

# Dóri Pap and Susan Davis – Ideas to Serve: the Evolution of Social Innovation Education at Georgia Tech

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## Abstract

This letter delves into the transformation of social innovation education at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) by exploring the evolution of its Ideas to Serve competition. Against the backdrop of Georgia Tech's vision for the next decade as an inclusive innovation hub, this narrative captures a conversation between Dori Pap, Managing Director, and Susan Davis, Practitioner in Residence at the Institute for Leadership and Social Impact. They discuss how the competition has evolved from fostering "heropreneurs" to empowering students to critically engage with systemic social issues. They present a compelling recap of how Georgia Tech has reimagined social innovation education by elevating community-based organizations as co-educators, inspiring students to become effective and empathetic social entrepreneurs.

**Keywords:** New educational methods, Transformative learning, Social innovation, Social impact, Community partnerships, Inclusive innovation.

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## 1 Introduction

### About Georgia Tech: Progress and Service

The Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) 2020-2030 vision is that over the next decade, Georgia Tech will be an example of inclusive innovation, a leading technological, research university relentlessly committed to serving the public good; breaking new ground in addressing the biggest local, national, and global challenges of our time; making technology broadly accessible; and developing exceptional leaders from all backgrounds ready to produce novel ideas and create solutions with real human impact (Cabrera, 2019). The College of Engineering at Georgia Tech is consistently ranked among the country's top 10 engineering institutions and has a reputation as a global leader and innovator (Georgia Tech College of Engineering, 2023). The Georgia Tech Scheller College of Business has placed among the top 20 business schools in the U.S. and the top 10 business schools among public universities for the third year in a row (Scheller College of Business, 2022). For many years, Georgia Tech students have been driven to finding solutions to problems.

In recent years, Georgia Tech has become a more diverse school. For example:

- 56% of undergrads have an international experience before graduation
- 33.5% of our undergraduate engineering students are women, compared to just 17% of engineering students nationally; and Georgia Tech is number 1 in engineering degrees awarded to women in the US
- No.1 in engineering doctoral degrees awarded to African American students
- No.1 in engineering undergraduate degrees awarded overall to minorities

Below follows a conversation between Dori Pap and Susan Davis about the evolution of social innovation education at Georgia Tech through the lens of the changes in the Ideas to Serve program.

### **About Atlanta: More Progress Needed**

**Dori:** Georgia Tech is also set right in the middle of the most inequitable city in the United States - Atlanta, Georgia. Despite being central to the Civil Rights movement and the home to the Martin Luther King Jr Memorial, U.S. Census Bureau data from 2016 to 2020 show that Atlanta has the starkest chasm between the rich and the poor among cities with more than 100,000 residents (Jackson, 2022). Atlanta has dominated the country in this ranking for at least 10 years. On average, a wealthier resident (top income quartile) in metro Atlanta will live 6.5 years longer than a poor resident (bottom income quartile) (ARC Research, 2016).

## **2 The Evolution of Ideas to Serve**

### **Fostering Heropreneurs**

**Dori:** I had been involved with various nonprofits in Atlanta and saw an opportunity to connect our brilliant students with the needs in these organizations (I had a very traditional needs-based view of these amazing organizations back then). Our center - formerly the Institute for Leadership and Entrepreneurship (ILE), now the Institute for Leadership and Social Impact (ILSI) - is housed in the Scheller College of Business, so at its beginning, in 2010, the *Ideas to Serve* program was based on a traditional business plan competition. Our call to students - that we proudly wore on our swag shirts - was *What problems will you solve?* The competition was open to students across curricula, who were encouraged to submit solutions to “social” or environmental problems. This was loosely defined, but basically meant it was somehow different from commercial innovation.

For the first several years, students would identify an issue they were interested in - ranging from mental health to cancer detection to toilet design. And given the type of students attracted to Georgia Tech, many of the proposed solutions involved technology - apps and gadgets. Winners received cash prizes up to 5,000 USD. The judges of the competition were practitioners from the community, some of whom were addressing these problems in real life.

**Susan:** I and other judges pointed out to Dori over the years that, like many similar competitions that emerged around the same time - Ideas to Serve was fostering “heropreneurs” - people who were rewarded for just trying to help, even if it was ineffectual (Papi-Thornton, D., 2014). We judges appreciated that smart, passionate students were interested in social issues, but observed that many weren’t coming up with great or even original ideas. This was due in part because they were not proximate to the problem, or aware of root causes.

I went to another similar Georgia Tech competition for students and saw a group of very smart women win the People’s Choice prize for a water treatment device, and since their solution had social impact potential, they decided to participate in *Ideas to Serve* as well. Water and sanitation

is an area I had some knowledge of, so I offered to meet with them. I compiled research on the various challenges of other water treatment devices and shared a summary over coffee. I think they had only heard accolades so far and were expecting an alumna to offer funds, or at least admiration. They politely said thanks and went on to start a company based on the device.

A year later, after they had done some efficacy studies, they asked to meet again. They realized that many of the things I had highlighted from the research were true. Fortunately they were able to pivot their model to work on water issues closer to home. They are now running a thriving business in the area of lead in pipes in the US.

**Dori:** Like the founders you mention, I didn't want to hear criticism of *Ideas to Serve* for a while. The model was working; donors felt good about seeing students caring and winning. At the end of each year, we could feel good about ourselves because we thought we were addressing social issues. The evaluation of success was counting our inputs and outputs: how many student teams participated; the variety of majors and colleges; the number of sponsors; and how much prize money was distributed.

Some academic programs posit that it is possible to create a social innovation mindset in a semester. However, our experience started with the same premise, and very quickly (which in academia is 6 to 8 years) we realized that doesn't work.

### Ready for change

**Dori:** A couple of years ago, the Institute for Leadership and Entrepreneurship rebranded as Institute for Leadership and Social Impact (or ILSI). This reflected a growing understanding that social issues are systemic, that students can play multiple roles in the ecosystem of innovation, that raising the awareness of students about social issues is essential, and that the skills students develop in an experiential learning process is transformative. Associated with that we made iterative changes to *Ideas to Serve*.

About 2017, we pressed pause and said let's think about this competition differently. Originally, we ran random, optional workshops for the participants on understanding social issues and evaluation. I attended a one-day workshop that Susan developed called *Bullsh!t Without Borders*. The workshop led participants through some of the fallacies of development work and encouraged us to explore the root causes vs symptoms of issues. That fit in with my idea of how I had been wanting to design a course for credit. I invited Susan to join ILSI as a Practitioner in Residence.

**Susan:** You and I co-designed this course as a series of workshops over a semester. We invited friends who were experts from the social sector to lead workshops. Each workshop introduced a tool for understanding social issues. Examples include:

- The Impact Gaps Canvas (Papi-Thornton, 2014) which was designed to help people learn about a problem before jumping in to try to solve it.
- Asset Based Community Development (Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 2023).
- Active Listening
- 5 Whys / Iceberg Model
- Pre-mortem (Davis, 2018)
- Human Centered Design

**Dori:** In 2018, we started offering the course (it became part of my course load) and added a problem discovery track to *Ideas to Serve*. After that, rather than students selecting their issues to explore, we paired them with partners from around Atlanta to help students understand the issues affecting their neighbors. The course is open for the partners and they can choose to participate in

the workshops that are of particular relevance to their work. We also moved away from the idea that it has to be a competition, and our motto on the t-shirt changed to a more humble *Know what you don't know*. Next, we elevated the community partners as co-educators, centering their expertise and knowledge instead of centering around the students. With the partner's guidance, we have students explore the nature of the problem and do stakeholder discovery mapping. Over the past three years, we have had eight community partners each year and 25 students each rotation. We develop these community collaborations with guidance and support from one of our long-term partners in Atlanta, the Center for Civic Innovation (<https://www.civicalanta.org/>).

As part of our latest iteration of changes to *Ideas to Serve*, we decided to use the funds we raise for the program to invest in community partners instead of giving students cash prizes. It is a more equitable way to engage with community partners because working with students takes time and energy. The cost of running the competition (without labor) is about \$20,000 a year, and we invest more than half of that in the partners' organizations. We still want to motivate and inspire the students, so we provide small awards for their achievements - for example, the best map or presentation.

### Changing mindsets about changing the world

**Dori:** Our approach to evaluating impact has changed too. Now we're looking at how we are changing mindsets vs output metrics. At the end of the course and close of the program, students submit a final reflection on how they will be able to apply this experience in their careers. Students say they get a lot out of it because it's a very different approach to learning and discovery; it's one of the most transformative experiences of their four years in university. Some say it was uncomfortable at first but most see the value it provided because it gives them a more human lens to understanding social issues. They say that the complexity of issues is daunting, and they have an increased empathy for anyone who is working to address them. And they are much more critical consumers of the news (including social media) because they see the fallacy of quick solutions to systemic social issues. The knowledge they gained about how they operate in a team, and what is their communication and conflict resolution style is something they can build on in their future work.

Beyond participation in *Ideas to Serve*, we're also aiming for long-term engagement with our community partners. For example, we can help them achieve their mission through our Social Impact Fellows program, in which students intern with an ILSI-supported stipend. We also serve as an 'entry point' to Georgia Tech and connect partners to other parts of the university where collaborations can be mutually beneficial. For example, we introduced one of our community partners that provides sensory swim clinics to neurodiverse youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds to Georgia Tech's aquatic center. They can now use a larger pool space, which was one of their main barriers for scaling.

## 3 Conclusion

**Dori and Susan:** We had other social innovation educators in mind when we crafted this conversation. We hope you gained insight on how you can prepare students to be effective and empathetic social entrepreneurs by purposefully elevating community-based organizations as co-educators. We encourage you to skip ahead on your learning curve and avoid the mistakes we made - feel free to contact us with any questions. In closing, we wanted to share a that shows where *Ideas to Serve* is now (video: <https://youtu.be/WpWmx7fKcps>).

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## Biographies



**Dóri Pap.** Dóri Pap is the Managing Director of the Institute for Leadership and Social Impact at the Scheller College of Business at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She directs the Leadership for Social Good Study Abroad Program in Central and Eastern Europe, coordinates the Impact Speaker Series, runs the annual Ideas to Serve student social innovation program, and teaches courses on social entrepreneurship. Outside Tech, Dóri serves on the board of Global Growers Network, a nonprofit organization that connects the agricultural talent of the refugee community in and around Atlanta to opportunities in sustainable agriculture. She is also a board member for the Center for Civic Innovation, an organization that works at the frontline of civics education and advocacy. Dóri is a triple Yellow Jacket and is currently pursuing her doctorate degree at the Louise McBee Institute for Higher Education at UGA. Her research interests include social innovation, leadership, and inclusive postsecondary programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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