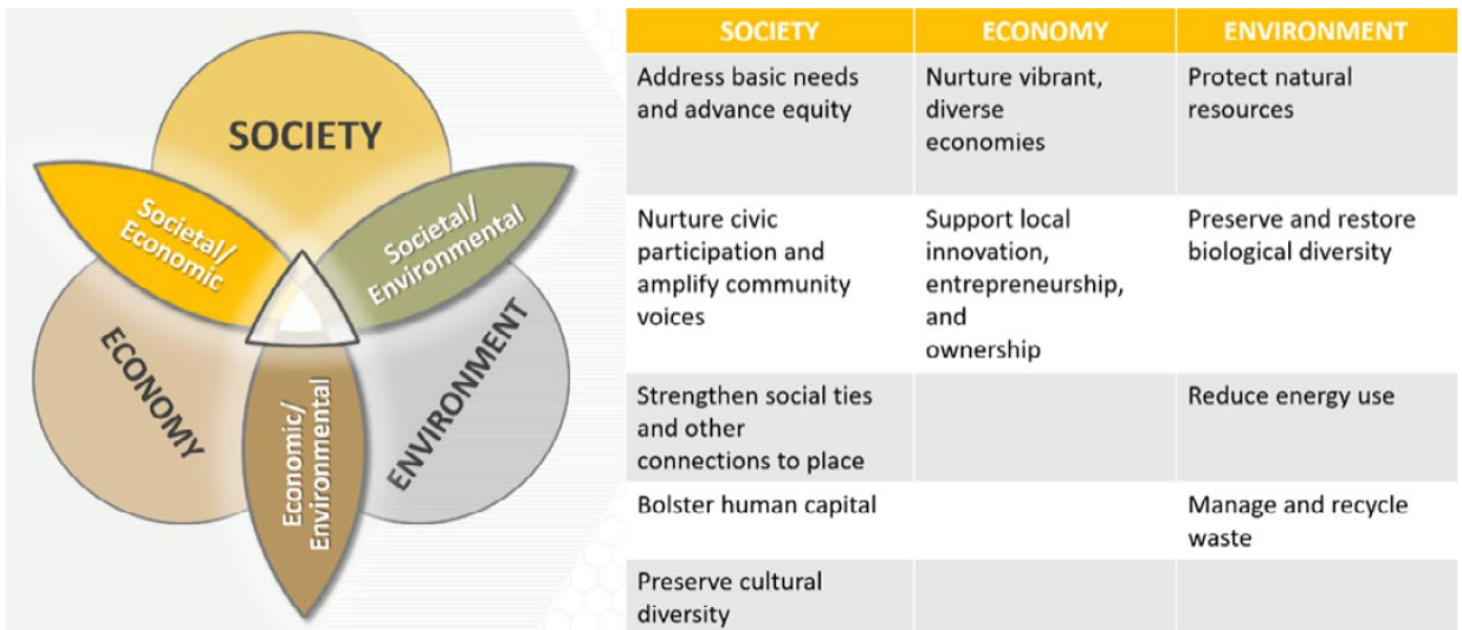


Introduction

[Serve-Learn-Sustain](#) (SLS) is a campus-wide academic initiative working with all six colleges to offer students opportunities inside and outside the classroom to collaborate with diverse partners – across the community, non-profit, government, academic, and business sectors – to tackle key sustainability challenges as they play out in the context of local communities. SLS is the central clearinghouse and coordinator of course-related community partnerships at Georgia Tech. We also regularly connect faculty with community partners related to their research projects. (Faculty and other units also regularly coordinate their own partnerships.) SLS collaborates closely with the other offices on campus that work with community partners, including the following: [Office of Government and Community Relations](#); [Civic Engagement in the Center for Student Engagement](#); [Center for Education Integrating Science, Mathematics, and Computing \(CEISM\)](#); [the Atlanta Engagement Center for Education Integrating Science, Mathematics, and Computing \(CEISM\)](#); [the Atlanta Global Studies Center](#); and [the Institute for Leadership and Social Impact](#). Our partnership strategy has been developed in close consultation with members of the SLS Partnership Advisory Council (PAC), which includes representatives of other Georgia Tech offices and several close community partners.

SLS approaches sustainability as an integrated system (see figure below), with a special focus on society and social sustainability. Through SLS-affiliated courses and our [Signature Programs](#), students learn to use the knowledge and skills they are acquiring at Georgia Tech to help “create sustainable communities” where humans and nature flourish, now and in the future.



*Model adapted in part from Jeffrey C. Bridger and A.E. Luloff, "Toward an interactional approach to sustainable community development," *Journal of Rural Studies* 15 (1999): 377-387

WHAT WE CARE ABOUT

Our Partnership Principles

Our partnerships are guided by seven principles. We do our best to embody these principles within SLS and to educate GT faculty, students, and staff about these principles. We seek partners who embody them as well.

We see these principles as key to forging and sustaining partnerships that create or support sustainable communities here and abroad.

We have number of [examples on our website](#) of long-term partnerships that exemplify these principles, and there are photos throughout this document of some of those partners and their student and faculty collaborators.

1. START WITH ASSETS	Recognize and start working with communities based on their assets, or strengths, rather than their problems. Engage with community partners as experts who bring important knowledge and skills to the table.
2. FOCUS ON EQUITY AND JUSTICE	Keep equity and justice at the forefront of all of our work aimed at making communities more sustainable. Highlight marginalized voices and bring them to the center of the conversation.
3. CHAMPION SYSTEMS CHANGE	Address the root causes of today's biggest challenges, while also helping meet basic needs.
4. SUPPORT COMMUNITY INNOVATORS	Support community innovators to deepen and broaden their impact.
5. PRIORITIZE PROCESS BEFORE OUTCOMES	Establish processes for collaboration that emphasize reciprocity, co-learning, and co-creation. Remember that the journey impacts the outcome.
6. CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD	Cultivate change in our own backyard as responsible and engaged community members. Proximity to community partners also allows for extensive and meaningful participation of faculty, staff, and students.
7. APPLY TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL CONTEXT	Tailor technological interventions to local conditions and possibilities, and use technology to advance the principles above.

HOW WE WORK

Service Learning Community Engagement (SLCE)

Our primary method for engaging in partnerships is incorporating service-learning and community engagement (SLCE--pronounced “slice”) into undergraduate courses across Georgia Tech’s curriculum. Service-learning scholars argue that SLCE should seek to impact three groups: students, institutions, and communities (see [Chupp and Joseph 2010](#)). Our long term goals for each group are to work with our partners on and off campus to:

Students

- » Graduate global citizens who are grounded in local knowledge and equipped with the competencies required to be sustainable systems change-makers. Education for Sustainable Development defines these competencies as: Systems Thinking; Anticipatory; Normative; Strategic; Collaboration; Critical thinking; Self-awareness; and Integrated problem-solving (see [UNESCO 2030 Learning Objectives](#)).

Institution

- » Create a collaborative educational culture at Georgia Tech in which local community partners are treated as co-educators and faculty are rewarded for their efforts to incorporate SLCE into their courses.
- » Together with other higher education institutions in the region, create coordinated systems for engaging in community partnerships, and partnerships across higher education that are streamlined and beneficial to everyone involved.

Communities

- » Advance partners’ visions for creating thriving communities.
- » Nurture regional multi-stakeholder efforts for collaborative action aimed at systems change.

To accomplish these goals, we put our Partnership Principles into action. Here is how we do that:

1. Focus on equity and justice

SLS emphasizes equity – and the justice work necessary to achieve it – as key to sustainability. Social science research has demonstrated a positive correlation between equity and sustainability overall (see [Agveman 2011](#)). Equity acknowledges the impact of the past – of structures that favored certain groups and suppressed or disadvantaged others – on the present. Justice work supports policies, innovations, and structural changes that specifically aim to improve the lives of groups and communities who have had the least access to opportunities and resources – and the least say in determining their own futures. This focus is especially important in Atlanta, which is singled out every year as having one of the largest wealth gaps in the U.S. This gap is also racialized: as of 2017, almost 75 percent of Atlanta residents living below the poverty line were Black (see <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/atlanta-ga/>). Working in this context, and drawing on the rich legacy of Atlanta as the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement, SLS prioritizes partnerships with Black and/or People of Color-led organizations in parts of the metro area where such disparities are most pronounced. In connecting these – and all – partners to SLS, we strive to cultivate SLCE opportunities that lead students to examine the root causes of structural inequity and contribute to social change on a broader scale.

Students taking courses in the Sustainable Cities iGniTe program tour the Atlanta BeltLine with guides from SLS partner the Grove Park Foundation, as part of SLS’ Equitable & Sustainable Development Linked Courses Program. (Summer 2019)



2. Engage rather than serve

We emphasize “engagement” more than “service.” “Serving” depends on a power hierarchy: it situates one group as having expertise, skills, or resources to give and the other as needing these things. In contrast, we seek to bring Georgia Tech faculty and students into collaborative partnerships that yield reciprocal learning and mutual benefit. We continue to use the term “service-learning” because it helps people understand what we do – and “serve” is of course in our name – but our preferred term is community engagement.

3. Work with partners over the long-term

Rather than focusing primarily on matching faculty and courses with projects in a piecemeal fashion, we aim to get to know partners and to build long-term relationships based on trust. This impacts our approach to projects. Some of the projects that our courses work on last only for a semester. But as much as possible, we try to support projects over the long term by advancing them to different courses and programs over multiple semesters and supporting the transfer of knowledge to new faculty and students.

4. Connect organizations and work through communities of practice and social change networks

For practical reasons, many of our courses pursue projects with single organizations. However, whenever possible, our preference is to work with multiple organizations together, to develop new understandings among us about our regional sustainability challenges as they play out in communities, and then work together to develop and implement more innovative solutions that address the root causes of our problems.

Often a project that engages multiple partners under one theme is more beneficial to all parties – as a learning experience for students seeking to hone technical, disciplinary skills that require a “big challenge” and for

partners seeking collaborators on an issue that requires a systems approach. We strive to do the same approach internally with faculty and students: bring them together across disciplines to work on projects from a more holistic perspective. Systems change will only come about through multi-stakeholder collaborations across issue, institutional, and disciplinary silos.

SLS also works with partners through [RCE Greater Atlanta](#) to facilitate student and faculty collaboration across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Atlanta area, with nonprofit organizations, grassroots community groups, government agencies, and businesses. Officially recognized by United Nations University, co-founded and co-led by SLS, this multi-stakeholder sustainability network brings together diverse partners to advance Education for Sustainable Development in the Greater Atlanta region through training and education in the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, RCEs are charged with working on SDG 4: Quality Education and achieving target 4.7: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

Students working with SLS partner the Center for Sustainable Communities through the SLS Internship Program visit the Hampton Roads EcoDistrict in Virginia. (Summer 2019)



5. Push engineering/technological education in new directions

While industry partnerships have long been a central part of engineering and technological education through programs such as co-op and capstone design, community partnerships – and partnerships aimed at social change – have not been central. In fact, they challenge some of the dominant approaches to engineering education, namely, strong emphases on technological innovation and institutional expertise as the linchpins of social change, as well as client- and problem-based approaches to partnerships. SLS’ partnership program tailors SLCE methodologies to identify ways for students (and faculty) to contribute their technological expertise to social change work while also helping students work with partners as collaborators, recognizing and building on community-based expertise to develop socio-technical solutions to community sustainability challenges.

WHAT WE WORK ON

Our Priority Issues

Through our work with faculty, students, and partners during our first three years, we identified four Priority Issues for SLS:

- » Community Health
- » Green Infrastructure
- » Equitable & Sustainable Development
- » Climate Change & Energy

These are issues where we believe Georgia Tech – and SLS and its faculty and courses in particular – can make significant contributions to systems change work being carried out in the region, through partnerships focused on community-level change. SLS’ major partnership efforts and our Signature Programs primarily address these issue areas. For example, our [Linked Courses Program](#) brings together courses to learn across

disciplinary boundaries and work on projects with community partners, focused on one of these issues each semester.

“SLS HAS OPENED MY EYES TO REAL PROBLEMS THAT IMPACT NOT ONLY MYSELF BUT MY COMMUNITY AND [HAS] GIVEN ME THE OPPORTUNITIES, TOOLS, AND NETWORK TO START MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION.”

- MICHELLE HENRIQUES, GEORGIA TECH STUDENT

WHO WE WORK WITH

Our Partners

Geography: Work Locally, Connect Globally

SLS facilitates partnerships in the Atlanta region and across Georgia, with a special focus on the neighborhoods in our backyard, including several West Atlanta neighborhoods in the Proctor Creek watershed, which is a key focus for our Green Infrastructure partnerships.

We also support faculty-led [study abroad programs](#) that take sustainable development as a central focus and incorporate SLCE into their courses through projects and activities with local partners in Asia, Europe, and Central America. Our local and global foci come together through RCE Greater Atlanta, which connects us with over 170 other RCEs around the world through the [Global RCE Network](#). Our partnership with the [Atlanta Global Studies Center](#), jointly run by Georgia Tech and Georgia State University, also helps us take advantage of Atlanta’s growing reputation as a global hub for higher education. Together, these initiatives help both Georgia Tech and its partners understand sustainability from different cultural perspectives, thus opening up new worlds of possibility for imagining alternative futures.

PARTNERSHIP OUTREACH STRATEGY

This section describes how we form partnerships, sets out criteria for different kinds of partnerships, and clarifies SLS' priorities for deepening existing partnerships, developing new ones in the future, and enhancing our support overall for university-partner collaboration. It is intended to help SLS staff direct and focus our partnership efforts with community, nonprofit, social enterprise, and government organizations (a separate strategy document for corporate partnerships is in development). This strategy also is intended to be flexible, to accommodate unanticipated future opportunities and challenges.

Overview of Existing Partners and Partnership Opportunities

SLS engages with a large variety of partners through different types of projects, programs, and collaborations, ranging from single class- or project- or event-specific collaborations to multi-year relationships that include multiple courses, internships, and other initiatives such as RCE projects. These partners include community-based groups, nonprofit organizations serving a specific neighborhood or working across the city, region, or state, local and federal government agencies, and for-profit businesses. Our closest partners:

- » Embody our partnership principles
- » Are either community-based groups or engage deeply with the local community as equal partners
- » Work on different aspects of our priority issues
- » Focus on addressing root causes and enacting systems change

We also engage with businesses and partners committed to advancing sustainability beyond their own operations. In particular, we seek to partner with large corporations that aim to effect social and environmental impacts in ways that are aligned with their core mission by supporting community-based initiatives with similar goals. We also look to community-based businesses and social entrepreneurs as partners with strong vested interests in their communities and innovative approaches based on deep community knowledge. Finally, through RCE Greater Atlanta, we partner with other higher education institutions to co-create and co-sponsor joint educational programs and activities and to build the capacity of our institutions to partner more respectfully and effectively with community-based groups and other stakeholders to educate our students, benefit communities, and build a more sustainable region.

“PARTICIPATION IN SLS HAS FACILITATED CONNECTION WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO MOTIVATE MY RESEARCH IN ADDRESSING THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF COMMUNITIES...”

- IRIS TIEN, GEORGIA TECH FACULTY

Students participate in a food security workshop run by SLS partner the Atlanta Community Food Bank as part of an SLS Community Health Linked Courses Program. (Fall 2018)



Types of Partnership Opportunities

Currently, SLS helps to develop partnerships and projects across all six colleges and 28 schools (departments) at Georgia Tech. Partnerships linking Tech courses, students, and faculty to partners range from low-touch interactions, such as inviting a partner to speak in a class or taking students on a field study trip to a community site, to semester-long projects that involve multiple meetings between faculty/student teams and partners, resulting in a final report or other deliverable. Our goal is to integrate community-engaged learning into courses at all different levels, from introductory courses for first-year students to capstone courses taken by students during their final years at Tech. Since the majority of students are majoring in STEM disciplines, our primary focus is on identifying project and partner opportunities where students can practice their STEM skills, within a strong social context framework.

Semester-long partnerships, including capstone projects, typically involve an iterative process in which students or faculty work closely with their partner to define a project scope that simultaneously provides value to the partner and meets the learning objectives of the course. In the case of capstone courses, projects must also afford students an opportunity to practice their advanced technical skills. To date, SLS' Capstone Project Program has focused on four schools: Civil and Environmental Engineering (CEE), Mechanical Engineering (ME), Industrial and Systems Engineering (ISYE), and Computer Science (CS). See examples of community-engaged course projects [here](#).

Evaluating and Prioritizing Partnerships

Given our priorities and capacity, it is important that we establish criteria for determining which project opportunities and partnerships to prioritize. We evaluate partnership opportunities in two stages, outlined here.

Stage 1: Partnership Priorities and Principles Consideration

As a general rule, we prioritize partnerships that advance the approach and priorities set out in this Partnership Strategy. The majority of our efforts are focused on building long term relationships that advance our Priority Issues in the Atlanta region. In addition, each semester we work to identify partners for specific project needs, especially for [capstone projects](#). Some of those partnerships serve a focused, short term purpose and may be limited to a single semester. This outreach section focuses on establishing priorities and criteria for partnerships that are longer-term, extending beyond collaboration with a single course or student team.

The RCE Greater Atlanta celebrates its launch at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. (Fall 2018)



The following questions, based on the Partnership Principles laid out above, are intended to help SLS more deeply consider whether an organization new to SLS aligns closely with our strategy and thus makes sense to pursue as a potential long-term partner. We will always look for partners that align closely with multiple principles.

Partnership Principle	Questions to Ask
1. START WITH ASSETS	Does this organization operate either implicitly or explicitly with an ABCD (asset-based community development) approach?
1. FOCUS ON EQUITY AND JUSTICE	Does this organization have an implicit or explicit equity focus? How does its internal structure or Board express equity as a value? Does the organization's leadership include People of Color? Is it working in parts of the metro area where disparities are most pronounced?
2. CHAMPION SYSTEMS CHANGE	Does this organization work on systems change (e.g., in addition to providing social services)? Will its projects with students help educate them on systems change?
3. SUPPORT COMMUNITY INNOVATORS	Does this organization have an explicit focus on social innovation or support community innovators/entrepreneurs? Is the organization itself taking innovative approaches to sustainability challenges in communities? Will its projects with students expose them to its innovative work?
4. PRIORITIZE PROCESS BEFORE OUTCOMES	Does the organization prioritize long-term relationships over transactional relationships? Does the organization practice participatory, inclusive processes internally and in its work with partners and community residents? Will its projects with students help educate them on the difference between relational and transactional partnerships, and on relationship-building itself?
5. CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD	Does the organization's work focus on neighborhoods in Georgia Tech's backyard? Do their projects afford students opportunities to work in the community with community residents (i.e., beyond organizational or professional staff)?
6. APPLY TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL CONTEXT	Does the organization have project needs that match the technical skills of students in engineering, design, or computing? Does this organization have the background and capacity to mentor these students?

One of our key priorities for partnerships relates to the last principle. Student interest in SLS-affiliated capstone projects across multiple engineering disciplines is growing, as students seek more purpose-driven educational experiences. Most of these projects require that students practice high-level engineering or computing skills. As such, we need to grow the number of partnerships that have project needs in this area as well as the capacity to guide and mentor the student teams, which requires not only that partners commit significant time and resources, but also, generally, that they have some technical knowledge of their own to draw on for guidance. This presents some challenges given that our Partnership Strategy prioritizes grassroots community groups, but these groups often do not know enough about the different technical fields, especially in engineering, to understand how these student teams might benefit them, or do not have the background or the capacity to manage a highly technical project. Starting in 2020, we will work with advisers and faculty in our engineering schools, along with PAC members, to create scaffolding and materials to better facilitate these types of partnerships in ways that are mutually beneficial to students and partners.

Stage 2: Capacity Consideration

One of SLS's partnership priorities is to support small, grassroots community groups. However, for a partnership with this type of group to be successful, it is crucial that the partner have sufficient capacity to collaborate closely with SLS, students, and faculty on projects. To that end, we explore the following capacity questions before determining whether to move forward establishing the partnership.

1. Has initial communication indicated that the primary liaison will have the time and energy to build a relationship with SLS?

2. Does the primary liaison have some experience in mentoring students—even if those weren't projects with GT/college students? Do they indicate that mentoring and working closely with students is attractive to them and a desirable part of the project process?

3. If organizational capacity is limited (as indicated by the answers to the questions above), but the fit is otherwise strong, does the group have partners or an umbrella organization known to SLS – or does SLS have ideas for additional support (e.g., via a student organization) – that can support its project work with SLS and provide needed expertise and bandwidth? For example, to partner with community-based entrepreneurs, SLS works through the Center for Civic Innovation (CCI), which takes the lead on both connecting us to the entrepreneurs and then supporting them as they work with Georgia Tech on projects. If not, is SLS able to facilitate a Georgia Tech partnership or direct the group toward resources that support the organization's efforts to build capacity that would set it up to partner more fully with SLS at a later time?

Trash trap installation in the Proctor Creek watershed, in partnership with West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA). Placement was informed by recommendations made by a Civil and Environmental Engineering Capstone Team. (Fall 2019)



Stage 3: Moving Forward

If, after the capacity evaluation, we determine that we should not move forward establishing a partnership with a particular group, we will do our best to refer the group to other entities that might make more appropriate partners, either for an immediate project or a long-term relationship. These include other offices or student groups at Georgia Tech as well as within RCE Greater Atlanta and other networks in which are involved.

For partners with whom we decide to move forward, we plan to draw on our SLCE resources to explore partnerships and projects. Our SLS Teaching Toolkit contains a broad array of resources, especially in the [SLCE Nuts ‘n Bolts](#) section. However, most of these resources were developed with faculty as the target users. Beginning in 2020, we will develop a separate portal housing tools specifically developed for partners.

SIGNATURE PARTNERSHIPS PROGRAM

Beginning in 2020, SLS will begin working with some of our closest partners to create Signature Partnerships guided by a collaboration agreement. Signature Partners will have a strong focus on relationship-building; be engaged in multiple SLS programs over time, ideally advancing a long-term project; and be committed to and passionate about their role as co-educators of our students. Signature Partnerships will initially last for two years.

The Signature Partnerships Program was developed in consultation with PAC members, as part of our vision for formalizing our closest partnerships. The purpose of creating the program is to provide more, ongoing, and deeper opportunities for our closest partners that result in significant impact; deepen the learning experiences of

our students; and, ultimately, have more impact advancing sustainable development around our Priority Issues in the region. The program will do this by putting in place a more formal and transparent set of partnership benefits and responsibilities and incorporating regular check-in opportunities for communication, reflection, and continuous improvement. These check-in opportunities are intended to support transparency, regular communication, and accountability—for SLS, faculty/students, and partners—for adherence to our Partnership Principles.

SLS will work with Signature Partners to:

- » Set up ongoing, multi-course collaborations across multiple semesters with a diverse set of faculty, courses, students, research, and projects at Georgia Tech and beyond (e.g., RCE)
- » Connect to other Georgia Tech resources as appropriate (e.g., space, expertise)
- » Facilitate networking with other SLS partners
- » Promote partners’ and our collaborative work through SLS and other Georgia Tech events and media – including an annual showcase and awards ceremony
- » Intentionally reflect on projects and the partnership overall, through a yearly reflection meeting during which we will identify what is working well and figure out how to address areas in need of improvement
- » Identify and pursue potential funding opportunities
- » Shape the SLS Partnership Program through the PAC (optional but encouraged)

Additionally, Signature Partners should commit to:

- » Working closely with Georgia Tech faculty and students on projects– co-developing and honoring collaboration agreements; communicating regularly and effectively; and embracing the role of co-educator by mentoring students
- » Communicating regularly and effectively with SLS
- » Promoting SLS and our collaborative work through networks and media, as appropriate

Signature Partnerships may evolve over time and may vary in their length; expected duration will be discussed through the process of creating an informal agreement between SLS and the partner organization. SLS is excited about the potential for this new program to strengthen relationships and thereby enhance the impact of its community engagement work. SLS is committed to using the regular reflection activities described above to ensure opportunities for ongoing evaluation and communication that results in the most effective program possible, for community partners and for Georgia Tech students and faculty.

Learn more and Contact Us!

Visit the [Partners](#) section of our website for more information. For examples of partnerships, scroll down to “SLS Collaborations – A Sampler.”

Our Partnership Strategy is informed by the larger national and global fields in which we work, including their scholarship and the conversations, teaching, research, and practice of both our colleagues and ourselves in these fields. Specifically, we are engaged in and influenced by work taking place related to five themes: Asset-Based Community Development; re-orienting engineering education for social justice and sustainable development; networks for social impact; service-learning in higher education; and sustainable development - equity and higher education. For

example, we draw on asset-based approaches to inform our work with faculty, students, and partners, and we use recent scholarship around critical service learning to shape both how we think about the role of service learning in the curriculum and how we build meaningful community engagement experiences for students. The centrality of networks to our partnership work is evident in this list, as is our emphasis on equity and social change. To learn more please see the [additional reading](#) section on the SLS web site.

We are always interested in discussing our Partnership Strategy and exploring new partnerships. We would love to hear from you! Contact us at any time:

Rebecca Watts Hull, SLS Service Learning and Partnerships Specialist: rwattshull@gatech.edu

Ruthie Yow, SLS Service Learning and Partnerships Specialist: ryow6@gatech.edu