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Georgia Tech grad: Students with disabilities can improve campuses for all

[Caption](#)

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By **Maureen Downey**

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In his five-year undergraduate career at Georgia Tech, Trey Quinn has collaborated with the school to create positive change for students with disabilities, including the recent adoption of a part-time dean's list for students enrolled in less than 12 hours of classes in an academic term.

In a guest column, Quinn details the challenges facing students with disabilities and how campuses can work with students to improve outcomes for everyone.

Quinn has a physical disability due to cerebral palsy. A co-founder of [ABLE Alliance](#), a student organization focused on expanding disability resources and advocacy on campus, he graduated from Tech with highest honors in May. He also began work on his master's while an undergraduate and will continue graduate school at Tech.

Quinn is pursuing a [broad research agenda](#) focused on the intersection of artificial intelligence, neurorehabilitation and accessibility and plans to focus on software accessibility and inclusive design after graduation.

By Trey Quinn

Georgia Tech just announced a new academic honor: [the part-time dean's list](#). The new honor is a result of broader ongoing efforts to increase resources for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses. I had the unique and memorable experience of being one of the people at the center of these efforts.

A bit about me ... As a result of not being able to breathe for the first 10 minutes of my life, portions of my motor cortex did not properly develop, and I was left with a moderately severe case of cerebral palsy. In a nutshell, my verbal speech sounds a bit like the Cookie Monster's voice, my limbs unexpectedly jump and shake like a Chihuahua and I have the hand dexterity of a slaphappy sea-lion.

While my academic career started in intensive special education, I was quickly moved to a more traditional classroom when I started hacking the user interfaces of school system computers to make them more accessible in kindergarten out of intellectual boredom. I was extremely fortunate to be raised by phenomenal parents who were able to ensure I had access to adapted gifted education and an abundance of work-based learning opportunities to mature my passion for accessibility engineering and inclusive design.

This passion eventually led me to studying computer science at Georgia Tech, where for the past five years I have somehow successfully juggled a vigorous college life with learning how to live independently with the assistance of a self-managed personal support staff of caretaking companions who keep me on my toes.

I was accepted early action to Georgia Tech in 2018 after having an inclusive experience collaborating with College of Design faculty on accessibility technology projects throughout my high school career. At the time, a multitude of administrators, faculty, and students were transparent with me about the fact that the conditions within Georgia Tech's Office of Disability Services were untraditional for a top American research university and encouraged me to be a pioneering force for positive change.

I initially questioned if I was making the right choice. However, after spending my high school years helping my disabled Army-veteran father with mourning the unexpected passing of my mother and navigating the bureaucratic process of securing the caretaking benefits I needed to attend college independently, I decided I had to earn my Georgia Tech degree through hell or high water.

I considered transferring as I struggled making the adjustment to Tech's ultra-challenging academics, advocating to properly receive the academic accommodations I needed to succeed and being an effective head administrator to my continuously rotating home healthcare staff of 7 to 10 direct reports paid through multiple operating budgets governed by their own unique stacks of regulations.

The need for substantial changes within Tech's Office of Disability Services became increasingly evident to both faculty and senior administrative officials. A national search was launched to build a team of high-quality professionals who would be committed to serving Tech's students with disabilities for the long haul. Administration kindly allowed me to be one of the interviewers of the finalist candidates to ensure an experienced student voice was heard.

Meanwhile, I and a group of faculty and students called a series of meetings to discuss what we could do to help ensure students were being supported. We decided to write a constitution for a new student organization called the [ABLE Alliance](#). I was appointed as founding president, and we quickly got to work.

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We focused on hosting social events to allow students with disabilities to find support within the broader community and helping recruit more student workers for disability services to support the academic accommodations process. We welcomed a new joint assistant dean of students/director of disability services and multiple new disability services professionals toward the beginning of summer 2019.

With a renewed sense of purpose, disability services tackled the often-paradoxical task of creating spaces for accommodation and understanding within the broader environment of an institution that has a storied tradition of being one of the toughest and best resilience-building universities in the nation.

This was when my college career began to soar. I earned a 4.0 grade-point average most semesters after trying to wrap my head around abstract algorithms, turning them into code while praying for everything to run smoothly and hunting down that one tiny little bug screwing up my entire codebase.

The ABLE Alliance has continued to develop as a student-led complement to the Office of Disability Services. While trying to grow a campus organization for students with chronic illnesses during a worldwide pandemic came with a set of obvious challenges, we now offer peer-to-peer mentoring and advocacy, continue to host accessible social and recreational events throughout each semester and developed corporate partnerships with companies such as Google, Coca-Cola and Georgia Power to run professional development and recruitment initiatives to help students with disabilities transition into the workforce.

I began pursuing undergraduate research under a world-record breaking Paralympian faculty member who advised me not only how to conduct cutting-edge machine learning and neuroengineering research, but also how to have grace for myself as I balance pursuing an ambitious career while managing a complex disability on a day-to-day basis.

I was blessed as a senior to be able to complete 40% of my master's degree requirements before graduating from my undergraduate degree through Tech's BS/MS program (my older sister completed a quarter of her doctorate degree before finishing her bachelor's at the University of Georgia, so I was not about to let her outdo me).

All of these accomplishments would have been substantially more difficult if it were not for the new Georgia Tech disability services staff and my professors ensuring that the accommodations I needed were reliably provided.

Around the time that the new disability services professionals joined Georgia Tech, there was a call from the campus disability community to lower the minimum credit hour requirements to earn semesterly academic honors so students with disabilities could qualify. Many students with intensive disabilities have to take two to three times longer (or even more) than their able-bodied peers to complete assignments due to their disabilities. They were often shut out of honors because of their lower course loads.

Some students may have to take less than a traditional full-time course load out of necessity to accommodate their disability. As the recent rise of artificial intelligence and mobile and ubiquitous computing are allowing for the development of more advanced technologies to assist people with disabilities in everyday tasks, a greater number of students with disabilities are beginning to enroll in higher education.

An interesting debate has begun around how reduced full course load accommodations should be treated with respect to the minimum credit hour requirements for academic honors. A number of top-ranked institutions have added disability-specific language to their academic honor policies to recognize that students with reduced full course load accommodations are spending an equivalent amount of time on their coursework when compared to their able-bodied full-time student peers.

For several months, I personally debated the sentiment of ensuring students with disabilities were honored for their hard work with some of the unintended consequences of having a public policy that singles out students with disabilities. However, with a personal desire to help Tech continue to move forward and with a continued push from within the Georgia Tech community, I decided to raise the concern to the necessary administrative units to start the conversation surrounding changing our academic honors policies.

The governing bodies of Georgia Tech were in the midst of passing the policy change when COVID-19 hit. Unsure of the exact status of the policy change as the pandemic situation began

to stabilize, I decided to keep the conversation going throughout the years with a more diverse array of stakeholders to gain different perspectives, including the Student Government Association and various campus diversity and inclusion initiatives.

When the idea was eventually awarded second place in the Georgia Tech College of Engineering's 2022 Student Innovation Challenge, the College of Engineering's leadership reaffirmed the importance of the policy change and gave me the actionable support to bring the idea to the attention of the office of the provost, who swiftly put changing the policy back on the governance's agenda.

While Tech's governing bodies saw the need for the policy change, they did not want to make a solution that was exclusive to students with disabilities due to the vast number of different reasons a student might need to take a reduced course load. The final solution that was created is the part-time deans list, a more inclusive academic honor that will recognize the semesterly academic achievements of all undergraduate students regardless of disability status who successfully complete 3 to 11 letter-graded credit hours in a single semester and meet all of the other criteria for the traditional dean's list.

The careful thought process behind this new honor epitomizes how applying accessibility and universal design principles to everyday systems can lead to better solutions for everyone, not just people with disabilities. Institute governance officially approved the new policy this spring, and it goes into effect this summer.

Having graduated with my bachelor's degree in computer science from Georgia Tech this May, the timing of the passage of this policy has marked a bittersweet end to my undergraduate career. Georgia Tech has provided me with a more comprehensive preparation to continue my career in accessibility engineering and inclusive design than I ever could have imagined.

To my surprise, the rich amount of student leadership opportunities the circumstances on campus have afforded me have also thoroughly taught me the importance of ensuring the principles of accessibility and inclusion are not only acknowledged in passing remarks, but are also tangibly implemented into the structures of everyday systems with respectful action.

As I return to Georgia Tech in the fall to finish my master's degree, I am excited to apply both the technical and leadership skillsets I have matured throughout college to helping build a more accessible and inclusive world for people of all abilities forever in progress and service.

About the Author

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Maureen Downey has written editorials and opinion pieces about local, state and federal education policy since the 1990s.

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