



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Won't Lose This Dream: How an Upstart Urban University Rewrote the Rules of a Broken System

By Andrew Gumbel

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on May 3, 2023 to discuss *Won't Lose This Dream: How an Upstart Urban University Rewrote the Rules of a Broken System* by Andrew Gumbel.

It is a book about how a major public institution transformed itself. The institution is Georgia State University. The transformation: In less than two decades, it made itself into a national leader in the education and graduation of first-generation college students.

The results have been dramatic, the book reports. Since 2003, the university's graduation rate (that is, students graduating within six years of the time they entered) has increased by 74 percent. Even more amazingly, Georgia State did it without changing its student body. Now, as then, 60 percent of GSU's student body qualifies for federal Pell grants, which are aimed at low-income students. 70 percent are minority students.

So, how did Georgia State become so good at graduating first-generation students? By changing systems within the university, from counseling and short-term financial assistance to rethinking the sequencing of courses in some majors.

The book, then, is a story of success by an institution important to Atlanta whose work will enrich the Atlanta area for generations to come. But it is also an insider's story, a step-by-step narrative about how transformational change comes to a public institution. And that is what the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group focused on in our discussion: What does this book tell us about how important institutions undertake major reforms?



Elements of Change

Before we could identify the “big ideas” from *Won't Lose This Dream*, we needed to spell out what had caused Georgia State's change effort to succeed. Here were the elements that started—and sustained—Georgia State's transformation:

- The right person came to the right place in the institution and saw problems and opportunities. In Georgia State's case, it was a professor named Tim Renick who in 2008 became associate provost in charge of enrollment, registration and financial aid. In other words, the part of the university administration closest to the students themselves.
- This person had talents and qualities that made him particularly effective. Renick was respected by the faculty, “difficult to dislike,” comfortable with both data and narrative, and began his new job with the belief that the university could do more for its students. In other words, he had a bias for action and reform.
- He began small, with demonstration projects that sought to find new ways of keeping students on a path to graduation. Because they were small, higher-ups were largely comfortable with Renick's experiments. And because he was comfortable using data, he carefully documented the results.
- Over time, the demonstration projects became more than experiments. They added up to a new philosophy about how a major university could operate, along with a comprehensive set of new processes.
- Leaders at the top noticed and became champions. Renick's important champions were the university president and provost, who embraced the new philosophy and supported the new processes.
- A crisis speeded change. In this case, it was the deep recession starting in 2008 and the state budget cuts that followed. This made it easier for some in the university to consider new ways of doing things.
- In time, the changes found admirers and supporters outside the university, including the university system chancellor, the governor, higher-education officials elsewhere in the country and even Bill Gates.

Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five “big ideas” from *Won't Lose This Dream* that we think institutional reformers in Urban Atlanta could benefit from.

1. The insiders who lead reform are unusual people. They must be willing to question the status quo but also be respected within the organization. And they must be persuasive. A key to persuasion for reformers is combining storytelling with data.
2. These reformers should start small and become known for their experiments and for their careful documentation of results.
3. Eventually, the experiments should create new ways of thinking about the institution and its mission and new processes that changes how the institution works.
4. Early on, the role of senior leaders is to identify and cultivate these reformers, follow their experiments and support them as results are shown. As the experiments create new ways of thinking about the institution, senior leaders must become active partners in shaping the emerging vision and explaining it to the public.
5. Insiders and senior leaders must be ready when the “stars align” and conditions are right for transformational changes. The opportunities may come from a crisis, a change of leadership in state or local government, or a shift in public opinion. When these things happen, change can accelerate from incremental to transformational.

Why Do These Things?

If public institutions became more adept at reform, how would it help Urban Atlanta?

- It's good for the region. We need well-functioning institutions in Urban Atlanta.
- Our region is changing in its demographics and needs. We need institutions that change with it.
- Institutions are inherently slow to change. If we don't help them see opportunities for reform, they won't.
- By resisting change, institutions will not attract the most talented and motivated workers.
- We need many more people to understand how institutional reform works, not just those who serve in these organizations. The more people learn about how change actually works, the better they can function as citizens and voters in a democratic society.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes generate opposition. That's true even for something as desirable as institutional reform. So our members discussed the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Institutions are good at the status quo.
- Inside these institutions there may be a fear that change will cost more than it brings in benefits.
- Many people can remember only reforms or changes that didn't work; this creates cynicism about change.
- The institution may have powerful outside interests that do not want it to change.
- Some institutions, especially the most visible ones, may be so encumbered by requirements like public hearings and environmental reviews that change becomes difficult.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers:

- We need to publicize institutions that have successfully transformed themselves, as Georgia State University has, and call attention to how they did it.
- We may need an outside organization that is focused on identifying opportunities for change and teaching the process of change. This was part of the mission for Research Atlanta, a nonprofit think tank that for more than 30 years researched issues and advocated for change in the Atlanta area.
- We need to be sure that Georgia State graduates, who have benefited from the changes at the university, are hired in our regional institutions. They benefited from institutional change. They may become its evangelists.
- We need to teach institutional insiders and senior leaders about how change works. One focus should be on identifying those in institutions who are good at thinking like “humanists and statisticians”—that is, comfortable in communicating with data and stories. These are the ones who can lead change from within.

A Synopsis of *Won't Lose This Dream*

Won't Lose This Dream is 263 pages, not including acknowledgements, notes, bibliography and index. It has 14 chapters and an introduction.

Gumbel is a British-born journalist and the author of several books. He lives in Los Angeles.

This is a book about how an institution well known to Atlantans made a “fundamental transformation” in its approach to social mobility and higher education. Along the way, this institution became a national

leader in educating *and graduating* first-generation college students. The institution: Georgia State University in downtown Atlanta.

It's a success story that took place recently and surprisingly rapidly. As mentioned earlier, Georgia State's graduation rate has increased by 74 percent. Importantly, it did this without changing its student body.

And it didn't lean on a wealthy alumni base to make these changes because Georgia State doesn't have one. In fact, Gumbel writes, "people regarded (GSU) as the red-headed stepchild of the university system." Nor did it do so using small numbers. Georgia State is huge; the downtown campus has more than 36,000 students. Add the two-year colleges that GSU assumed responsibility for in 2016, and the student body is more than 55,000.

So, how *did* Georgia State transform itself? As Gumbel makes clear, the university did three things that flew in the face of conventional thinking in higher education:

- It embraced its first-generation student body. In other words, it did not try to become more exclusive in admissions.
- It accepted responsibility not only for admitting these students but for their success once admitted.
- It gradually designed an undergraduate curriculum and a support system around its most vulnerable students, on the theory that what served the least advantaged would also benefit the most advantaged.

As simple as these ideas were, there were few in higher education—or even in Georgia State's administration—who accepted them when GSU's transformation began. The book explains how these ideas emerged, who championed them and why, why these ideas were resisted, how people were won over, and how these ideas became practices. In short, it's the story of institutional reform told from the inside.

What can urbanists learn from *Won't Lose This Dream*? Three things:

- Reform is hard. To change large institutions, you need the right people in the right places, a set of beliefs that challenge conventional thinking, a method of finding and documenting good practices, hard work, strong leadership and some element of luck.
- Reform is so hard that others may be dissuaded from trying it once they learn the price. As word spread of Georgia State's successes, college administrators from around the country made journeys to Atlanta to learn how it worked. Few followed in its footsteps.
- That said, there is nothing special about Georgia State other than its willingness to try new things. There are many public agencies in need of new ideas and practices. Where else could this kind of institutional reform work in Urban Atlanta? And what would be the benefits?

So how *did* Georgia State begin its transformation and sustain its changes? It began when a remarkable professor named Tim Renick was moved into administration and placed in charge of academic progress. Renick started his new job with a belief that the first-generation students he had taught could succeed in college and a curiosity about why so many did not. What he learned was there wasn't a single explanation; there were hundreds of reasons, many of them clustered around predictable problems, such as choosing the wrong major, running out of money or feeling lost in a big, unfamiliar environment.

What moved Renick's work forward—and connected it with the university's future—was a crisis and new leadership. The crisis was the Great Recession of 2008 and the deep cutbacks in state support of higher education that followed. The new leadership was the arrival of a new president and provost at Georgia State in 2009. President Mark Becker and Provost Risa Palm did not arrive believing Georgia State should be a pioneer in educating and graduating students most universities avoided. But they were persuadable. And Becker, in particular, was searching for something to make Georgia State distinctive.

Turned out, Renick knew how to be persuasive. His theories were grounded in data, which he analyzed from existing Georgia State information sources, such as student aid, course selection, grades and graduation rates, and new data sources he helped create. With all this, he had mapped how students traveled from admission to graduation. With small interventions, Renick theorized, you could improve the likelihood of graduation. A small loan or grant here. A course taken earlier there. Advisors and peer-learning groups to help see students through the rough parts.

With Becker's blessing, Renick ran experiments that confirmed the power of small interventions. Later on, the experiments became larger and involved things like curriculum design. There were, Renick learned, some courses that could predict whether a student would succeed in business or nursing school—or maybe should switch to a new major. Why not have students take these courses early, when changing majors would do the least harm? (The reaction was one reformers everywhere know all too well: because we've always done it this way.)

But with Becker and Palm's backing and growing support from others at the university, Renick persisted and the successes continued. As word spread about Georgia State's work, so did its list of admirers. Importantly including the chancellor of the University System of Georgia and, in time, the governor's office.

The university gained admirers outside Georgia as well. Bill Gates stopped by to see the programs and technologies Georgia State had pioneered in tracking student success and identifying problems. Other colleges brought entire delegations. They usually left disappointed when they learned that adopting a new technology or creating a new department would not, by themselves, bring success. Changing goals, strategies and the very culture of the institution—together with technology, data, counselors and resources—would.

This book should be a revelation for reformers. Yes, it makes it clear how hard change was at this university. And how others, once they saw what was required, were defeated by the prospect. But all the elements of success are here as well:

- Respected and determined insiders asking the right questions
- Leaders who want to accomplish something meaningful and are open to persuasion
- The importance of data and experimentation in trying new things and documenting results
- How success builds on itself and how outsiders come to recognize and support it
- Most important, the benefits that reform can make, not only on the institution but for the people it serves

Maybe best of all, this is a success story we can see for ourselves in Atlanta.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.