



Atlanta Community-Engaged Research Student Program

Impact Report · Spring 2026

A partnership of Georgia Tech, Georgia State University, Emory University & Spelman College

34

GRADUATE FELLOWS

4

PARTNER UNIVERSITIES

5

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

8.2/10

SATISFACTION RATING

THE PROGRAM

A network for community-engaged research

The Atlanta Community-Engaged Research (CER) Student Program launched in Spring 2026. It was co-led by Dr. Nicole Kennard, Assistant Director for Community-Engaged Research at **Georgia Tech's** Brook Byers Institute for Sustainable Systems (BBISS), along with Associate Professor Richard Milligan and Associate Professor Sarah Ledford from **Georgia State University**, Associate Professor Emily Burchfield and Associate Teaching Professor Carolyn Keogh from **Emory University**, Ilesha Baldwin from **Spelman College**, and Patrick Ryan from **Science for Georgia**.

Five community-based organizations — [Science for Georgia](#), [Historic Westside Gardens](#), [HBCU Green Fund](#), [South River Watershed Alliance](#), and [Food Well Alliance](#) — served as strategic advisors to the program, shaping its trajectory and advising students in the trainings. Each organization was also paired with a Georgia Tech graduate student fellow to work on a research project of mutual interest; students were supported with a \$2,500 stipend. Amritha Karthikeyan (Georgia Tech) also served as the Graduate Student Program Coordinator.

This program was funded through the Atlanta Global Studies Center and the Georgia Tech Provost's Excellence in Graduate Studies fund.

What CER means to me...

CER means working with people, not just for them.

— Bingjie Lu, PhD, Georgia Tech

"Lived experience is just as valuable as academic expertise, and meaningful change only occurs when both work together."

— Virginia Cason, MS, Georgia Tech

"CER is not only a methodology, but a commitment to partnership, humility, and shared power."

— Grace Fraser, MS, Georgia Tech

WHAT WE SET OUT TO DO

Objectives

The program set out to train graduate students in the skills needed to co-lead community-engaged, locally impactful research. Building a network was an important component; the program served as a space for peer learning across institutions, while helping students build lasting relationships with local community organizations. The longer-term goal is that these skills and relationships seed research careers that center co-creation to address real sustainability and social challenges across our home city.

WHO TOOK PART

The cohort

From 41 applications, the program welcomed its first cohort of 34 graduate students across Georgia Tech, Georgia State, and Emory — spanning six disciplines with a nearly even between Master's and PhD students. Spelman College joined as a core partner, with eight of their senior undergraduates taking part in the launch and closing events to explore community-engaged graduate programs in Atlanta.

The Spring 2026 Cohort

APPLICATIONS → COHORT

41 → **34**
applied admitted to the cohort

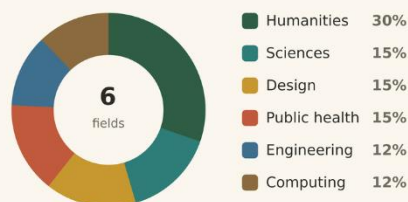


+ 8 Spelman undergraduates engaged at the launch & closing

DEGREE LEVEL



DISCIPLINE



Student networking at the closing event.

“It’s rewarding to just talk about what we do and how we want to leave an impact! Despite different fields, I was able to make that connection with everyone.”

— Luke Singer, MS, Georgia State University

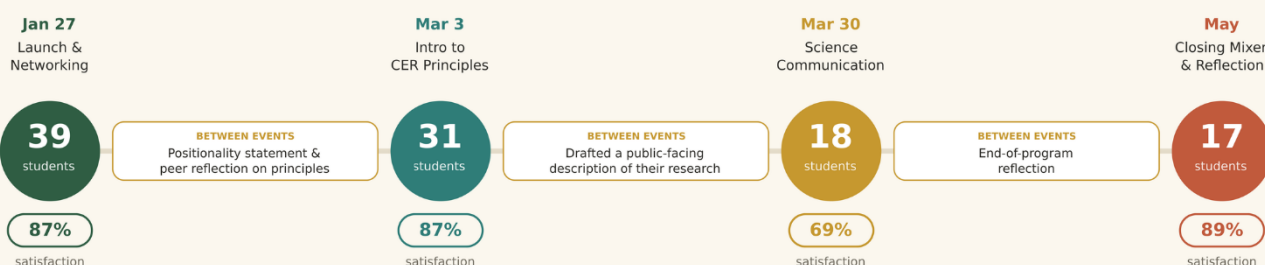
HOW IT UNFOLDED

Program activities

Over the spring, the cohort came together for four core events — two of them in-depth trainings — moving from introductions toward shared skills and a genuine sense of community. Hands-on, interactive formats consistently outperformed lecture-style sessions, and the networking opportunities with both peers and community partners was a cherished component during each activity. Between events, students carried the learning forward through short assignments: reflecting on CER principles with a peer and drafting positionality statements, developing a public-facing description of their research to refine during the science communication training, and closing with a program reflection. Throughout the semester, students were also invited to community events across Atlanta via email updates and a shared Teams channel, opening the door to further engagement around their own interests.

Four events, one semester

Numbers show student attendance; many faculty and community partners joined too.



A small-group discussion at the CER training.

“The topics covered are pretty new to me. I really appreciate learning about the potential pitfalls and tensions of working between an academic institution and a community organization. I feel like this is valuable information that is often implicit and not taught.”

— Yiheng (Ethan) Zhao, MS, Georgia Tech

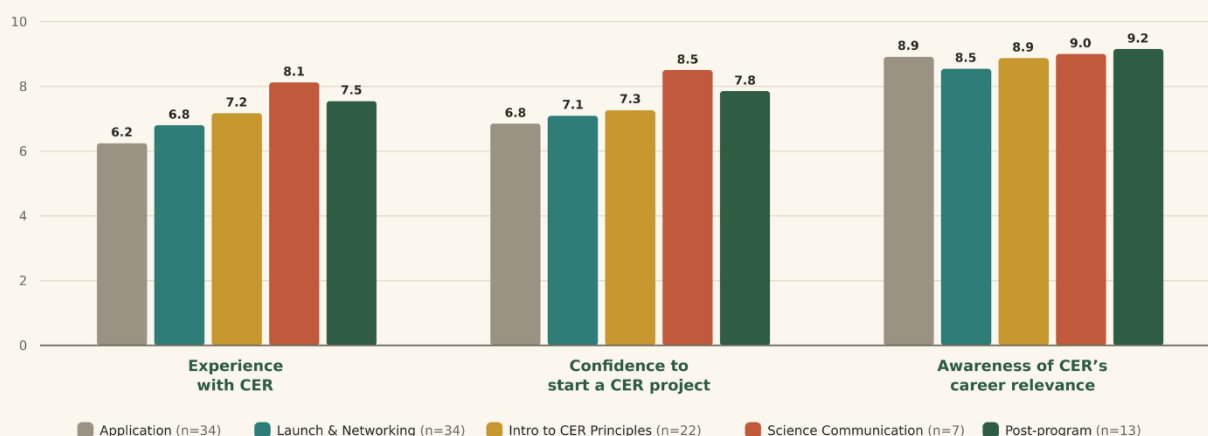
WHAT CHANGED

Outcomes & impact

Students were surveyed before and after the program and following each event. Growth was clearest in hands-on capacity: CER experience rose about 30% and confidence to initiate community-based projects about 24%, based on peak ratings post-trainings compared to pre-program. Awareness of CER's relevance to careers, meanwhile, was rated highly throughout — showing that students already grasped the importance of CER but lacked the mechanisms to build the skills and experience needed to carry these projects out, the exact gap that the program set out to fill. Engagement held strong across the semester, as well, although dipping toward the end: nine students attended all four events, and twenty attended at least three.

Progress across the program

Average self-rating at each activity point across the program (out of 10)



+30%

growth in CER experience

+24%

growth in confidence to initiate CER projects

Peak increase from start of program, self-rated by students

From our partners

“Food Well [Alliance] has been intentional about engaging our constituents since we began, and this is not only a continuation of that effort, but a significant refinement of how we accomplish that. I think all of us have deepened our understanding of the CER process since we began this journey.”

— Fred Conrad, Food Well Alliance

IN THEIR WORDS

What students took away

Community & belonging

When asked the single most impactful part of the program, students answered almost unanimously: the people and the network. Again and again they pointed to the cross-university community — connections with peers, faculty, and partners they would never have met within their own departments — as what mattered most.

A shift in mindset

The program also reshaped how students think about research itself. Their biggest intellectual takeaways centered on positioning community partners as subject matter experts and researchers, building from assets and values rather than deficits, treating collaboration and co-creation as essential, and recognizing that sustaining relationships matters as much as building them.

New skills & open doors

Students left with concrete, transferable skills. The hands-on trainings — the CER principles case studies and, especially, the science-communication elevator-pitch workshop — gave them tools they could use right away, from framing a research hook to pitching a project to a partner.

“Sharing space with people who share the same interests in CER is the most impactful, considering how difficult collaborative work can be. It definitely takes a village, and this CER community has become part of my village here in Atlanta.”

— Talofa Fe’a, PhD, Emory University

“As grad students we have the opportunity to make an impact, but we also need to be considerate and intentional about the relationships we build. We will graduate and finish up our projects, but we need to recognize that if we are working with community partners, they continue the work even if we don’t.”

— Olivia Nelson, MPH, Emory University

“I learned how to pitch my research in a CER context in one of the workshops. It was a step-by step hands-on experience, and I think this is important to draw the interest of community partners or other collaborators.”

— Munirat Sanmori, PhD, Georgia State



Connecting at the closing mixer.



Cohort members at the closing celebration.

Fellow spotlights

Five Georgia Tech fellows — spanning computing, design, planning, and the liberal arts — worked alongside the program’s five community organizations on research projects of mutual interest over Spring/Summer 2026, and presented at the Science for Georgia Environmental Justice and Climate Protection Conference in June 2026.



Irene Jacob

MS, City & Regional Planning

Partner: Fred Conrad, Food Well Alliance

Redesigned Food Well Alliance’s 10-year community garden survey and its implementation strategy, combining residents’ lived experience with technical planning skills.

“Supporting equitable and thriving community gardens is an important step toward building greener and more resilient cities.”



Yiheng (Ethan) Zhao

MS, Human-Computer Interaction

Partner: Khari Diop, Historic Westside Gardens

Integrated new technologies into community garden spaces to measure the educational, environmental, and health impacts of the work across the English Ave / Vine City neighborhoods.

“Designing for a local community feels particularly exciting, because it requires a lot of creativity to come up with solutions that feel organic and impactful.”



Virginia Cason

MS, Sustainable Energy & Environmental Management

Partner: Jessica Owens & Patrick Ryan, Science for Georgia

Supported environmental-justice storytelling and science communication — translating rigorous data into accessible, community-centered narratives, with a focus on balcony solar.

“Lived experience is just as valuable as academic expertise, and meaningful change only occurs when both work together.”



Sharon Rachel

PhD, History & Sociology of Technology & Science

Partner: Felicia Davis & Prof. Myron Williams, HBCU Green Fund

Applied mapping tools to examine environmental hazards and the environmental-justice implications of datacenter proliferation in West Atlanta’s historically underserved neighborhoods.

“The mutual benefits of working with the HBCU Green Fund include expanding my research skill set and interfacing directly with community members to advance health equity.”



Ella Neumann

PhD, Interactive Computing

Partner: Dr. Jackie Echols & Therese Kelly, South River Watershed Alliance

Researched the environmental justice implications of Atlanta’s combined sewer consent decree, developing GIS maps and public information sets to inform advocacy efforts in Peoplestown.

“I am energized about the opportunity to learn from leaders in the field and to grow as a community-engaged researcher.”



What we heard — and what's next

Feedback from students — and the program team's own reflection — points to clear, overarching refinements for the next cohort.

Clearer pathways for working with partners

"A lot of us were confused about if we were going to be assigned a project, or if we had to apply, or just work it out with the community member. I would have loved some more clarification on that!"

— Virginia Cason, Georgia Tech

Students wanted a clearer roadmap at onboarding, especially around how they were expected to work with partners. The program was intentionally designed to build relationships first — a key CER principle — and to let students propose projects organically as shared interests emerged, but we see an opportunity to make that path more explicit. The Georgia Tech student fellowships, funded through a separate GT source, likely added to the confusion; in the future, we ideally would have a small project fund open to all students.

More time to connect

"More time for networking early on!"

— Margaret Gordon, Georgia Tech

Students favored training exercises that rotated small groups, and valued the open, unstructured networking time at each event. Going forward, we will prioritize more activities that build student-to-student connection alongside those with partners.

A longer, broader program

"With the program only being a semester, it felt like it ended as soon as it began. I also noticed that participation seemed to drop as the program progressed."

— Sharon Rachel, Georgia Tech

Students wanted a longer runway than a single semester, with trainings and partners spanning more disciplines — health, education, immigration — and clearer ties to non-research careers. The program was originally envisioned as a full academic year; funding delays prevented that, but it remains the goal.

A lasting way to stay connected

"I would love to have a group chat created or a teams channel to reach out to more folks in this program."

— Zixuan Hao, Emory University

A persistent channel — Teams or Slack — set up from day one would keep the cohort connected between events and beyond the program.

Reflections from the program team

The biggest challenges were logistical: event planning was time-intensive, and low- or no-cost venues with in-budget catering were hard to find at locations central to all four campuses. Delays in funding delivery shortened the program from its intended two semesters to one, and a planned faculty showcase was not held — though the team still delivered four events, including two in-depth trainings.

A second area for reflection is community-partner involvement. Each partner received a \$500 stipend for advising the program, plus a Georgia Tech graduate student to work with on a mutually beneficial project. Partners were asked to attend the launch and one of the two trainings, where they supported students in the interactive group sessions. Students generally wanted even more partner involvement in the trainings — but this had to be balanced against the time partners could give to a program outside their core operations. Finding ways to intentionally integrate partner experience and increase the program's value for partners, while lessening the administrative burden of taking part, will be an important point to explore in future iterations.

LOOKING AHEAD

Future & sustainability

When surveyed at the close, nearly all students asked for the same things going forward: ongoing mentorship, continued networking, and CER funding opportunities. The clearest signal was that the cohort wants the network to continue past the program. The leadership team meets in early August 2026 to design a more sustainable structure with shared ownership — with the leading idea being to embed the network in an existing structure or to have students “rotate” across existing trainings held at each of the partner universities, thus weaving new cohorts into each campus’s existing programming rather than organizing new, standalone events.



Georgia Tech CER student fellows presenting their partnered projects at the Environmental Justice and Climate Protection Conference. From left to right (top): Irene Jacob, Yiheng (Ethan) Zhao, Ella Neumann; (bottom): Virginia Cason, Sharon Rachel, Amritha Karthikeyan (Graduate Student Coordinator).

“Community voices are the leaders in each research endeavor; it is the responsibility of university researchers to build long-term relationships rooted in trust.”

— Ella Neumann, PhD, Georgia Tech CER Fellow