Regents' Award for Excellence in High-Impact Projects and Experiential Learning

The Experiential, Project-based, Interdisciplinary Curriculum (EPIC) Program
Georgia State University

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Georgia State University

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Selection Committee
Regents' Teaching Excellence Awards
University System of Georgia
Atlanta, GA 30334

Dear Regents' Teaching Excellence Award Committee Members:

      I am delighted to nominate the Experiential, Project-based, Interdisciplinary Curriculum (EPIC) Program at Georgia State University for the Regents' Award for Excellence in High-Impact Practices (HIPs) and Experiential Learning. As shown in the attached dossier, the EPIC Program has distinguished itself as an innovative curricular model for incorporating HIPs and experiential learning at GSU, especially within first year and core classes. Through faculty development that deepens HIPs in the curriculum, the EPIC Program has excelled at creating, implementing, and assessing classroom practices, building on the national reputation of GSU's student success accomplishments. Moreover, the EPIC Program has 4-year assessment data that demonstrates how these curricular innovations considerably improve retention rates: over 30% higher than the 2019 incoming class overall and 60% higher than the rate of the matched control group.

      The EPIC Program meaningfully intersects with a number of HIPs and evidence-based experiential learning practices, including Learning Communities, First-Year Seminars, Common Intellectual Experiences, Writing-Intensive Courses, Collaborative Projects, and Community-Based Learning. The dossier documents the diverse range of initiatives EPIC uses to enact HIPs through faculty development, creation of shareable curricular resources, and implementation of engaged learning course designs. Some of the most innovative components of EPIC that incorporate HIPs are 1) the Wicked Problems Project series of interdisciplinary events and curricula related to complex, real-world problems, 2) the Project Labs course model that encourages students to earn course credits in multi-semester, interdisciplinary, public-facing projects, and 3) large enrolled Perspectives courses on "Understanding Atlanta" in the core curriculum that incorporate walking tours, digital humanities projects, guest speakers, and connections to local current events. Beyond effective implementation of these initiatives, faculty leaders with EPIC approach the program as an active and ongoing site for research and assessment, providing additional evidence for the value of HIPs. Research findings and curricular designs from the EPIC program have been presented at regional, national, and international teaching and learning conferences.

      The faculty and staff affiliated with the EPIC Program are creative and innovative educators committed to making HIPs accessible to a large number of GSU students; their contributions are of exceptional value and the EPIC Program should be recognized by the Regents' Award for Excellence in High-Impact Practices and Experiential Learning committee. It is my pleasure to forward the EPIC Program's nomination to you with my full support.

Sincerely,

Nicolle Parsons-Pollard
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

Narrative

High-Impact Practices (HIPs) and Student Success share a growing influence in higher education, with seemingly aligned methods and goals, but often with very different approaches. Georgia State University (GSU) has become a national model for student success measures, but these are generally based outside of classroom instruction through the use of big data, innovative advising practices, and the scheduling of freshmen learning communities (FLCs). By connecting to some of these deeply embedded measures, and other well-established and documented practices like High-Impact Practices (HIPs) and the Vertically Integrated Projects (VIP) model, the Experiential, Project-based, Interdisciplinary Curriculum (EPIC) program at GSU is creating a sustainable model of developing, assessing, and implementing classroom practices to build off our student success accomplishments. Our guiding philosophy is that faculty development and innovative pedagogical and curricular approaches are an integral part of student success.

EPIC has 2 main goals: 1) improve the core experience for GSU students with integrative and experiential learning modeled on a Liberal Arts education, and 2) create project-based learning (PBL) opportunities for students, particularly over multiple semesters. The PBL focus of our program reaches students from freshmen to grad students, while our efforts connected to the core are particularly focused on providing multiple HIPs for incoming freshmen. Our 4-year assessment data from our 2019 pilot cohort shows that including multiple HIPs during the incoming freshman semester considerably improves retention rates.

During our first 2 years, the program created Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs) for incoming GSU students that included the following HIPs: Learning Communities, Writing-Intensive Courses, Collaborative Projects, Common Intellectual Experiences, Community-Based Learning, and First-Year Seminars. EPIC student cohorts took a set of courses that deliberately had overlapping content. For example, one cohort had an American Studies theme and included a course pairing of American Government and American History to anchor the community, along with a Statistics course that intentionally used U.S. census and voting data, along with a first-year course that focused on our city of Atlanta as an example of some of the national issues discussed in other classes. Our learning communities also participated in Project Labs, in which students can earn credit over multiple semesters working on faculty-led, public-facing, interdisciplinary projects. Project Labs follow the Vertically-integrated Projects (VIP) model at Georgia Tech, which is now used at over 40 universities around the world.

While our assessment has shown that this heavily curated EPIC model has had significant impact on student GPA and retention, we have struggled in two main areas

with scaling the program: 1) the complex scheduling of paired courses at a large university, and 2) the necessarily slow nature of creating Project Labs considering the need for course credits for faculty and students over multiple semesters and the faculty development around running long-term projects with teams of students. In order to scale EPIC goals, we have experimented with more dispersed ways of introducing integrative learning in the core curriculum and creating smaller scale project-based learning opportunities for incoming students. As we tweak the model, a team of faculty and grad students are assessing our various interventions to maintain the success of the program as we scale (detailed descriptions of these efforts are in the evidence section). EPIC students are labeled in Banner, allowing us to track retention, GPA, DFW rates, etc. of participating students. The Director of the EPIC program was a member of GSU's USG HIPs implementation team, which has worked with the registrar to plan the tagging of HIPs in Banner.

Following are current interventions we are developing to encourage integrative learning across core classes (these brief summaries will be expanded in the fact profile section). The purpose of these interventions is to encourage large numbers of faculty to provide more opportunities for project-based learning and more explicitly acknowledge connections between their core course and other courses in other disciplines that students will be taking as a part of their general education classes.

- **Faculty Development-** an annual workshop series bringing together 20 to 30 faculty members across the disciplines from the Atlanta and Perimeter campuses across the disciplines to 1) develop interdisciplinary course material, 2) revise course material to more explicitly acknowledge connections between their core course and other disciplines, and 3) encourage project-based learning in their classes.
- **FLC Building-** We continue to work with the Student Success Office to build EPIC learning communities.
- **Project Labs-** Project Labs allow students to earn course credit over multiple semesters while working on faculty-led, interdisciplinary, public-facing projects.
- **Online Interdisciplinary Library**- a growing online repository of interdisciplinary course material allowing instructors to browse, download, and add material.
- **Wicked Problems Project-** a series of events and collection of interdisciplinary course material that bring together faculty from different departments focused on complex, real-world problems from the perspective of their disciplines.
- **PERS 2003: Understanding Atlanta-** an interdisciplinary co-taught course embedded in the core curriculum with the potential to enroll large numbers of students. The course uses the city of Atlanta as content, including memoirs, walking tours, current events, local speakers, and digital humanities projects. This focus on our city provides a place-based approach that incorporates interdisciplinary and project-based learning.

The EPIC program came out of a "Moonshot Committee" established by Provost Risa Palm in 2018 to explore how GSU needed to adapt to the rapidly changing career landscape. We received a $25,000 planning grant from the Teagle Foundation in summer 2019 and then a 3-year, $300,000 implementation grant in fall 2019. The implementation grant was extended to 4 years because of the pandemic. During the first 4 years of the project, we have worked with over 125 faculty from 30 disciplines. In order to institutionalize our efforts, we are currently working to integrate our initiatives into GSU's strategic plan. We also submitted a $150,000 proposal to the NEH Humanities Connections grant to expand our PERS 2003: Understanding Atlanta course over 2 years by including 4 more faculty from different disciplines to teach new sections and funding faculty development efforts to bring in 20 faculty to create interdisciplinary modules for the course. Further, EPIC is connected to a grant submission to the Spencer Foundation for $490,407 to assess the effect of walking tours on undergraduate student learning.

Fact Profile

Following are more detailed explanations of several of our initiatives:

Project Labs
Project Labs allow students to earn course credit over multiple semesters while working on faculty-led, interdisciplinary, public-facing projects. Through Project Labs, students have opportunities to:

1. Develop and demonstrate 21st-century skills like digital literacies, complex problem solving, and teamwork
2. Apply knowledge from classes to real-world projects with impact
3. Build networks with faculty, community groups, non-profits, and businesses
4. Build a portfolio to show what they know.

Project Labs allow faculty to build an experienced, interdisciplinary team of students to further their research agenda, community outreach, or passion project. Students and faculty earn course credit over multiple semesters while engaging in public-facing work. Georgia State's Project Labs are based on the Vertically Integrated Projects (VIP) concept and are a part of the VIP Consortium.

Wicked Problems Project
Wicked problems are real world issues that are complex and have no clear or easy solutions. Engaging in these issues allows students to work on unstructured problems, unlike more traditional assignments where the goal is to find the "correct" answer. Students must apply skills and knowledge from multiple disciplines and synthesize different and sometimes contradictory points of view. Developing these skills is increasingly necessary in careers and even navigating everyday life. The EPIC Wicked Problems Project at GSU is creating interdisciplinary iCollege modules and in-person forums around these issues to provide opportunities for learning communities to connect around common intellectual experiences. Our inaugural series over fall 2023 focused on two wicked problems: 1) Climate Change and Environmental Impacts, and 2) Housing Affordability and Precarity.

For each of these issues, we put together a group of eight faculty from different departments to discuss these wicked problems through the lens of their respective disciplines. These faculty participated in roundtable events and created video content focused on the following:
- What questions does your discipline ask about this issue? How does your discipline approach research in this area? What types of solutions does your discipline offer?

- Do you have a specific research project connected to this issue?
- Are there specific examples in the metro Atlanta area connected to this issue?
- How does this issue currently affect our students and how might it affect their future careers?
- What practical advice do you have for individual students, the University, and surrounding communities to make a positive impact on this issue?

Video content has been packaged with discussion prompts, assignments, readings, and other course material as modules on the Online Interdisciplinary Library.

Online Interdisciplinary Library
The Online Interdisciplinary Library is a growing collection of course materials that make connections across the core curriculum. These materials are housed online on GSU's Learning Management System, iCollege, and are searchable by discipline, type of material, and content focus. The site allows instructors to easily find material and upload it into their own iCollege courses. The purpose of the Library is to provide resources for faculty to more clearly show connections between core classes, allowing students to better understand and discover relevance in the core courses they are required to take. Underlying the development of the Online Interdisciplinary Library is providing opportunities for faculty, who are typically siloed away from one another by campuses and disciplines, to better understand what is taught in other core courses and build relationships with faculty across the curriculum.

Course materials created for the Online Interdisciplinary Library include:
- **Syllabus statements** to make it clear to students at the beginning of the semester how the course connects with other disciplines
- **Assignments** that challenge students to apply what they are learning across disciplines
- **Example and Question Banks** that deliberately connect material from multiple disciplines
- **Course Material** from readings to multimedia content collected, curated, and created by instructors to show how content overlaps between core courses
- **Approaches** to discussion boards, in-class exercises, and experiential learning that are meant to develop interdisciplinary understanding
- **Modules** that package these materials together and can be imported into iCollege

An early version of the Library is online, with 15 assignments and 27 syllabus statements from 16 departments. Materials currently in development include a series of modules on logic created by faculty in Philosophy and Computer Science and a test

bank for Statistics based on data provided from faculty in History, Political Science, Biology, Business, and several other disciplines. We have also created a visualization based on the syllabus statements in the Library that allow faculty and students to explore how faculty across disciplines explain how their course connects to others.

<u>PERS 2003: Understanding Atlanta</u>

Based in GSU's Institutional Options in the core, EPIC's Understanding Atlanta course has been and will be taught by an interdisciplinary team of instructors. We use Atlanta as the connective tissue between theory and reality. Project-based learning and data literacy components are taught through the use of Atlanta content. Early in the semester, students form small discussion groups that are used in online and in-class discussions about Atlanta and data literacy content. These discussion groups then become their project groups. For much of the semester, these small groups develop a project that will focus on Atlanta and include some form of data visualization.

Course content includes memoirs, walking tours, current events, local speakers, and digital humanities projects. This focus on our city provides a natural way to incorporate experiential, interdisciplinary, and applied learning. The course both pulls from and adds to the Online interdisciplinary Library and the Wicked Problems Project. As an example of the modular nature of PERS 2003: Understanding Atlanta, in fall 2023 the course is being taught by faculty from English and Biology. A faculty member from Africana Studies has developed a 2-week module on Sports and Atlanta- including material about Muhammad Ali, Hank Aaron, and the 1996 Olympics- and will be a guest speaker in the course. The content from her module connects to a walking tour and other content already embedded in the course.

Evidence

Assessment has been a part of the EPIC program from the planning stages. We have a team of faculty and grad students designing assessments, creating surveys, submitting IRB approvals, analyzing data, and presenting our findings. Following is a list and then description of several of our major assessment efforts:

- 4-Year Retention Study of 2019 EPIC Cohort
- Walking Tour Surveys
- GSU 1010 Interdisciplinary Discussion Assessment Research

Assessment Design and Results from 4-Year Retention Study of 2019 EPIC Cohort
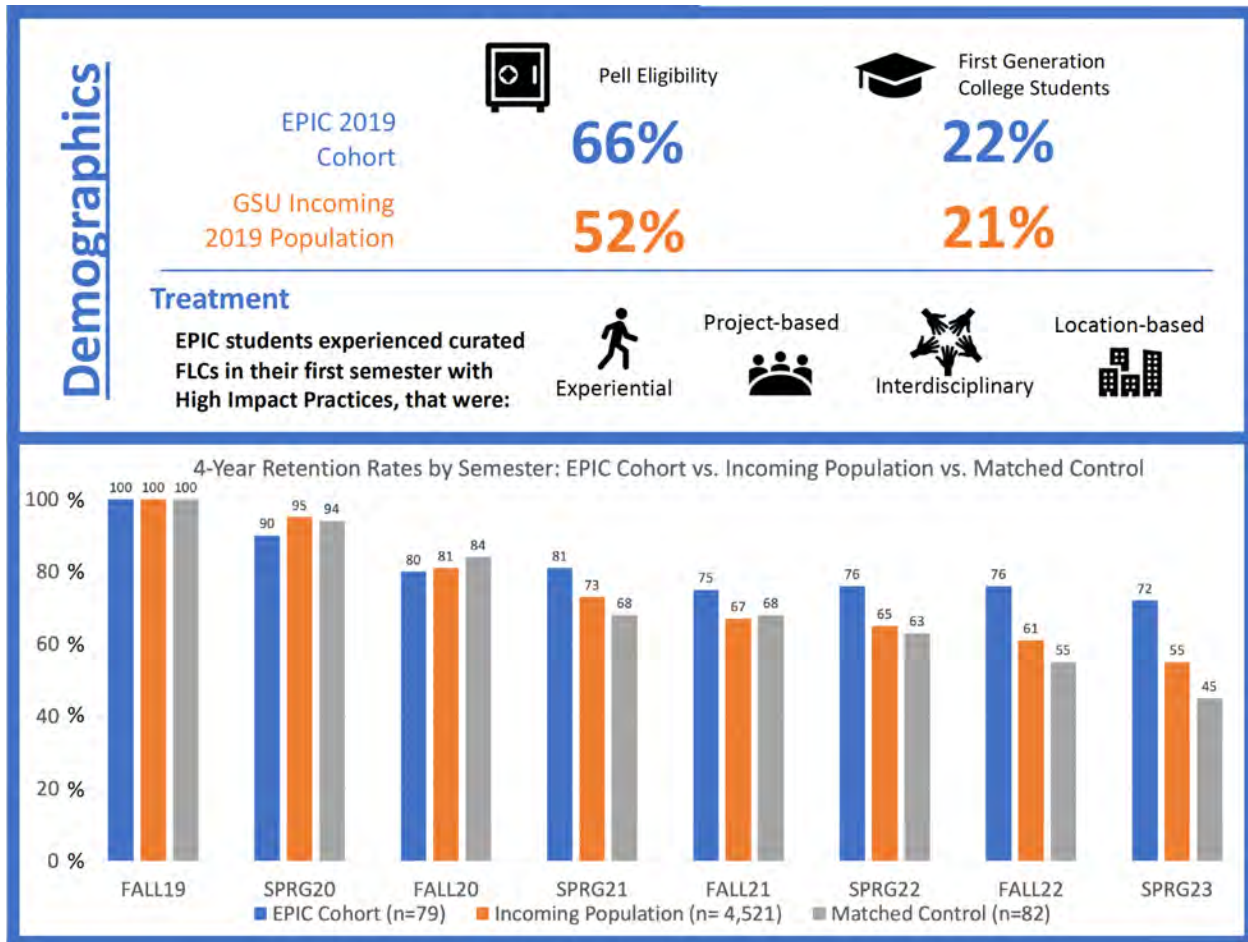
- The 2019 cohort received the EPIC treatment only in their first semester. The treatment included the following High Impact Practices, which are pedagogies that have been shown to be beneficial for students from historically underserved groups: Learning Communities, Writing-Intensive Courses, Collaborative

Projects, Common Intellectual Experiences, Community-Based Learning, and First-Year Seminars.
- The 2019 EPIC cohort was matched with a control group using indicators of gender, race, ethnicity, first-generation status, AP or IB participation and Pell eligibility.
- Honors students and students who did not complete their first semester were removed from the analysis.
- Compared to the average 2019 incoming GSU student, EPIC FLC students were disproportionately eligible for Pell Grants.
- By the end of year 4, EPIC retention is over 30% higher than the 2019 incoming class on the whole, and 60% higher than the rate of the matched control group.

Walking Tour Assessments

We piloted a walking tour survey in our PERS 2003: Understanding Atlanta course in fall 2022 and will run the survey again in late fall 2023. We are attempting to measure how walking tours affect understanding and retention of course material compared to content from readings, affinity toward our campus and the city of Atlanta, and interdisciplinary thinking.

Students were given questions from a class reading, walking tour, and overlapping material from both. The survey was given 2 months after the course content.
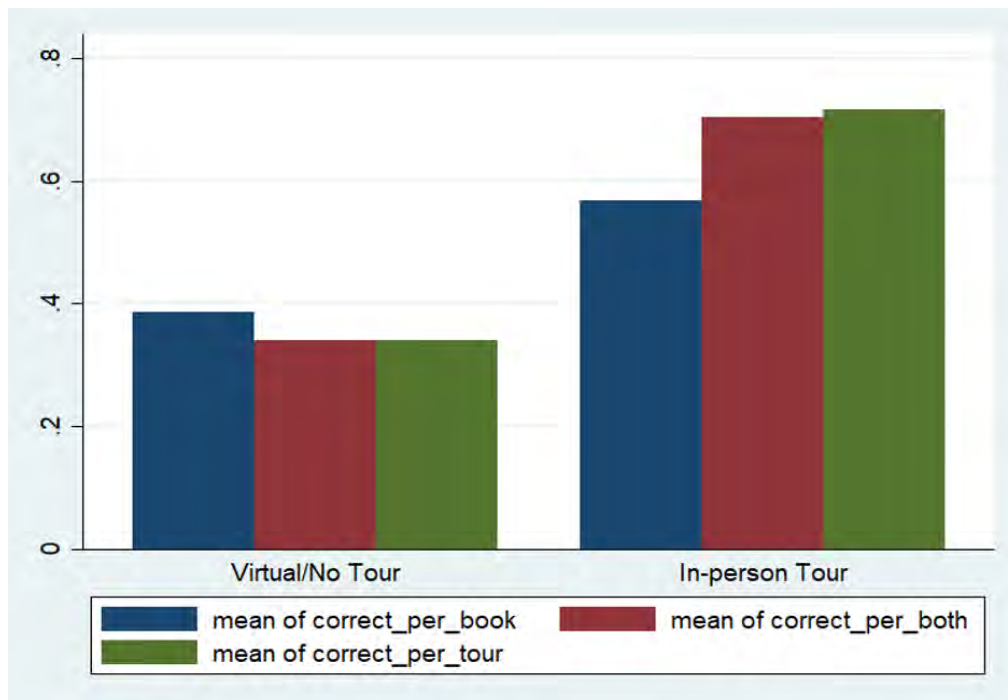
Students who reported going on a virtual tour had a far lower number of correct responses on all types of questions. Our assumption is that these students either did not go on the virtual tour or only partially went on the virtual tour. For our 2023 course we have integrated a QR code on the tour route to better ensure participation in the tour whether virtual or live. Students who participated in the in-person tour more accurately answered questions that focused on tour content or content that overlapped with tour and reading content.

Students were also asked a series of open-ended questions about their walking tour experiences. Their answers had trending themes of interactive learning, visual learning, remembering information better, learning about history/place, and from just reading. Following are sample responses:

- "It also really put the book we are reading into perspective. It really helps you visualize what you are reading better after experiencing yourself."
- "Every time I pass along Auburn Avenue after the walking tour, I see a lot of things…I also came to the realization that everything around you is full of history and a purpose."
- "In being a part of the Sweet Auburn Walking Tour, I saw parts of the city that I have never seen… Seeing that one of our most beautiful buildings that GSU owns is on the street with so much history is amazing. There is so much to discover in a single street."
- "By walking this tour, it gave me a hands-on experience to give a better opinion. It gave me the option to explore and make my own judgment instead of reading an article with a prompt. i enjoyed this walking tour."
- "This walk really captivated my perspective on Atlanta's famous Auburn Avenue. This walk also allowed me to share more information with my friends about Auburn Avenue. It was very interactive and would have been different if we could not go in person."
- "When on a walking tour you use all of your senses while learning about the subject. This definitely helps remember and retain information way better."

GSU 1010 Interdisciplinary Discussion Assessment Research

Considering our strong retention data from our 2019 cohort, we were interested in which of our interventions were having a significant effect, and the dosage level needed for that effect. In fall 2022 we explored how much intervention is required to develop interdisciplinary thinking. Did we need our highly-curated EPIC FLCs or would much smaller interventions be effective? We gave the following discussion prompt to EPIC and non EPIC FLCs at the middle and end of the semester:

While you will be taking classes from many different disciplines during your time at college, they should not feel disconnected and random. Starting with your first semester, you should consider how your courses connect to one another. What skills are you developing in multiple classes? What are common topics that you are learning about?

Several months later, in spring of 2023, we created 3 cohorts to survey:

Received Course Connections prompts   No intervention

Cohort A   Cohort B   Cohort C

EPIC   Not EPIC   Not EPIC

Students in all groups were asked a series of questions about how the content and skills they were learning in their courses were connected. In likert scale questions, there was no distinction across the groups. In general, all groups reported that the material in their courses at least sometimes connected. However, when asked to provide specific examples of how their courses connected, the EPIC cohort were significantly more likely to provide examples:

Cohort A - 50%   **Cohort B - 17%**   **Cohort C - 16%**

Further, the responses from Cohorts B and C tended to be more vague:

Prompt: Can you tell us an example of when one of your classes helped you understand another class?

Examples from A

- in both my macro and global issues class we are talking about the same significant figures economies in the world. each class was able to give me a different perspective
- Last semester, a lecture in my world religions class on intersectional feminism helped me get an A on my social problems test on the same issue

Example from B

- Critical thinking helped with English.

Example from C

- Communication and Media share concepts such as the model of communicating and certain threats to it.

EPIC Research Dissemination

We are currently working on an article about EPIC's 4-year retention data, and we have presented at multiple conferences on our assessment projects:

- *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Utrecht (fall 2023). "Walking Tours as Engaged, Location-Based Pedagogy"
- *SOTL Summit*, virtual (fall 2023). "Developing Interdisciplinary Thinking Among College Freshmen: Evaluating the Impact of Classroom Intervention."
- *National Higher Education Teaching Conference*, New York City (summer 2023). "Bridging the Gap Between Course and Career: Designing Learning Opportunities That Develop Students as Professionals."
- *USG Teaching and Learning Conference*, Athens (spring 2023). 2 workshops- "Location Based Approaches: Writing, Walking, and Project-Based Learning" and "Location Based Approaches: Building an Interdisciplinary Project-Based Course from Scratch."
- *SOTL Summit*, Kennesaw/Virtual (spring 2022). Walking Tours Innovative Teaching Talk.
- *SOTL Commons Conference*, Savannah (spring 2022). Panel, "Connecting High Impact Practices and Student Success Measures."
- *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Virtual (fall 2021). "Using Student Success Measures to Implement, Sustain, and Research Effective Classroom Practices."

EPIC Highlights

EPIC showcases the achievements of our program, faculty, and students on our highlights page, our YouTube Channel, and on our social media feeds (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn). Following are some examples:

EPIC undergrad and grad students and faculty from Project Labs were showcased at the Society for the Study of Southern Literature conference in summer 2022. The Rap Map, Krog Street Tunnel, and Locating South-Asian Food Culture of Atlanta projects were featured. Attendees of the conference were able to interact with EPIC student exhibits, leading to an enjoyable and enriching experience.

EPIC's Project Labs are about undergrad and grad students collaborating with faculty to create research that stands out. Part of this research process, like any other research, is publishing and presenting work. GSU hosts an undergraduate research conference (GSURC) every spring to exhibit projects from all areas of study. In 2022, a student in the Pollitik lab, Iman Hoque, presented his research on executive approval ratings in response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and came in second place in the category of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Check out [his presentation](#).
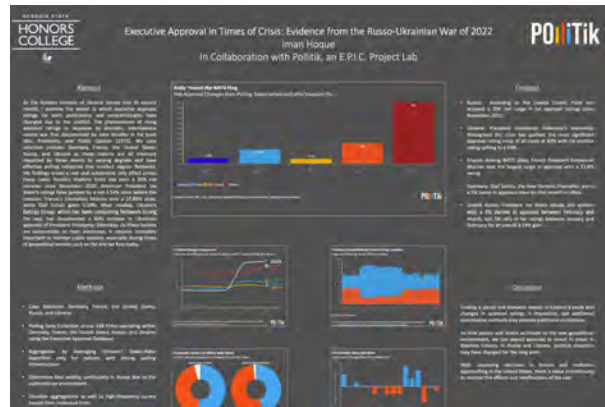
Students work to preserve Atlanta's Krog Street Tunnel

"It's a community bulletin board. It is ephemeral:" A Georgia State team is making sure the changing walls at Krog Street Tunnel are preserved for generations

EPIC Project Lab researchers Curt Jackson and Brennan Collins and their students were recently [profiled on 11 Alive](#), one of Atlanta's leading local news programs. Jackson described his process for documenting the changing nature of the tunnel, the hot-spots for painting and messaging, and the ways that current events change the look and feel of one of Atlanta's most recognized landmarks.

Finding Francis is the product of years of research on the part of Elizabeth West, English professor at GSU's Downtown campus, along with her students working in the Mapping Atlanta project lab. Working together, they combed U.S. Census records and slave schedules from the 19th century to learn more about Francis Sistrunk, a distant ancestor. Then, they combined the information they learned with mapping technologies like GIS to give an exhaustive look at the land on which Francis lived in Harris County, Georgia. The book gives a unique insight into the life of an enslaved woman, as well as those of her children.

COCURRICULAR AWARDS

Student Scholar for Outstanding Research
Marina Fishman

"Marina Fishman started in my Perspectives 2003 Project Lab in fall 2022 and is continuing in my Perspectives 2001 course this semester. The class is designed to encourage students to work on "real-world, public facing" projects. Marina developed a research project to interview autistic individuals and family members. Marina designed the research protocol, wrote the informed consent and the survey questions, and organized recruiting volunteers and finding space for the interviews. [...] This is Marina's first major research project, but throughout the process she has been motivated, organized, meticulous, and professional."

2023 STAR AWARDS — PERIMETER COLLEGE

Marina Fishman from Kathryn Crowther's Disability, Access, and Inclusion Project Lab has won the 2023 Perimeter College STAR Award, in the category of "Student Scholar for Outstanding Research." Marina spent two semesters planning and carrying out her research interviewing individuals with autism and their family members. She was helped along the way by a group of other students from her Project Lab.

On April 22, 2022, students from the Georgia State Prison Education Project Project Lab traveled with lab directors Dr. Owen Cantrell and Dr. Katherine Perry to Montgomery, Alabama to the Equal Justice Initiative's National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum. Both sites serve to memorialize the Black men, women, and children lynched and murdered in the U.S. and to educate the public on the history of enslavement, racial terror, segregation, and mass incarceration. The students spent the semester learning about the history of racial inequality as a central feature of mass incarceration. This visit was the culmination of that work.
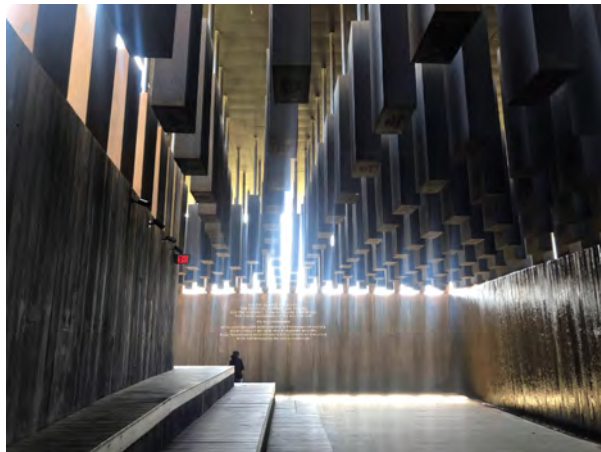
Capturing Krog Tunnel in real-time

Thomas Wheatley

Photo: David Goldman/AP

The Krog Street Codex was the subject of interest for Axios Atlanta reporter Thomas Wheatley on November 15, 2022. Axios is a news service specializing in bringing local issues to the forefront. Lab Leader Curt Jackson and Mapping Atlanta organizer Brennan Collins related their experience on the project and the connections between street art and public discourse in an interview with Wheatley.

EPIC students work to find solutions for real problems in their interdisciplinary classes. During summer 2023, Emma Barrett, Reese Orkin, and Leah Soller developed a prototype for an accessibility map for the Alpharetta campus as part of Dr. Crowther's Disability, Access, and Inclusion Project Lab in collaboration with the CASA Summer-HIP program.

GSU's EPIC and Biology students have collaborated with Emory University and the David J. Sencer CDC Museum to digitize museum exhibits about global responses to and the histories of Ebola and Influenza. We're so proud of these students' epic work! You can see more about their work here.

Project Labs promote teamwork, problem solving, and research, some of the skills most important to employers. Former Pollitik students Taylor Coleman and Aditi Deo attribute their job-hunting success in part to their participation in an EPIC project lab. Here's what they had to say.

Undergrad and grad students in the Pollitik Project Lab were published in the Wall Street Journal in January of 2021. Pollitik released a series of statistical reports that place the COVID-19 diagnoses of world leaders at the center of their public opinion ratings. The visually striking and globally-focused reports filled an important niche for political reporters and followers of political news.