

TIM DODD

Georgia State University gets great results for disadvantaged students



By **TIM DODD**
HIGHER EDUCATION EDITOR

9:45PM MARCH 8, 2024 •  NO COMMENTS

Here's a true story. Twenty years ago a large urban university in the US was graduating less than 30 per cent of the students who initially enrolled. It also had a major "equity gap", with white students outperforming students of colour, and students from richer families outperforming those from a low income background.

What's happened since then? Well things got even more challenging. The student body shifted further toward the low income end of the scale, SAT scores of commencing students went down (which means they were less academically prepared), and, with state government revenues hit by the 2008 Great Recession, the university's state funding fell.

This would have meant catastrophe, right? Wrong. About 12 years ago something shifted at Georgia State University, which is the institution we're talking about. University leaders decided to ask themselves a difficult question: "Are we the problem?"

Timothy Renick, executive director of Georgia State's [National Institute for Student Success](#), told the story in his keynote address to the [Universities Australia annual](#)

[conference](#) two weeks ago.

It was a barn burner.

“If 7 out of 10 students are coming to Georgia State with hopes and dreams, but leaving with debt and very little to show for it, whose fault is it?” Renick asked rhetorically. Yes, he said, it would be nice to have better academically prepared students and more money from the government. But those things weren’t going to change. “We have a lot of control, though, over how we admit students, how we communicate with them, how we register them for classes, how we advise them, how we package them for financial aid, how we prepare them for careers,” Renick said.

Georgia State boldly tried new things and when they found something that worked they scaled it. Here are some of the initiatives Renick described.

They helped students navigate the bureaucracy around admission including with an AI driven chatbot that answered questions from new students. The summer melt rate – the proportion of students who enrol but don’t show up when classes begin – fell by half.

Because first year students, particular those from low income backgrounds, often feel as if they don’t belong at university, Georgia State created freshmen learning communities of 25 students who go to all their first semester classes together. It helped students develop friendships and study partnerships.

They did a major data project to find the predictors of student drop out. They found 800 risk factors and now, every night, they track every undergrad on each of the 800 factors and offer assistance where it is needed. In the last 12 months they reached out to students 100,000 times.

There’s much, much more. See the video of Renick’s address above. It’s worth watching.

Following the changes, the 50,000 student university is graduating 3,500 more students a year and improvements are weighted towards low income, black, Hispanic and Latino students. Higher student retention generates an extra \$80m a year in revenue.

There are fascinating learnings here for Australia in implementing the [Universities Accord](#). It shows that great results for disadvantaged students are achievable – with some introspection and a willingness to change.

TIM DODD, HIGHER EDUCATION EDITOR

Tim Dodd is The Australian's higher education editor. He has over 25 years experience as a journalist covering a wide variety of areas in public policy, economics, politics and foreign policy, including reporting f... [Read more](#)

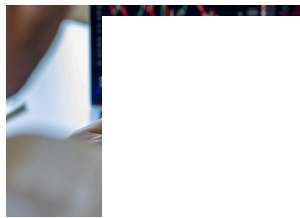


SPONSORED CONTENT

What are "blue chip" stocks?

Where to invest - fresh companies on a trajectory? Or is the steadier path of well-established companies the wiser choice?

SPONSORED



"Alarming wide" gaps at high school

New school year should be full of possibilities, but for one in six Aussie kids living in poverty, it's fraught with challenges.

SPONSORED

