Georgia Tech automates program operations for structured student-alumni formal mentorship

Georgia Tech

INSTITUTION TYPE
Public Research University

LOCATION
Atlanta, Georgia

TOTAL ENROLLMENT
37,000

PROGRAM

• 37 bachelor's degree programs

• 101 master's degree programs

• 56 doctoral degree programs

The Georgia Institute of Technology (or "Georgia Tech" as it's more commonly known) located in the state capital of Atlanta, is a top-ranked public research university and home to renowned engineering and computing colleges. Its students hail from all 50 states in the U.S. and 149 countries. The Student Alumni Association (SAA) is the largest student organization on campus, with 5,000-6,000 members each year. As its name suggests, the SAA is designed to **facilitate ongoing, meaningful interaction between students and alumni**. Within that organization is a one-to-one mentoring program, called Mentor Jackets (a nod to the school's mascot, the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets), which serves approximately 700 student-alum pairs during each academic year.

Introduction

Pivoting to a New Mentorship Format

The SAA faced a significant hurdle in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced many people with ties to the university—students and alumni alike—to stay at home. The Georgia Tech Alumni Association, which helps steward the Mentor Jackets program, had to quickly figure out a new way forward for their thriving mentorship program.

During a PeopleGrove Innovators event, Janet Kinard, Vice President of Engagement for the Georgia Tech Alumni Association, reflected on that uncertain time. "How do we provide a platform for [mentorship] to happen, when [students and alumni] can't meet in person?" she asked.

"How do we provide the services that students are looking for, when their internships are being canceled and job offers are being rescinded?

That's when we really started to look at what PeopleGrove could bring to us... to provide those connections and reduce friction [involved in the process]."

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Janet Kinard,
Vice President of Engagement,
Georgia Tech Alumni Association

Aspirational goals outpaced old systems

Even before the university was forced to operate remotely, the Alumni Association recognized that the technology they were using to manage their formal mentoring program had its limitations. Emily Laurence, Manager of Student Engagement at Georgia Tech Alumni Association, reflected on the challenges of using their old system.

"The platform [we used] was solely a pairing platform. I would have to do all of the follow-up communication [to mentors and mentees]," she recalls. Emily imported student and alumni data into their platform to execute matches. Separately, their team used iModules to send program communications, resulting in what she described as a very disjointed, manual process. The mentee experience using the old platform wasn't ideal, either: students didn't have a single destination for information about the mentoring program. They would typically have to navigate to several different websites and portals to complete the program sign-up, get paired, and attend orientation.

Besides all that, there was something else missing from their system that, for Emily, became the real tipping point in making the switch to a new platform. "The point where we knew we needed to change….we weren't able to see whether or not our pairs were communicating. For example, sometimes I would hear from a mentor in April (as the nine-month program cycle was nearing completion) say, 'Hey, I never heard from my mentee.' And you wish you'd had a tool to be able to see that as it was happening."

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Emily Laurence,
Manager, Student Engagement,
Georgia Tech Alumni Association

Because only 30% of Emily's time is allocated to the Mentor Jackets program, and the program had grown to more than 700 pairs per cycle, the Georgia Tech Alumni Association began the search for a new platform that could better meet their needs.

Emily believes that the evolution of the Mentor Jackets program brought on a shift in focus; their needs have changed as the formal program matured. "When the program was set up, it was really about trying to promote awareness and recruit as many mentors and mentees as possible," she said. "Now, the focus is on what happens after they're paired. We knew if we could get a system that was more automated, that could send those nudges and send those resources, one, it would take some work off of my plate," Emily said. "But it would also help mentors and mentees communicate better, and more frequently."

A modernized operation and user experience

The Georgia Tech Alumni Association launched their PeopleGrove platform—known to their network as "Georgia Tech Connect"—to a portion of their mentor-mentee pairs ahead of the 2020-2021 academic year. The partial rollout was a pilot program to test the waters of their new platform.

Recruiting

Self-guided training

Matching

Ongoing program maintenance
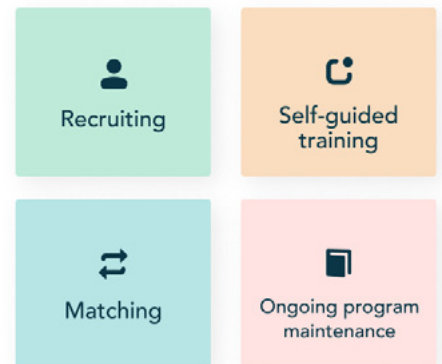
Recruiting

The Association serves more than 170,000 living alumni, and mentor recruitment kicks off every June. The Association team is excited to now be able to recruit to the mentorship program directly from their PeopleGrove platform. "Registration, resources...everything's now in one place," Emily said. In light of all the changes stemming from the COVID-10 pandemic, the Association received "an outpouring of support from alumni...I think they saw what was happening and wanted to offer support any way they could."

Once they "build up a good base" of mentors, the team shifts its attention to recruiting students in August as the academic year is just starting up. Once they've assessed all mentor and mentee participants, they sometimes conduct a second wave of alumni recruiting to fill in any gaps. "For example, we might see that we have way more Computer Science majors than we have alumni, so we'll specifically recruit alumni to fit that need in the second round."

Self-Guided Training

The Association's staff took advantage of PeopleGrove's pre-built training Pathways to prepare its mentors.

Program participants took advantage of on-demand, self-guided, and interactive content to prepare for mentorship, as well as how to best use the platform. Mentors read handbooks and resources, and then answered a series of questions for each training section—Active Listening, Goal Setting, Scheduling Meetings, and Mentorship Closure were all included in their content stack. Some mentors were seeing this information for the first time, others considered it a good refresher.

Since Georgia Tech's platform launched, PeopleGrove's mentor training has expanded in both its format and scope. Available plug-and-play Pathways now include training for mentees as well as mentors, with added sections for practicing inclusive mentoring. On-demand video components are also included. In fact, today's version of mentor training Pathways is the result of Emily's direct feedback as a customer.

Matching

When it comes to matching mentees with mentors, the Alumni Association pays close attention to what students are asking for in a mentor. "Our students are very driven and focused, and they're always looking for that internship or next job, and we want to support them," Emily shared. "We typically pair based on major, industry, job function, and sometimes company. Industry is usually the most popular factor for matching."

Ongoing Program Maintenance

Before the team made the switch to PeopleGrove, "there wasn't much data on mentor-mentee communication." Their team now has full visibility into which pairs are connecting (and how often), and who's completing assigned program goals. They also have automated notifications set up to gently "nudge" anyone who isn't responding.

Looking ahead to the upcoming academic year, Emily knows that she'll have a greater opportunity to prepare ahead of schedule, during the summer months. "I manage other programs during the school year," Emily said, "So being able to front load a good amount of the work—like resources, communication, nudges, etc.—will be great."

The Georgia Tech Alumni Association's President and VP of Engagement are focused on forging connections all over campus. "That's something they've been encouraging since day one—reaching across campus as an affiliate, finding those partnerships, and spreading the goodwill of the Alumni Association," Emily remarked. The Alumni Association is located directly across the street from the Georgia Tech campus, and collaboration with other offices and campus organizations is always top of mind with Emily and her team.

"Mentor Jackets is such a great resource for students, and I think our colleagues across the street see that. What I hear a lot of the time is, 'We don't have the time, the capacity or the funding to do a mentorship program.' And what I emphasize to them is that Mentor Jackets is for all majors, in all industries... everybody. We just ask them to help support us in recruiting—through college-specific newsletters, or other alumni connections they may have."

One example Emily cited is with the Black Alumni Organization (BAO) at Georgia Tech. Emily's team heard directly from Black students that they wanted to connect with Black alumni mentors. "BAO has been an amazing partner in helping us recruit and get those mentors and mentees connected. We're really excited about more opportunities to support additional affinity groups."

Looking ahead

Now that the Alumni Association has completed their pilot program, platform rollout to all Mentor Jackets participants for the 2021-2022 academic year is already underway.

"The biggest thing that I'm excited about is that we now have one platform with all these different resources," said Emily. "We've been heavily recruiting alumni to the new Georgia Tech Connect platform, and that makes it even easier to get them involved in Mentor Jackets. We tell them, 'Go ahead and register on this platform, and then you can mentor students long term.'"

She continued: "Having the resources and everything that alumni and students need, all in one place, is really exciting," said Emily. "It's easy to use, and they can also discover other resources outside of Mentor Jackets, like the Job Board."

The Alumni Association sees Georgia Tech Connect as a way to expand its offerings to alumni beyond just a single mentorship program. Through alumni feedback surveys, the Association heard repeatedly that their alumni were looking for ways to connect with one another virtually. Their team hopes that the platform serves as another bridge to continue building connections, and keep the Alumni Association top of mind with students and alumni alike.

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