

University System of Georgia

A systemwide series of institution-by-institution consolidations



STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Predominantly horizontal mergers among similar institutions, with one significant two-year/four-year exception.

WHY THE SYSTEM TRANSFORMED

In 2011, the University System of Georgia (USG) adopted consolidation as an ongoing strategy for aligning institutional capacity with changing enrollment patterns and regional needs. The Board of Regents identified six principles to guide its consolidation decisions: increase educational attainment, improve geographic access and identity, reduce program duplication, increase economies of scale for operations, support regional economic development, and streamlining administration while maintaining service quality.¹ Rather than positioning consolidation as a response to underperforming campuses, USG framed it as a strategy to build stronger institutions and reinvest efficiencies in academics and student success.

Collectively, the consolidations provided an opportunity to pursue a common strategic purpose: improving student outcomes, expanding academic pathways, aligning programs with regional workforce needs, and redirecting resources toward core institutional priorities. They also demonstrated the challenges around sustained attention to institutional culture, mission alignment, community support, operational coordination, enrollment pressures, and long-term financial sustainability.

WHAT CHANGED

Across three implementation waves from 2013 through 2018, USG completed nine consolidations, reducing the system from 35 institutions to 26.² A tenth consolidation planned for 2026 would merge East Georgia State College with Georgia Southern University, bringing the system to 25 institutions.

Most USG combinations were horizontal: four-year institutions joined other four-year institutions, while state colleges joined other state colleges. Examples included the consolidations of Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University; Albany State University and Darton State College; Georgia Southern University and Armstrong State University; and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College and Bainbridge State College. Each combination moved toward a single president, accreditation, mission, budget, and administrative structure while generally retaining multiple campus locations.

The most notable exception was the vertical integration of Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College. Perimeter remained a distinct associate-degree college within the research university, creating more direct pathways from two-year programs to bachelor's degrees.

USG typically announced consolidation decisions following a central review and then relied on campus implementation committees to carry them out. This approach accelerated implementation but limited opportunities for early stakeholder input, contributing to ongoing disputes over institutional identity, status, faculty policies, and campus culture.

RESULTS AND LESSONS

Evidence suggests the consolidation helped more students stay enrolled and complete degrees. In the consolidated institutions, second-year retention rates rose by 1.7 percentage points—equivalent to an 8 percent reduction in first-year dropout—and four-year bachelor's degree completion increased by 4 percentage points, a 29 percent relative gain.³ These improvements occurred without a detectable increase in total spending per student. Instead, institutions redirected spending toward academic support, including advising. At Perimeter College, the three-year associate degree graduation rate increased from 7 percent in 2015 to 22 percent in 2020, with larger gains among Black, Hispanic, and Pell-eligible students.

Georgia demonstrates that structural consolidation can improve productivity when leaders preserve access, create intentional academic pathways, and reinvest savings in the combined institution. It also illustrates the limits of structural change alone: technologies, curricula, tenure systems, institutional brands, and campus cultures can take years to integrate. Equity outcomes may also be overlooked unless they are explicitly defined, measured, and tracked.

[1] University System of Georgia, *Campus Consolidations and Guiding Principles* <https://www.usg.edu/consolidation/guiding-principles/>

[2] University System of Georgia, *Campus Consolidations and Guiding Principles* <https://www.usg.edu/consolidation/>

[3] Russell, L. (2019). Better outcomes without increased costs? Effects of Georgia's university system consolidations. *Economics of Education Review*, 68, 122–135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2018.12.006>