongly agreeing their residential courses allowed them to engage with peers.
- Both student and faculty participants engaged in residential sessions described that social distancing was highly respected and/or enforced in their courses; however, students and faculty reported challenges interacting with one another or hearing one another due to face coverings. Those who participated in meaningful in-person experiences, even infrequently, commented on the value of these course sessions to their overall educational and social experience.
- Both student and faculty participants engaged in remote courses commented on the “awkwardness” of remote learning. Some described long pauses when questions were asked, not being able to see others’ faces, teaching to a blank screen, or not getting to know others in the class with them very well. The “awkwardness” was sometimes reduced over time as students and instructors became more comfortable with the technology or with a greater degree of guidance from the instructor or GTA.
- Faculty, students, and GTAs commented on ways in which remote courses with lower enrollments could operate most effectively. Students enrolled in these courses reported that they engaged in conversations with their peers more often, and they felt more comfortable turning on their video during class sessions. Overall, the use of video in courses with lower enrollment (or opportunities for small-group work) was described more positively, and while most noted that it was not required, many reported that it was encouraged.
- Both faculty and student participants reported that small-group experiences promoted student-instructor and peer-to-peer engagement while also easing the sense of isolation (e.g., breakout rooms, group projects, group presentations...etc.). Breakout rooms online were reported by students and faculty as places for more vibrant discussion—particularly when the instructor or GTA provided some structure in those environments.

Assessment and Effectiveness

- Student survey respondents reported similar perceptions on their ability to learn course materials across all course modes. For residential courses, 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed the mode was an effective way to learn the materials, along with 73% of those in hybrid modes, and 72% of those in remote modes.
- Both faculty and student focus group participants did, however, note some challenges with assessments and technology. Some noted issues of technology miscalculating

grades on online quizzes. Others noted the additional stress of using proctoring software as they felt that their behavior might be misinterpreted, or a family member or roommate may accidentally come on screen unplanned. Some instructors noted the benefits of proctoring software as they felt it created a more equitable testing environment and prevented cheating as intended.

- Faculty, GTAs, and students noted the need for evolving assessment measures to match the new modalities. For many, this meant forgoing traditional timed, closed book exams for more frequent shorter quizzes (e.g., open book/open internet). For others, this meant shifting more heavily to projects, essays, or presentations. Instructors frequently noted that adapting their assessment methods often leads to a more meaningful evaluation of the student that they may carry over to future semesters. That said, faculty also noted the time-intensive nature of these assessments as a concern.

Impact of Technology on Teaching and Learning

- Student survey respondents agreed that technology enhanced their learning more so in remote classes than in hybrid classes with 62% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the technology in their remote classes enhanced their learning, whereas 58% reported the technology in their hybrid classes enhanced their learning.
- Similarly, 75% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their instructor appeared confident with technology in remote modes and 70% agreed or strongly agreed on hybrid modes.
- Participants in focus groups noted how managing technology in dual modes was time-consuming. For faculty, many were trying to set up multiple camera views for the class so that remote students could see their classmates, the instructor, and any presentations or class materials. Because of these technology challenges, faculty, GTAs, and students described the experience as “suboptimal for everyone.”
- Some faculty and GTAs reported successfully managing the challenges of a hybrid environment using distinct environments remotely and online. Examples of this included studio work or lab work in-person that was complemented by remote instruction. For some of these hybrid scenarios, there was still some overlap between remote and in-person (e.g., students in lab may be gathering data to be analyzed by students attending remotely).
- Faculty and GTAs noted “lessons learned” in setting expectations around technology early in the course. Some began the semester by encouraging students to use video and utilizing the chat for questions or discussion. When these expectations were set early in the semester and reinforced frequently, they seemed to have the biggest impact on

classroom participation and order.

- Participants noted that one way of reducing stress was to provide students with a back-up plan for technology failure. This included what to do if the instructor got “kicked-out” of the lecture, what to do if the student had technology failures during an exam, or what to do if students could not enter their remote breakout room.
- Participants noted that the abundance of technology platforms offered led to some confusion in accessing course materials, following along with course communications, or developing a sense of expertise on any given platform. Many noted that with multiple platforms came the responsibility to learn how each worked and monitor communications from each, which resulted in “information overload.” Participants often had strong (but varying) opinions on which technology worked best.

Campus and Classroom Culture

- Student survey respondents reported on campus and classroom culture positively with 70% feeling a very strong connection or some connection with Georgia Tech, 92% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their instructors were empathetic with them during Covid-19, and 89% agreeing or strongly agreeing that their instructors were flexible with them during Covid-19.
- Survey respondents reported varying levels of clarity from Institute communications with 63% agreeing or strongly agreeing that communications from the Institute as they related to changes in the academic calendar were clear.
- Across all student services (e.g., academic support, career services, health services...etc.) categories, of those who participated, at least 86% reported being satisfied or very satisfied in each area (with some areas reaching as high as 93%).
- Students reported that some of their courses intended to be taught as hybrid were either entirely remote or had few, in-person sessions planned. Faculty, GTAs, and students reported a decrease in attendance when students were given the flexibility to attend either remotely or in-person.
- Faculty, GTAs, and students noted the importance of setting course attendance expectations early. Students frequently described that there was a desire for earlier and more clear guidance on what their course would look like for the term.
- Focus group participants noted ways in which alterations to campus operations impacted campus or classroom culture. Participants noted that opportunities to make course work feel “normal” were helpful to their well-being. Sometimes this meant an in-person, socially distanced group activity or class discussion. For others it was simply creating remote classroom customs like waving hello or goodbye at the start and end of

class or having some social aspect of the class.

- Faculty, GTAs, and students reported missing the “water cooler talk” aspects of in-person instruction (i.e., the ability to talk casually and build relationships before and after classes). Incorporating this more casual interaction into a remote class was sometimes perceived as awkward though appreciated.
- Students also noted the importance of having faculty and GTAs acknowledge the additional stressors of the pandemic (e.g., health, sense of isolation, and additional family stressors or concerns). Even if instructors could not intervene with these stressors, knowing instructors saw them as not just students helped them feel supported. Conversely, when there was no acknowledgement, some students reported additional stress.
- Students described a sense of isolation that extended into their coursework. This was particularly true in courses that were lecture based with limited engagement with the faculty, GTA, or other students or in asynchronous modes. Students also mentioned the lack of informal conversation with peers and instructors in all modalities—as social distancing made interactions more difficult even in face-to-face modes.
- Similar to the classroom experience, graduate students expressed the need for and appreciation of compassion and understanding from their advisors. Students commented on the need to be viewed as a person with additional stressors outside of their degree progression. Students commented that advisors recognizing and normalizing their reduced productivity and asking about their overall health and well-being is important.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GEORGIA TECH

The following are recommendations for improvement for the Georgia Tech academic experience for spring 2021 based on the information described above.

Creating Opportunities for Classroom Engagement

Creating opportunities for meaningful classroom engagement is important for students, faculty, and GTAs across all modes. In-person learning opportunities (both in residential and in-person sessions of hybrid modes) should prioritize creating safe opportunities for students to actively engage with instructors and their peers. This could include lab or studio work or other opportunities for hands-on active learning. Faculty-led conversations about classroom safety guidelines and how to engage in safe interactions with peers in the classroom may also help students better navigate the classroom environment and feel more comfortable interacting with one another, especially when students may not know one another at the start of the semester.

Opportunities for meaningful engagement, however, should not be limited to in-person interactions, as student survey respondents and focus group participants reported having opportunities for engagement in hybrid and remote modes as well. Virtual small-group discussions, breakout rooms, projects, virtual guest lecturers, or presentations in remote and hybrid courses may ease student, faculty, and GTA sense of isolation and provide opportunities for engaging with others in an online environment.

Supporting New Avenues for Assessment of Student Learning

While students' perception of effectiveness looked similar across modes, focus group participants noted how altering assessments to fit the mode was sometimes helpful and even led to more meaningful assessment of student learning. Some examples of this were limiting the number of traditional, timed exams in favor of projects, essays, or presentations. It is important to note that these methods were often described as time consuming for faculty and GTAs, particularly in large classes.

Providing additional support and tools for faculty in developing new, more meaningful assessments is one way of promoting the use of assessments designed to fit the course modes. This could include support in designing assignments which align to student learning outcomes, support with technology for delivery of student presentations or projects, or support with developing evaluation tools including rubrics to assist with more timely, consistent grading. Additional support for implementing these assessments may also be useful to faculty which could include additional GTA support or other departmental supports.

Enhancing Technology in Teaching

To address concerns raised by faculty, GTAs, and students regarding dual mode instruction, faculty may consider establishing distinct environments (i.e., in person and online). For example, lab or studio work may be complemented by online instruction. Similarly, data collected by students in lab may be analyzed by students attending remotely. Technology may also be used to enhance the learning experience. Faculty may consider the use of a document camera or Smart Board for in-person sessions that may be viewed by a remote audience (synchronously or asynchronously). The availability of multiple Georgia Tech approved technology platforms for a common function leave some faculty and students feeling conflicted about which would be most appropriate for course-related objectives.

Faculty can leverage the expertise of administrators in the Center for Teaching and Learning and Georgia Tech Professional Education (e.g., Remote and Hybrid Teaching Academy and individual consultations) to tailor the technology to their respective course. In addition, faculty and students can access just-in-time resources and address frequently asked questions through Georgia Tech's [Service Now](#) site. Anticipating possible technology failures and communicating a back-up plan may reduce stress and improve the learning experience.

Supporting Well-being Through Campus and Classroom Culture

We are encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive perception that students have of faculty's empathy and flexibility, and we hope to continue this trend moving forward. To address

students' reports that there are limited in-person opportunities in their hybrid courses, faculty are encouraged to provide earlier and clearer guidance regarding attendance and participation. Faculty should also consider ways to promote student-faculty and peer-to-peer engagement in all course modes. Faculty should continue to prioritize health and safety guidelines when setting and communicating policies, and faculty should continue to exhibit flexibility for those who may be unable to attend for health and safety reasons. Faculty are encouraged to continue to support the well-being of students through the acknowledgement of additional stressors of the pandemic and displays of compassion and understanding in their interactions with students.

Georgia Tech may leverage resources through Campus Services, Student Life, the Office of Graduate Studies, and the Office of Undergraduate Education in the support of students who may benefit from added assistance in navigating learning in an online environment. These student and academic support units may also serve as venues for positive and safe engagements with peers and the campus community either in-person and remotely, as they bring together students with common interests, ideas, challenges, or goals. As a community, Georgia Tech may consider offering more opportunities for students to engage outside of the classroom (either virtually or safely in-person) in an effort to ease a sense of isolation and increase a sense of normalcy on our campus.