



# Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals at Georgia Tech

*Launching a Framework for Organizational Transformation to Unite Sustainability Efforts Across Research, Teaching, Operations, and Partnerships, featuring President Cabrera*

**Keynote Remarks:** President Ángel Cabrera, President, Georgia Tech

**Moderator:** Anna Stenport, Professor of Global Studies, Chair of the School of Modern Languages, and co-Director of the Atlanta Global Studies Center, Georgia Tech

**Panelists:**

- **John McArthur**, The Brookings Institution
- **Wendy Purcell**, Research Scholar, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and President Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive Emerita, Plymouth University, UK
- **Sarah Lee Kjellberg**, Head of U.S. iShares Sustainable ETFs at BlackRock
- **Na'Taki Osborne Jelks**, Assistant Professor, Environmental and Health Sciences, Spelman College; co-founder, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance; and steering committee member, RCE Greater Atlanta
- **Isabella Stubbs**, Environmental engineering undergraduate student, Georgia Institute of Technology, and co-lead, RCE Greater Atlanta Youth Network

<https://president.gatech.edu/Event-Advancing-SDGs>

**Transcript Table of Contents**

**Moderator Welcome:** Anna Stenport.....3

**Opening Keynote Remarks:** President Ángel Cabrera.....6

**Panelist:** John McArthur.....11

**Panelist:** Wendy Purcell.....16

**Panelist:** Sarah Lee Kjellberg.....19

**Panelist:** Na’Taki Osborne Jelks.....24

**Reflections:** President Ángel Cabrera.....29

**Panelist:** Isabella Stubbs.....31

**Q&A Panelist Response:** Anna Stenport, John McArthur, Wendy Purcell,  
Na’Taki Osborne Jelks.....35

**Closing Remarks:** Anna Stenport, Joy Harris.....40

**Welcome: Anna Stenport, Chair of Georgia Tech's School of Modern Languages,  
Founding co-Director of the Atlanta Global Studies Center**

We'll get started right away. We have a wonderful list of speakers and topics to address today. Without further ado, let me just make some introductory remarks and then we'll get right onto our panelists. For those of you who want to learn more, there is a web link in the chat to the website for more information: [www.president.gatech.edu/SDG](http://www.president.gatech.edu/SDG). So, welcome to the event, *Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals at Georgia Tech: Launching a Framework for Organizational Transformation to Unite Sustainability Efforts Across Research Teaching, Operations, and Partnerships*.

To advance the Institute's new mission and strategic plan, President Ángel Cabrera encourages leaders and units throughout campus with spearheading a project to promote, implement and advance the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at Georgia Tech. This project began in early Spring 2020 and has continued to gain momentum, through the events of the recent months as cultural, social, and environmental sustainability has become ever more important in the life of a global pandemic, increasingly evident effects of the climate crisis, and the on-going fight for racial justice and equity.

Today's campus kick-off event officially launches the initiative programming during the fall semester and will introduce to the campus community through the sustainable development goals and articulate the role that Georgia Tech can play, as a place based globally connected anchor institution to lead the Atlanta region in implementing and advancing the SDGs. Everyone is invited; students, staff, faculty,

alums, partners, to join in this transformative project of innovation and organizational change. You're invited to peruse the website [president.gatech.edu/SDG](http://president.gatech.edu/SDG). It's also in the chat. To learn more, reach out to organizing community members and become involved. Pulling off an effort like this is no small deal. Please join me in thanking all the members of the fall SDG planning committee at Georgia Tech as well as the Institute's Sustainability task force, staff and members of the president's office, and of course President Ángel Cabrera. You will find their names and contact info on that website.

So, let's move to today's events. Panelists in today's speaker line-up have been asked to consider how the SDGs can be a useful framework for large organizations such as Georgia Tech to catalyze action and positive change that advances the public good. We encourage you to use the Q&A function or the chat function to pose questions to the panelists and share your thoughts and reflections.

So introductory remarks today will be given by Georgia Tech President Ángel Cabrera, who joined Georgia Tech as it's 12<sup>th</sup> president in September 2019. He is a Georgia Tech alumnus and in his role as a business educator, he has played a key role in advancing professional ethics, internationalization, and corporate social responsibility. Deeply invested in the positive future of region, President Cabrera serves on such boards as the Atlanta Committee for Progress and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.

Our distinguished group of panelists, which you can read more about on the website include John McArthur of the Brookings Institution, a key leader in promoting SDGs roles for higher education; Wendy Purcell of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public

Health and former President of UK's University of Plymouth; Sarah Lee Kjellberg, Head of U.S. iShares Sustainable ETFs at BlackRock; Na'taki Osborne Jelks, professor at Spelman College and co-founder of the Atlanta Watershed Alliance; and Isabella Stubbs, Georgia Tech environmental engineering student and a co-lead of the RCE Greater Atlanta Youth Network. To finish up the panel for today, Joy Harris of Georgia Tech School of Electrical and Computer Engineering will give concluding remarks and present us with our upcoming call to action. With that, please join me in welcoming President Cabrera for introductory remarks. Thank you.

## **Opening Keynote Remarks: Georgia Tech President Ángel Cabrera**

Thank you, thank you so much, Anna for that introduction and thanks to all the panelists for joining us today, for being a part of this incredibly exciting thinking process that will set up an ambitious agenda for action. I'm really, really excited about today. When I came back to Georgia Tech last year, what I was most excited about was this deep conviction that it is in places like Georgia Tech where there is hope to find solution to the most important problems of our time, and both because it is in places like Georgia Tech where the minds and the talents of young people and future leaders are changed and formed, but also because of the very direct contributions that our faculty and our research centers make to finding answers to very complex problems.

So, one of the first things that I did soon after I arrived was to invite the broader community, faculty, staff, students, but also alumni and leaders from our community to come together in a process to build a new strategic plan to basically lay out what are our collective dreams for the next decade and we started off by asking the most profound questions. What is it that we do? Why do we exist? What is the ultimate reason, the purpose that gets us up in the morning and that keeps us going forward, that binds us as a community? And out of those questions came a very important part of that process - to produce a mission statement, to try to summarize, to distill in one sentence what it is that we do as a community. And we spent a lot of time working on this one sentence. And discussing. And Anna was part of the process and several of you were there as well, discussion prepositions and articles and nouns and every

single word in that sentence was carefully chosen. And the final sentence is, “We develop leaders, who advance technology and improve the human condition.”

Clearly, we are an educational institution, and it is developing people’s talents that is the number one thing we do. We are a technological university and proud of it. Proud of the science, of the technology, the innovation that happens in this place. But ultimately, we don’t believe in technology just for technology sake. We are committed to making a difference, to improve the human condition. I find that short sentence incredibly inspiring, and I’ve been reflecting on it ever since it became officially our mission statement a few months ago. But of course, it raises lots of questions, which is, what exactly a mission statement ought to do, right? It’s to force us to think about what it is we do, and want to do, and especially that last part, improving the human condition. Because it begs the question, exactly what is it that we ought to do? What are those big questions? What are the big issues that should drive our attention if we are committed to improving the human condition?

And fortunately, a lot of people around the world have spent time trying to answer that question, and that is the source of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is an answer to the question of what aspects of the human condition need improving? What are the top priorities that we should be embracing as the world? So, it makes total sense to me that we would start there, that we would just carefully look at the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, as an articulating framework that can guide our actions as a University. I was somewhat involved in the earlier millennium global development framework and somewhat frustrated that academic

institutions were really not at the table at the time. Faculty members were, individual faculty members, but institutionally. Academic institutions were not. I participated in creating what is called the Principals for Responsible Management Education within the UN Global Compact, and that framework is now adopted, has been adopted by hundreds and hundreds of business schools around the world. I saw the impact that some of these global frameworks can have in shaping the behavior, the conduct of academic institutions, in that case, of business schools, which is the space where I worked at the time.

So, I have seen it happen, and I think it ought to happen again within the current framework of sustainable development goals. That's what we've been trying to do. We have been partnering with other organizations, of course the Brookings, and I'm delighted that my friend John McArthur is with us today and with the Rockefeller Foundation. Thanks to them, we have worked in figuring out how to create a coalition of universities to band together and to exchange best practices and to support one another. And that is the university global coalition that we've been shaping during this year.

Clearly, the problems, the issues, the challenges, that we face as a planet are too big for any of us to be able to make a difference by ourselves. And that's why we're here. We have to reach out. We have to collaborate with others. And that's why it's important that we have these guests with us today to help us shape our thinking and that's why we're going to continue to work in establishing partnerships and cooperation with others.

So, I'm excited for two reasons about using, how in this sort of strategic planning process the notion of embracing our responsibility to make an impact in the big problems that matter I'm delighted that that has come out so strong in this strategic planning process. And I encourage us to think about this in two directions, right. One is, how can be the SDGs help us organize ourselves more effectively at Georgia Tech, how can we maybe be inspired by this framework to focus our energies into things that really matter. And then in the opposite direction is really how can we think about how we're going to have the biggest impact that we can, as a community, and think about how both on the education side and how we can shape curriculum. We can shift what happens inside and outside of the classroom. So how can we can shape our multidisciplinary research efforts to really provide a voice of science?

Of course, we were doing this whole reflection and analysis, and we came together as a community on this strategic planning process. Before COVID hit and before the issues around racial inequality, really became a central issue in our nation and I think both of those issues, if anything has highlighted and amplified as Anna was mentioning earlier, the importance of what we're doing. We have seen how in dealing with our own challenges as an academic institution eyes and technology have been essential tools for us to deal with our own issues. We have seen how many of our faculty and their disciplines and labs have turned their knowledge and expertise to provide assistance and solutions for others. We've also seen how Covid-19 has even exacerbated or made it even more obvious the issues of social inequality that we have around us. We have seen that these issues of Sustainable Development Goals are not

just problems of faraway places, but our realities that in our very immediate community.

And so, if anything is the very odd and difficult circumstances of 2020 inspired me and energize me about the importance of the urgency of our mission of having an impact and convinced me that the SDGs are just the framework that we need to do that.

So, I look forward to the panel, Anna. And looking forward to the presentations from the other panelists. Thank you all for being part of this very important conversation.

**Panelist: John McArthur, Brookings Institute**

I'm John MacArthur thank you so much for having me. Congratulations to Ángel, my wonderful friend, and all the wonderful leaders at Georgia Tech and in the community.

I am an economist, based at Brookings, and also an advisor to the UN Foundation. I've been involved for many years I guess now with the Sustainable Development Goals, and what was before that the Millennium Development Goals, and have really watched this extraordinary arc, going from the original UN high-level conversations of how world leaders get together to what I would call the local, regional pioneering conversations to where things actually get done. And it's been quite extraordinary to watch an extraordinary university like Georgia Tech get so much momentum around this. And there's a few things I thought I might be able to share in terms of how I see a lot of people, worrying about the SDGs, and also thinking about how to make them just a little more tractable even still.

So, if I were to start with our people, worrying about the SDGs and we're seeing this especially today in the context of COVID and so many big crises that are going on around the world. You know, is the crisis bigger than the SDGs and do we need to take a step back?

Well, I would argue it's the opposite actually. The SDGs are called to come back to basics around basic issues of inclusion, prosperity for all, sustainability for all, and no one left behind. And so, if anything, this is a time to double down on those basics

and as a colleague of mine said, “the crisis of COVID has brought a change in thinking that the SDGs were meant to help trigger all along to begin with.”

And so, it's this change in thinking around basic issues for humanity, and our long-term success as humanity interfacing successfully with nature. And I find that an important starting point because a lot of people when they worry about the SDGs, or they wonder about the SDGs, or even when they're introduced to the SDGs, there are typically three basic concerns I hear people having. One is, it's just too big. It's too much. Second is it's too far off, I've got an immediate set of concerns in front of me. And third is, I'm not the UN. That's it, that's what people talk about out there. I don't go to New York. I didn't go to the General Assembly. What does it mean for me?

And it's in that context that I found that there are three basic answers, and this is some work that we've been doing at Brookings and with the Rockefeller Foundation and many partners around the world to say well, first of all, on this concern of it being too big. It's very important to, in my view, take stock of what these SDGs actually are.

When I meet with groups around the world, if I ask 20 people, “What's the single biggest issue in the world?” “What’s the single biggest problem the world needs to solve?” I'll generally get 20 different answers. I might actually get everything ranging from inequality, to climate change, to education, to protecting the environment.

But sometimes people forget some of them. And that those 20 people, often, for example, people don't answer the oceans, doesn't come up. And then I say, “well, does that mean we shouldn't protect the oceans, for the next generation because it's not important it's only 70% of the planet?” And then people will laugh, and they say,

“well of course we should protect the oceans.” I say, “well that's interesting because what you just described, typically, is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and the 20 answers all feed into these goals, but we might have forgotten one in the room which is goal 14 on protecting the oceans.”

And the way to understand the goals in my view is that it's not what the UN told the world to care about. *It's what the world told the UN, not to forget about.* And what it is, is a way to bring together all of these concerns that people have, which are all correct. And so, these goals are ultimately a way not to ask everyone to do everything, but to bring together all the issues that we already care about. And in universities, each department, each school, each student, each professor, each stakeholder, already cares about at least one of those issues as their most important. This is a way to bring our interest together.

But then, my second concern is usually that they're too far off, it's just too big an issue. And so, we said well why don't we think about not just what needs to be done say by 2030? Why don't we think about what can be done in the next 12 to 18 months to bend the curve? Or if life, forgive the sports metaphor, is a football game, don't tell me what the touchdown is, tell me what the first down is. And so how do we think about how to move the ball forward? And there's a million ways to do that. There's no single way. And that's how we actually make progress over time is thinking about the next 12 to 18 months at a time.

And then third is, how do we think about not just what the UN needs to do? Ultimately, this is about people, reminding the UN, what to play back to ourselves to

pay attention to. It's about what each of us do in our communities, and how we can cooperate. How can we come together to think about things we could do 12 to 18 months at a time, on a generational basis to make change?

And so, all we did is we bundled that together in an exercise we call 17 goals, but 17 rooms. Because ultimately, this comes down to, people getting together in rooms, to talk about what they can do together to make change. And for the past couple of years we've been building this experiment of 17 rooms to say how can we create new forms of problem solving that empower people in their communities in their universities in their businesses and organizations to cooperate and make change. And we've been very privileged that Ángel Cabrera has been part of that. And he's been leading what we call the goal 17 partnership room. But partnerships through universities as hubs of societal partnership.

And so, we're delighted, and I'm delighted as an economist who spent a lot of my career in and out of academia, to think about how universities can play a central role in this long-term agenda. And there's three basic reasons why I love universities.

One is, it's about science, in the face of the moment. It's about evidence and inquiry that can persist beyond the politics of the day. And universities play a central role in society for prompting hard questions for self-reflection, as society.

A second is that they're hubs of intergenerational collaboration, the problems that we're talking about need the wisdom and the people who have been around for a while, and the fresh perspective of the new generation that are going to lead the change. It means collaboration between all of the above.

And third, when universities work well, they're tied to the ground realities of the problems in their regions and the stakeholders where they live. And so, this is why I'm so excited by what you're all doing here in tackling, not just what the university can do, but what the stakeholders can do together to tackle the problems where everyone lives in the southeast. And in that spirit, we've been talking about how 17 rooms can be a concept and even 17 rooms U. This year we're about to have our annual global policy flagship which has taken on a spirit of course, 17 zooms, but we're also seeing that universities around the world. Several are wanting to say "how can we do this to bring together our communities, for common language a common framework to get everyone on the same page literally and figuratively?" And I understand that the team on the ground there has been leading an effort for next month. And we want to be as helpful as possible to you as you pioneer this and build on experiences from Mexico and Canada and Spain and other institutions. And we're so thrilled again that Ángel with the president actually McGill University is co-chairing the global flagship conversation on how universities can help in New York in a couple of weeks, based out of New York and the UN conversation while we're all on zoom globally.

But together, to see how we can support you to be a pioneer of how universities and communities can come together to create change that they get practical, near term, and cooperation based, these SDGs to be meaningful in people's lives. Thank you.

**Panelist: Wendy Purcell, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**

Thank you so much, thank you John. Hello, I'm Wendy Purcell. I'm a former university president, and I'm now a research scholar over at Harvard University. Thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this exciting event. The first thing I want to say is that higher education matters. What we do here, matters. And I think never more than now as we battle, the pandemics of COVID and inequity in our society.

In these times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, so-called VUCA-conditions, the SDGs can be a beacon that help guide our collective efforts. So, with 17 goals and 169 targets, I don't want to get lost in the detail, rather what the SDGs represent; the nearest thing we have a strategy for the world. A world where no one is left behind. Their importance to me is the hyper-dependence and interconnected nature of sustainable development, where the economy and society are nested into the biosphere. We can't have a thriving economy, with prosperity for all or a thriving society based on equity, if we're on a dead planet.

Looking at the SDGs and the university's mission, the key thing for me is to focus on what we do here. Teaching, learning, research, innovation, community service, and engagement, rather than something we add on to an already hectic schedule, the faculty, staff, and students. We need to use the SDGs as the lens through which we look at what we do here. Not something more to do.

It's a bit like for me putting on my SDG goggles and looking fresh at our teaching and learning, looking again at the research and innovation, and looking at new

at our community service. We need to integrate this higher purpose into the day job, which becomes very much part of the way we do things around here. We need to reframe sustainability and sustainable development as a strategic agenda, higher education.

Universities are full of people who are excited by problems, who are seeking solutions, pushing back the boundaries of knowledge, and nurturing the next generation of leaders, and scholars. The SDGs and addressing the SDGs, is not something we impose on an academic community. Rather, it represents a call to action for faculty, students, and staff, helping us reimagine our purpose and lead through uncertainty, driving academic excellence and impact, and helping sustain the institution in the face of disruption and global challenges. All well and good, you may say, but how, what does this look like? Can you tell me in this new agenda for the university, where am I in this?

Let me turn to some practical examples, first to the academic domain. The development of programs and courses that bring together disciplines and novel ways to address the SDGs and equip our students with knowledge, learning, and skills for the 21st century. The same is true for research problems, where the campus can be a living lab for societal inquiry. And when I talk of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary efforts, this is not about dissolving so called disciplinary silos. This is not anti-discipline. It's about maintaining strong disciplinary communities who can then bring their unique perspectives around a problem. This agenda must be driven by intellectual curiosity.

One scheme I wanted to mention is community research awards working with the local community here to invite their questions and connecting them with leaving faculty who are interested in finding answers. This is a way of connecting local with global challenges. With respect to enabling the university engaged with the SDGs, there needs to be some sort of structural coordinating hub, that can be a meeting place for scholars, students, and a wider group of stakeholders, particularly in a city and wider region. This agenda is about radical collaboration on a global scale, partnering with public, private, and plural organizations.

And finally, the University needs to walk the talk, dealing with its carbon footprint, its impact investing, and its promotions criteria and so on. This agenda needs to be baked into the culture and become as I said, “just the way we do things around here” this global agenda but made a personal. Thank you very much.

**Panelist: Sarah Lee Kjellberg, U.S. iShares Sustainable ETFs at BlackRock**

Hello everyone, I am Sarah Lee Kjellberg, and I lead our U.S. iShares Sustainable ETFs at Black Rock, and I am thrilled to be here with all of you at Georgia Tech for the invitation to join this really important discussion. So, what I'm going to do is provide some perspectives on more of a corporate level, private sector, and specifically around, finance, and investments, and what I'm going to do is really focus on three things. So, the first is to talk about BlackRock and what sustainability means to us, two is how are we supporting the SDGs. And then lastly, what are some of the things that we're doing to really inspire our employees to take action?

So, starting with BlackRock and how we think about sustainability, so it's really driven by our purpose, so BlackRock's purpose is to help more and more people experienced financial wellbeing. So, as a fiduciary what we do is we really commit to providing investment excellence to focus on long term sustainability, and this is embedded in everything that we do really holistically across all of our businesses. What this means is integrating, environmental, social and governance issues and practices into our overall investment processes to creating also, you know, positive social impact in the communities that we ultimately serve.

So today you know BlackRock manages over 7 trillion in assets which means that more and more investors entrust us with their assets, more than any other asset manager in the world and with that comes really a deep sense of responsibility.

So, earlier this year, our CEO, Larry Fink, published a letter to CEOs. He's been doing this now for close to ten years, and in it he stated that climate change is really a defining factor in company's long-term prospects and that we are on the edge of fundamental reshaping of finance.

So, the 2020 letter was really built upon the 2019 letter, which really centered on companies needed to really focus and be able to define and live their purpose. This year our executive committee also for the first time, published an open letter to all of our clients with some public commitments around how we're making sustainability, our new standard. And it really involves three key initiatives. The first is building sustainable and resilient.

The second is offering access to sustainable solutions for all investors, and then three it's really about increasing and enhancing our stewardship efforts and our commitments were really driven by our investment thesis and our belief that sustainable portfolios can actually help investors achieve more resilience and better risk-adjusted returns over the long term. And you know, this global pandemic and certainly the focus on racial equality has really reinforced our conviction and our focus, and we've also seen increase momentum into sustainable solutions within the industry. And sustainability of course is also really central to BlackRock as a corporation. Just to provide some, some statistics here. We hit 100% renewable energy this year, about 50% of our new hires last year were female, and we were voted number one in our sector for most diverse firm by Refinitiv and also number one as I should say as one of the most just companies, by Forbes and JUST capital.

Let me shift to talk about, how Black Rock is really supporting the SDGs and we're doing it in a number of different ways. So, first, SDGs as part of our investment stewardship efforts. So, our BlackRock investments stewardship team engages with companies globally on material environmental, social and governance issues. Our engagement priorities will center around these SDG issues for example, board quality, environmental risks, and opportunities, as well as human capital management and a few others. And this year what we began to do is, we, we are mapping our engagement priorities to the SDGs as many of the topics that we discussed with companies correspond or really intersect with the aspects of those SDGs in which the private sector really plays an important role.

And then the second is around how we really support it through our region. So, BlackRock has a dedicated sustainable investing function, and currently today they're developing an SDG investment framework, as well as tools to help with reporting, given the growing demand by our clients to be able to access that.

We do currently provide what we call impact reporting for, for some of our sustainable solutions where investors today can see how their dollars are aligning with specific SDGs.

And then finally it's access to SDG investment solutions. So, we really seek to provide access to, you know companies that are really aligning to the SDGs. In fact, we offer two global impact solutions for all investors. In fact, that was one of the ETS the

ticker symbols is actually SDG. So, you know it's estimated that the SDGs have the potential to really unlock both 12 trillion in savings and revenue by 2030.

So, let me just share with you just a few examples of how BlackRock is inspiring employees to take action. So, I would like to highlight two things. So, the first is BlackRock support, or networks. BlackRock supported a number of employee networks for decades. I'm part of many of them. Some of these networks include you know focus on women. We have a black Professionals Network...LGBTQ. We also have a green team, which is environmentally focused, and these networks really allow for employees to feel involved to have a voice and many of the leaders that champion these networks provide a number of different programs to help support employees, based on their passions and interest.

And then the second is, is focused on our philanthropy and our social impact. So, BlackRock, really, just to focus on this engagement with our employees. So, we have a robust matching gift program as well as providing you know paid, volunteer days. So you know, last year, BlackRock matched 7 million in employee donations.

And, you know, the second is around our overall philanthropy. We've developed a BlackRock gifts committee, where we provide, you know, grants annually globally to nonprofits really around the world that are really designed to serve the local communities, and in February the firm made a half a billion-dollar charitable donation. And when we established also the BlackRock Foundation, and the Black Rock foundation is really designed to promote social and economic progress for more and more people around the world with, I would say a particular outside focus on

marginalized communities from racial and ethnic minorities, as well as women and displaced people were immigrants, and in March we donated about 50 million to COVID-19 efforts and 10 million specifically to take action to support racial equity. And I would be remiss if I didn't mention our Hallac Scholars program. So this program, we are really humbled and thrilled that we have an opportunity to work with Georgia Tech to be able to identify a pool of candidates that socioeconomic backgrounds and identify these, these exemplary candidates that really show heart, and innovation.

**Panelist: Na'taki Osborne Jelks, Spelman College,  
West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, RCE Greater Atlanta**

Thank you again for the opportunity to serve on this panel. There's been a lot that has been said that has resonated with me, particularly many of Wendy's comments about letting SDGs be the lens that we use. She talked about the SDGs being sort of a strategic agenda for higher education and higher education being sort of a living laboratory for societal inquiry.

And so, I think some of those comments will help to center some of some of what I'd like to talk about today just very briefly, from my vantage point, as someone who works at another higher education institution, Spelman College. But also, who has worked for a lot longer at the community level on building sustainable communities than I have been working in academia. And as I've reflected upon how the SDGs can be a useful framework for large organizations like Georgia Tech to catalyze action and positive change that help to advance the public good, I think about it from this kind of community-based perspective, and to me it kind of boils down to three things - collaboration, meaningful partnerships, and authentic community engagement.

And so just for a couple of minutes what I'd like to do is to sort of illustrate this through my work on restoration of Proctor Creek and Proctor Creek is a local watershed in the Atlanta area very close to the Georgia Tech campus. Proctor Creek, in 2013, was named as a part of the US Environmental Protection Agency's Urban Waters Federal Partnership and so EPA says this about the Urban Waters Federal Partnership from their website.

“This partnership will connect urban communities, particularly those that are overburdened or economically distressed with their waterways by improving coordination among federal agencies and collaborating with community led revitalization efforts to improve our nation's water systems and promote their economic, environmental and social benefits.”

And so just from that description I think you can kind of understand how the SDGs cross in and out of projects like the Proctor Creek Urban Waters Federal Partnership Initiative. And so just to give you a little bit about Proctor Creek, it's a nine mile creek that starts in downtown Atlanta and flows through Atlanta's west side. It's a place where kids used to play, where people fished and swam, and where people were actually baptized. Today the creek is polluted with sewage from a combined sewer overflow system that are remnants of an age-old infrastructure that was brought to Atlanta in the late 1800s. Since that time significant progress and development has gone everywhere in the city except for west, and that's changing today for those of you at Georgia Tech you, you know what I'm talking about. But, you know, until recently there have not been a lot of investments, you know, on the west side of the city, and for years groups like the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, the organization that I co-founded, we've worked with fellow residents in the Proctor Creek watershed, um, sometimes kind of as this lone voice crying out in the wilderness

And we had nongovernmental organizations who came and went, some brought in programs here or there when there was available funding, but when that trail of funding and resources you know dried up they took their efforts and activities to other places

and to work on other issues, and community-based groups were left to sort of figure out the solutions, you know, for themselves.

Now we're in this kind of place in space where what was once a forgotten area of the city of Atlanta, is now the subject of intense focus from multiple, multiple government stakeholders, and to make institutions, local and national nonprofits, as well as private developers, in addition to residents and community organizations that have invested decades of sweat equity and activism to try to revitalize this watershed.

And as this federal partnership started to form in 2013 excuse me on watershed resonance really put it out there that they want it to ensure that solutions that were being sought by governments, and by other organizations were driven by community needs, and that included authentic engagement and principles of collaborative problem solving.

And so, when I think about the role that higher education institutions have played in this work, I think about Georgia Tech and the very thoughtful approach from a lot of different vantage points. But what I'd like to maybe sort of lift up is the work of the Georgia Tech Center for Serve-Learn-Sustain, and I know I saw Jenny Hirsch and I'm Rebecca Watts Hall and some others who may be watching on today. But when I think about, you know, sort of these collaborations, and I think about Georgia Tech as this locally connected, globally engaged institution, I think about kind of these basic principles of collaboration of authentic community engagement, and how these, these principles also undergird the 17 SDGs. And when you have an academic institution that has, you know, quality professors who have engaging and innovative research, curious

students who are inspired and really motivated to get into the work and to think across disciplinary boundaries, it can create an opportunity for lots of synergies and for partnerships that you know maybe sometimes very incrementally, but that steadily, you know, move the communities toward seeking this sustainable communities that they're trying to create. When I think about the partnership between S-L-S, and various community entities and organizations, I think about support that we've seen with respect to community science, and well, citizen science is what it's probably most commonly known as. When Georgia Tech professors have engaged with their students, as well as community members to help us to uncover what's happening in terms of water quality in Proctor Creek, and there are lots of other nonprofits who are involved in this work as well. But it's critical to be able to tap into an engage of the expertise of faculty as well as, again the curiosity, of students, as they're learning, as they're growing, as they're developing. And what we find is that students who may be in a class and an ecology class who are you know taking water samples at Proctor Creek, they're learning, not only about what's currently impacting the creek. But there's this space for them to learn about the historical inequalities and inequities and in some cases you know here in the city of Atlanta, kind of the racialized politics that have led to things that we see happening today like poor water quality in Proctor Creek, and all of the other social ills that impacts that community.

So, this idea of, just to take Wendy's idea again, of this "living laboratory for societal inquiry". I mean, it goes beyond just the traditional science and technology, but also spans into social issues. We've seen some great innovation, even from, you

know, English classes at Georgia Tech who had taken on kind of some of these issues with respect to sustainable development and I'll be honest, I have not seen that done quite the way that it's done in some of the classes here at Georgia Tech. Where students were taking on kind of English and communications but taking it, using it, looking at it through, if I can take Wendy's point again through the lens of the SDGs, and to through the lens of what's happening in local communities. I could talk on and on about this all day and I know that my time is running out. But what I guess I'll just end in saying is that there is so much promise in these locally grounded partnerships, there's so much promise around, using senior design projects, and lab projects, architecture and civil and environmental engineering, and in courses across the discipline to help solve, kind of in real time, some of the challenges that communities are facing. And from my vantage point, through working with and helping to build a community based nonprofit organization, it's meant the world to us to be able to tap into the expertise, and we've been able to translate on the expertise and these, what are seemingly these little student projects into real change happening on the ground.

Thank you so much.

**Moderator: Anna Stenport, Georgia Tech School of Modern Languages, Atlanta Global Studies Center**

Hi everybody again, we're waiting for Isabella's audio to come back.... With what we've heard, President Cabrera, would you want to share some initial reflections on what the panelist have volunteered today?

**Reflections: Ángel Cabrera, President of Georgia Tech**

Well, I'm taking notes because I've been inspired by each one of them. I liked John's sort of three ways of university impact on the SDGs because the first one he saw he cited is the obvious one that we're all aware of right, using science, being this neutral source of truth and analysis about what we need to know beyond politics, and I think that that is good, but the other ones are very interesting notion of intergenerational collaboration, which is of course inherent to higher education. And I don't think we're either not fully aware, but we don't address it intentionally. I think that's really a very interesting idea.

And of course, that connectedness, that embeddedness in the local community, which is very powerful and of course, that embeddedness in the local community became beautifully apparent with Na'taki 's work in our own in our own backyard, as a great example of how the idea of the SDGs in manifests itself in a powerful way locally.

I also like very much Wendy's description of the SDGs as they're sort of a strategy for the world, right, and it's been just a way to put it like we have this massive

just like I would expect that our Institute strategic plan will reflect itself in strategic plans among the colleges and units with rain is very interesting to look at this as sort of that strategic framework for the world, very powerful.

And Sarah, I love that the message that you sent, not just in terms of how BlackRock is sort of walking the talk and how the more work you do in the space of sustainability, the more accountable, you need to be with your own practices. But also, I think this message that sustainability and global sustainability is not at odds with good business, and with returns, that in fact, those can come, hand in hand and is also a powerful, powerful idea, so anyway. All I have is just terrific sort of reflections on this, and I can't wait for Isabella's comments to continue to help me fill my notebook this morning. Isabella, let's hope that your technology works now.

**Student Panelist: Isabella Stubbs, Georgia Institute of Technology,  
RCE Greater Atlanta Youth Network**

Well, I am so happy to be here at this kickoff event, As a current student, it's definitely an honor to be on this panel with so many other sustainability professionals. And as a current Georgia Tech student, I'm very excited and impressed that President Cabrera, and many departments on campus, are making a renewed commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. That's very important as a public institution in the southeast, so really exciting what could come of that. And by no means an SDG expert, so I'll talk a little more about my personal journey with sustainability as a student, and then why I think the SDGs can definitely be the transformational agent that our campus community can embrace.

So, growing up, sustainability wasn't really a word I heard get tossed around very often. But then I came to college at Georgia Tech, and well, I've learned a lot of things, and start getting involved in sustainability on campus. I've had the opportunity to get involved with many student organizations that consider sustainability at the heart of their missions, such as students organizing for sustainability and Engineers Without Borders, as well as many others, and they also started working at Serve-Learn-Sustain. I know some folks have already mentioned S-L-S, but S-L-S is a great department on campus, as truly like exemplifying what the SDGs are all about and the commitment that higher ed should make to sustainable development, because they are a department that incorporates sustainability education and service learning through in-class and extracurricular activities. Though if you're a student at Tech, and haven't gotten a chance to get involved with them, definitely check them out. It's definitely a

great example of an innovative higher ed initiative since it's grounded locally and connected globally.

And so, the first time I was introduced to the SDGs actually was while I was on a study abroad program in Japan. I was immediately drawn to the SDGs as a framework for sustainable development. And I was also just really drawn to the aesthetic icon colors that the UN uses. As cliché as it is to say, while I was on the other side of the world, I started thinking more about the sustainable development challenges that my college city of Atlanta was experiencing. So, when I came back to campus, I got more involved in local sustainability efforts.

In particular, I've been really involved in RCE Greater Atlanta, which Na'taki and many other people in the audience are a part of as well. It's a local sustainability network that has many different stakeholders from other institutions business nonprofits and government. Being involved in RCE Greater Atlanta has been a really unique experience as a student that I hope will become more mainstream as the network continues to grow and it becomes more advertised on different campuses in the area. It has really allowed me to get off with the GT campus bubble and work with community partners and work with students from other campuses on different education action initiatives around the SDGs, so that's been a lot of fun. Many of my favorite memories have definitely been when me and fellow friends and students have volunteered with community partners like Plantlanta or discuss some spicy sustainability topics over a civic dinner. Together the RCE is working to build relationships and catalyze community assets to provide a sustainability network for the

region, so I'm definitely excited to see where it goes, and hope all of you guys, check it out after this.

Thus, I believe that the UN Sustainable Development Goals are a great comprehensive framework for connecting any initiative to an aspect of sustainability, because it is scalable and linkable. Having a set of 17 goals helps bring a lot clarity and connectedness to the many challenges we are facing. Even though many of the goals are very high-level, such as like, no poverty and zero hunger, it's like, Whoa, how are we ever to achieve that? It may seem impossible make progress on, but I am very confident that our generation that can be the ones to make substantial progress on achieving sustainable development.

In fact, I believe it is definitely our responsibility, through personal lifestyle choices, or bigger like career choices, such as career or bigger like organized action, such as career paths, volunteerism, and voting can be contributing positively to sustainable development. A lot of our generation honestly has so much drive and passion, so I'm constantly impressed by the other work that my great friends and peers are doing in the field of sustainability.

And for those who are kind of like looking for what role they can play in crunch computing, to the SDGs, I really like how they're scalable and linkable. So, I think it can really be related to any of your personal and career interests, just for super basic practical examples. If you're choosing to go meatless for a meal, or have a vegetarian lifestyle, then you're definitely contributing to Goal 13: Climate Action, and then if you're thinking about going into career in like water resources or like water

conservation as an engineer or scientist, then you're definitely contributing to Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation. So, the SDGs I really do believe can be integrated into any major field of study.

As a great framework for higher ed, and as a GT student, S-L-S has a lot of advice on like what courses you can line up with to connect with your major that incorporate sustainability, or just getting involved in like campus clubs or an Atlanta organization like RCE Greater Atlanta, can be great as well, so I'll end with that, but I'm definitely happy to answer questions in the chat or later on about how you can get involved as a student with SDGs on the campus and in Atlanta. Thanks guys.

**Moderator: Anna Stenport, Georgia Tech School of Modern Languages,  
Atlanta Global Studies Center**

Thank you, Isabella, so glad we got the technology working. Wow, the Q&A, and the chat box is full of comments, questions, recommendations, and queries so I want to give a shout out to the eighth-grade scholars at Centennial Academy and STEAM Academy, just very close to Georgia Tech, and some really great questions that are coming through from the students. And interestingly, some of those questions really relate very strongly to two questions that are being asked by the campus community. And so perhaps, one large one is that how can we really integrate the SDGs into our everyday learning, whether we're in eighth grade or we're at Georgia Tech?

And is there a way to think about the SDGs as an opportunity to break down silos whether those silos are between the K to 12 and higher ed community, or whether they are in terms of disciplines at within a university, or whether they are between universities community partners and other partners?

So really that question is about, how can we think about the SDGs to break down silos and barriers, and that's a huge question, but I'm going to invite Wendy and John and Na'taki to give us just a couple of reflections on that.

**Wendy Purcell, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**

Yeah, I think it's really interesting. I think most of our societal challenges you know these big questions of our day don't fit neatly into any individual discipline or university departments, you know they are by definition multifaceted, and I think the

really exciting opportunity here is to gather people from different disciplinary backgrounds from, from a great diversity of viewpoints and cultures and gather them around a problem as their shared purpose. And I think, I think that nature of being connected through the purpose of seeking solutions is really what breaks down barriers, I think that's the kind of value add space, I think where I've seen institutions kind of miss out in the sense is to think let's do the structural silo changing and spend all their time looking internally, as opposed to creating opportunities for collaboration around the problem and the solution finding and in that process of CO creation and collaboration. That's really where the barriers if there are such things, fall away, as people connect very deeply around the purpose.

**Moderator: Anna Stenport**

Thank you, Wendy. John and, and then Na'taki.

**John McArthur, Brookings Institute**

Well, I would just add and with congratulations to Isabella, and I feel like we'll all be working for you soon. So, thanks for your leadership. I think there I'd have two answers. One is that there's a problem big picture problem solving side there are these real questions around how do we connect the dots? Ultimately, the SDGs are a giant connecting exercise about how everything connects to everything.

So, if you care about food systems, Isabella mentioned food, or if you care about climate, or if you care about biodiversity, or if you care about water, or if you care about energy, all of those issues, feed into each other because you need water to grow food, where we grow our food affects our biodiversity, how we produce our food affects our climate, where the energy comes from to grow and distribute the food affects all of the above. And we have to be thinking about how these pieces connect and it's not my goal versus your goal.

It's about yes, I care about food but there's another person who cares about energy and environment, and we need to think about how those connected to goals I would say or prompt a call to action to do so.

A second thing though is, I think, and this is an area where places like the Georgia Tech Community and all the partners, run the line, play a huge role to say, how do we not just measure success at our personal level, but at an organizational level. What does it mean to be an SDG-consistent University in our community? What does that mean we do internally, for everything from gender equity to leave no one behind?

We can start with very specific assessment of who's getting left behind, for what reasons, and in what places, and what can we do to address that? And there's a movement afoot to take these very big ideas of like voluntary national reviews that's the global official process how countries assess themselves. It's been a movement to voluntary local reviews, how cities can assess processes or what they're doing. Now we have some universities talking about Carnegie Mellon has said they're going to do a voluntary University review. And they announced that they were going to do it before

they figured out how to do it, because they said, “we just need to do this.” I think a place like Georgia Tech and all the community partners could say what's our scorecard for how we assess what good looks like so everyone's measuring to the same thing on how we are being a successful SDG undertaking.

**Na'taki Osborne Jelks, Spelman College,  
West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, RCE Greater Atlanta**

So, if I can build up on something that John just said, when I think about kind of what success looks like, we have the individual 17 SDGs, but then when we think about sustainability and think about those three E's, and how they can play out in terms of environment, the economy, and equity, how does that really play out, you know, in our pursuit of achieving the 17 SDGs?

Also, since we have some middle school students on the line. What you're what the question really made me think about the way that a lot of school systems are now kind of focused on this idea of problem-based learning. So, it's not just we're not just teaching our students math, we're not just teaching science, but how can we present a problem to them that brings in these various disciplines?

And I also want to think about, you know, some of the work that people are doing on climate change from this kind of multi-solving lens. We can address climate issues but at the same time be addressing issues around poverty and economic any quality in cities, we can be, addressing some of the challenges with respect to, environmental injustice and so we can look at these problems at these challenges that

we're up against, as there are multiple approaches and multiple disciplines, and so with the same token, we can bring together these, various Sustainable Development Goals and not look at things in silos really craft solutions that address multiple of these SDGs.

**Moderator: Anna Stenport**

Wonderful. I wish we had all day and many days to continue these specific conversations, and I want to thank our panelists and Sarah joining us from San Francisco. We'll hear more from you another time. Also, questions, comments are coming through the chat. We're going to take those in and process them, and hopefully be able to get back to you with responses.

I want to turn the microphone and space over to Joy Harris of Georgia Tech's College of Engineering, to give us our concluding remarks and our rousing call to action, because there is a way for everyone to get involved and that moment starts right now.

**Closing Remarks: Joy Harris**

Yes, it does. Can you hear me, and can you see my screen? Yes? Okay, I have learned so much, so much from this panel today, and you all have also given us a great deal to think about. I thank all of the panelists. Thank you for your work, and thank you for sharing your wisdom with us. We have several ways for you to continue and to get involved. The first way is to add to our Sustainable Development Goal asset map, and the link is here: [president.gatech.edu/SDG](http://president.gatech.edu/SDG). This map list assets that are connected to each of the sustainability development goals, and we would love for you to add.

That connects us two ways that we can help advance the goals. And secondly, add to it, but also use it, use the resources that are there that will help each person. If

you are a faculty member, ask students to add to the map but also apply some of the resources to their majors or to your classes These are ways that we can both contribute and also receive and advancing these goals and the metrics that we're trying to accomplish. You can also attend the University Global Coalition Virtual Conference on 9/21 and I'll drop the link in the chat it's a bit longer. And finally, students please apply to participate in the virtual 17 zooms event on 10/1. Again, the link is here [president.gatech.edu/SDG-student-engagement](https://president.gatech.edu/SDG-student-engagement), because we want to continue this conversation and nail down even more actionable items that we can continue this work as we move forward. And thank you all so much. Thank you to our panelists thank you to our attendees. This has been an amazing event.

**Moderator: Anna Stenport**

Alright. And with that, we'll close just a couple of minutes early here. I know people are busy and have plenty going on. So, with that, thank you panelists, thank you Georgia Tech President Cabrera, thank you, everyone on the organizing committee, and we're so thrilled to have this call to action, and a way to continue being involved. Thank you everyone.