

Winning Change on Campus: The Case of Georgia Tech's Special Institute Fee

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How and why do people decide to take action when they perceive an injustice? Why do some campaigns to bring about positive social change succeed, while others fail? This case study draws on a successful campaign to end a burdensome graduate student fee at Georgia Tech (GT) to provide insights into these questions. The case study is intended to support instruction that empowers students to identify ways they can lead change on issues of concern to them--on campus, in their workplaces, and in society more broadly.

Georgia Tech's Student Fees: Background

Financial wellness is a dynamic relationship between resources and needs. It encompasses the ability to meet financial needs today while planning for the future and having the freedom to make choices that promote health and satisfaction.¹

For college students, tuition and other educational expenses can be a significant source of financial stress. In 2022-2023, the GT Financial Aid Office estimated the total undergraduate costs (tuition, fees and living expenses) to be approximately \$28K for residents of Georgia and \$49K for non-residents per year over the course of 2 semesters.² These costs can lead to significant debt accumulation. While scholarships can help offset the price, many of them do not cover fees or living expenses.

Still, students do see strong value in pursuing a college education. According to the 2017 Study on Collegiate Financial Wellness, 77% of students attending four-year public universities agreed or strongly agreed that college was a good investment in their financial future. At the same time, 67% also agreed or strongly agreed that they felt stressed about their financial future.³

During times of economic downturn, educational expenses can become an even larger burden. From 2007-2009, the United States experienced the worst economic decline since the Great Depression. Termed the Great Recession, it started with the financial crisis caused by a bursting housing bubble that occurred when the subprime mortgage market collapsed. Shock waves spread around the globe and the chain reaction produced a contraction in financial markets. Many businesses were forced to cut expenses, and in some instances, employees.⁴ Spending decreased, which in turn reduced state appropriations. This led to a budget shortfall which forced state cuts in many areas, including higher education.

For fiscal year 2009, the [University System of Georgia](#) (USG) was faced with a \$1.4 billion budget reduction. Across the state, many adjustments were made to school budgets to cut costs, including some reductions in faculty and staff. Still, more revenue was needed to compensate for the loss of funding. To ensure academic needs and timely degree completion would be met, the Board of Regents (BOR) avoided further cuts by implementing a Special Institutional Fee (SIF) at all institutions. This fee was a flat, per semester rate that both part-time

and full-time students paid. Revenues generated from the fee were used to support operating expenses related to “essential” academic functions.⁵

Initially the fee was \$100 and was meant to be temporary. However, shortly before fiscal year 2010, the BOR voted to make the fee permanent. Over time, the fee was increased. By fall 2014, GT graduate and undergraduate students were paying as much as \$544 a semester.⁶

A Campaign for Change: The early years

Though the fee was required of all students, graduate students were particularly dissatisfied. Those who worked as graduate research or teaching assistants (GRAs, GTAs) usually had tuition waivers as part of their support package, but the SIF was not waived. They were forced to give a significant amount of their earnings back to GT to cover the SIF, which was deducted from their monthly living stipend.

Over time, the discontentment grew. Across the university system, students complained and stated that they didn’t know exactly how the funds were being used. Furthermore, graduate student teaching assistantships were listed as an “authorized use” for the SIF at some universities, which led graduate students to believe that they were contributing to their own stipend.

The BOR policy manual’s section 7.3.2.1⁷, adopted in 2000, established guidelines for institute governance of mandatory fees (transportation, technology, health, etc.), including the formation of a Mandatory Student Fee Advisory Committee (MSFAC). Any proposal made by a President to the BOR to create, increase or change the purpose of a mandatory fee had to first be approved by the MSFAC committee. In 2010, revisions to the BOR policy expanded student participation in the committee to 50%. As a result, the GT MSFAC included four students appointed by SGA. This representation increased the student voice and provided a venue for regular discussion of mandatory fees, allowing representatives of the student body to raise their concerns. Within MSFAC, members discussed whether the fee was still needed. Because the power to change the institute-wide SIF remained solely with the BOR, they also discussed the potential of moving the fee into tuition to alleviate the financial burden.

In the January 2015 meeting minutes which discussed a proposed transportation fee increase, the MSFAC committee stated “When Graduate Students were asked to prioritize decreases across other fees to meet the increase in transportation, it’s no surprise that a reduction of the Special Institution Fee (SIF) was the most desired; 80% for, with a large portion of the remaining 20% citing confusion over what SIF was. SIF is clearly out of the purview of the MSFAC but is a clear burden to increasing other fees from the perspective of graduate students.”⁸

In an opinion article in the GT newspaper, *The Technique*, author Arren Washington, stated “\$1,632 reflects the annual burden of the Special Institutional Fee (SIF). This one fee alone represents the loss of an entire paycheck for us. It forces us to ask whether we should take out additional loans.” In addition to contributing to mounting debt, Washington also suggested the SIF forced graduate students to make difficult choices with respect to basic needs such as safe housing and food.⁹

In 2015, as pressure over fees mounted, GT sought and obtained approval from the USG to allow for a differential in the fee between graduate and undergraduate students. This would allow GT to reduce the SIF by \$100 to \$444 for graduate students by shifting that amount into tuition costs. This action alleviated some of the costs for GRAs and GTAs who received tuition waivers as part of their teaching or research assistantships and those with scholarships covering tuition.

Though the reduction was helpful for many graduate students, the fee remained a source of discontent and frequent topic of discussion. Graduate students continued to voice their opposition.

As ongoing concerns were raised by graduate students regarding student fees, university faculty, along with university administration, began to question how the fee burden could potentially affect their ability to recruit and retain top graduate students. GT administrators who recognized the plight of the graduate students, attempted a variety of measures to improve the situation. Some college deans decided to increase stipends, as budgets allowed, to be more competitive with peer institutions. The Institute also increased its contributions to student health insurance. Though helpful, these attempts did not appease graduate student concerns over fees. They stressed that the need to increase stipends and address inequity in pay across schools was a separate, but important issue.

In 2017, the USG approved an additional \$100 differential, allowing GT to further reducing the SIF to \$344. That same year, the College of Engineering Graduate Student Advisory Council surveyed PhD students due to concerns over financial well-being. PhD students within the college indicated they were under significant financial stress. Data gathered on GRA stipends at peer institutions showed convincingly that GT College of Engineering (COE) GRA stipends were not competitive.

Engineering graduate students engaged with faculty, presenting their data in school meetings. This served to both spread awareness and garner faculty support for change. The following year the School of Materials Science and Engineering agreed to raise stipends by 22% over a three-year period.

Concurrently, the Graduate Student Government Association (GSGA) created a Graduate Finances white paper (see Additional Readings). The paper included the data that had been presented to COE while also addressing broader concerns including mandatory fees and housing costs. The paper's policy recommendations included finding alternative ways of covering fees.

New Leadership, Building Momentum

More and more faculty were becoming aware of the issue and joining the campaign to eliminate or reduce the SIF. The SIF and other fees were a frequent topic on Reddit discussions. In addition, faculty and students used shared spreadsheets to gather information that would drive change. Data on institute fees across the nation provided comparisons of fee costs and

structure. This public sharing of information helped to inform members of the GT graduate community and others to support the argument for change.

The growing social media presence was reaching a wider audience. In addition to Reddit, Facebook and Twitter feeds provided a virtual landscape for meaningful discussion and sharing of ideas. The feeds spread quickly as faculty, students, alumni, parents, and others communicated their concerns and advocated for change. University administrators (presidents, provosts, deans, etc.), BOR members and other public figures who were likely to see, or hear, about the public discussions through third parties, were receiving a loud message.

In 2019, a faculty member and graduate director in GT's School of Biological Sciences, Dr. Joshua Weitz, became involved. Dr. Weitz was concerned about the struggles the graduate students he mentored faced in trying to meet basic living expenses. Dr. Weitz viewed speaking up about governance and policies that impinge on student well-being as part of his responsibility as a faculty member. He collaborated with colleagues at GT to try to improve the situation.

Dr. Weitz drafted the *Resolution to Reduce Graduate Student Fees* (see Additional Readings). The resolution provided three recommendations. At the top of the list was to systematically reduce and then eliminate the SIF over the course of three years. In addition, the resolution proposed reducing other fees and developing ways for faculty and students to collaborate on changes to both the SIF and graduate student stipends. Clarifying the specific “ask” --the changes a group seeks—is an important step in organizing for change. Dr. Weitz’ clearly articulated recommendations supported the campaign’s ability to coalesce many loosely linked voices for change behind a single platform.

Dr Weitz had built his message using bottom-up consensus, gathering support for the resolution. In an op-ed article for the Atlanta Journal Constitution, Dr. Weitz compared the fees to salary increases, stating that the SIF had grown to over \$1000 for students attending fall and spring semesters, with summer adding to the yearly expense. He compared cumulative fees (approximately \$2750) to increases in student stipends, pointing out that the majority of stipend increases, which were meant to help graduate students, were consumed by the fees. He also compared GT’s fees to the median fees across universities (\$1128). Dr. Weitz stressed the hardships that the fees created.¹⁰ This was reinforced by a recent article in *Science* examining fees as a larger problem across universities that suggested some students were turning to food banks for assistance.¹¹ This information was communicated at every step through faculty e-mails, town halls and presentations to committees, whose approval was required for the resolution to make its way to the Faculty Executive Board.

By the time the resolution reached the Faculty Executive Board, faculty across the institute had heard about the concerns and were voicing support. On September 25th, the resolution was approved by the Faculty Executive Board to go on the agenda for the October 22nd Academic Faculty Senate meeting. There, a campus-wide vote on the measure would occur.

Dr. Weitz’s understanding of GT processes and procedures reinforced his ability to craft a strong resolution and present it to the appropriate administrators. On October 17th, Dr. Weitz presented his resolution to the Student Academic and Financial Affairs Committee (SAFAC).

Guests at the meeting included the Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Faculty Development and the Senior Director of Institute Finance. Following Dr. Weitz's presentation to the SAFAC committee, members voted to co-sponsor the resolution to lend support.

On October 22nd, with broad faculty and student support, the resolution passed the Faculty Academic Senate. This meant the measure would now go to GT President Ángel Cabrera for consideration. In anticipation, Dr. Weitz sent out a link to faculty, inviting them to join in as a signatory on the resolution, now in the public record.

These actions continued to build momentum for the needed change. However, what was lacking was a concrete plan on how to implement changes. This would require more study and time.

Later that year President Cabrera requested that a working group be formed. The VP of Graduate Education and Faculty Development (GEFD) would serve as chair. Representatives from Finance and Planning, the Office of the Executive Vice President for Research, GSGA, SAFAC, and others would serve on the committee. This working group was charged with making recommendations to improve the financial well-being of graduate students.

In January 2020, the report from the working group was completed. The top recommendation was to increase the minimum stipend levels for PhD students as well as GTA/GRAs "which would have a large impact on financially vulnerable students." Approximately \$1.65 million was allocated for this purpose. The other top recommendation was to implement a mechanism for annual review of stipend rates across colleges to evaluate the need for adjustments.¹³ As a result, a Graduate Faculty Council advisory group was created. In an update to faculty, the GEFD chair also stated that student fees had been discussed with the USG in an effort to advocate for reduction/elimination.

As this information was being communicated, an additional petition put forth by graduate students garnered over 1,000 signatures. It called on the GT administration to request that the USG either eliminate the SIF, since they had the sole power to do so, or for fees to be rolled into tuition which would effectively eliminate the out-of-pocket expense for both GRAs and GTAs. The petition also advocated for continued work towards minimizing other fees (athletic, technology, transportation, etc.) or to make them voluntary. Though efforts were unsuccessful to persuade the USG to eliminate the fee, GT was able to comply with the passed resolution calling for a reduction over three years. The SIF was lowered to \$272 for graduate students.

Similar efforts to offset costs were ongoing at other universities. Students picketed and wrote letters to the USG. Faculty continued to voice concerns that the SIF was a detriment to recruiting. They pointed out that it impeded diversity, since high out-of-pocket costs would keep some students, particularly lower SES, from applying for admission. As Dr. Weitz stated, "It may not seem like a lot, but when you're making [a stipend of] \$25,000 and working in a major city, it's a major problem".

At UGA, the Graduate Student Council (GSC) advocacy committee had secured faculty support for their own resolution which advocated eliminating the SIF. They also led a survey in 2020 in which 94% of full-time graduate student respondents (n=221) indicated they experienced

financial difficulties. Almost 22% of those receiving a stipend indicated they consistently ran short of money prior to the next pay period.¹⁴ The committee, along with the United Campus Workers of Georgia, requested meetings with the BOR to discuss.

These data driven discussions were not just aimed at the BOR. During each legislative session, Georgia lawmakers consider potential changes to higher education. Bills are introduced that often focus on education, affordability, and access. With student concerns now getting more media attention, including a Washington Post article on nationwide college fees (see Additional Readings), individuals in the legislature began acting. State Senators Sally Harrell (D) and Jeff Mullis (R) created a Senate study committee to examine the costs (tuition and fees) associated with attending Ga colleges and universities. The committee was charged with proposing solutions to increase affordability.¹⁵ This meant the SIF was now under intense scrutiny.

In January 2022, the Georgia Budget and Finance Office outlined four ways that lawmakers could improve affordability of college. Among them was to remove the SIF.¹⁶ Governor Kemp's FY23 budget proposed increasing state appropriations to the university system to reduce student fees.

As a result of years of effort on the part of many groups, in April 2022 the BOR of the USG voted to eliminate the SIF.¹⁷ The fee, which had been in place for over a decade, was compensated for with a \$230 million increase in the USG's budget by the state legislature. This increase allowed for elimination of the fee for all students and for tuition costs for the 2022-2023 fiscal year to remain the same as the previous year.

Reflecting on the Georgia Tech campaign, Dr. Weitz emphasized the importance of "going public:"

I think that the initial decision to utilize a combination of data, social media and an opinion piece set the ball rolling a lot faster than what a committee approach would have achieved. Taking the issue into the public arena was the key element that made it possible for momentum to be sustained. I learned if I wanted to get things done and there were barriers and politicization it was helpful to go directly to the public with persuasive data and to communicate the facts simply and clearly.

Suggested discussion questions:

- 1) How do you think the 2000 requirement that institutions create Mandatory Student Fee Advisory Committees (MSFACs), and the 2010 requirement that students be included, influenced Georgia Tech's and other institutions' campaigns to remove the SIF?
- 2) What were the roles of graduate students, faculty, and administrators in articulating their demand and providing support for elimination of the SIF? Why do you think it is important to have a clear "ask" or demand, when working together for change?

- 3) University administrators are continuously presented with concerns and demands about a wide range of problems. Identify two tactics (the term many organizers use for strategic actions) that students and faculty used to elevate the importance of eliminating the SIF for campus administrators. Which tactics do you think may have had the biggest impact?
- 4) Advocates often use different messaging or “frames” when they are communicating to different groups. How did students and faculty frame their message for GT administrators? How did they frame the issue for the Board of Regents? What kinds of messaging do you think were most persuasive to GT administrators, and why? Why might students and faculty use different arguments when communicating with the BOR than with students and faculty at Georgia Tech?
- 5) Both faculty and student groups worked on this campaign, but each group maintain an independent voice. Describe the benefits of including both students and faculty in this movement for social change at Georgia Tech. How do you think the outcome might have been different if the campaign had included students alone? Why do you think faculty and students chose not to team up in a formal way?

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