

What is our purpose?

“What is the purpose of the University of Georgia Visitors Center?” Well, sure, we give campus tours and help campus guests find their way. But what is our *big picture* purpose?

A brief bit of history: The VC was created in 1995 in anticipation of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. As a venue for

three events - soccer, volleyball, and rhythmic gymnastics - the UGA campus needed a welcome center to assist with the anticipated influx of campus guests that year. Prior to the VC’s creation, UGA had no official welcome/information center and offered just one tour a day on weekdays only, a walking tour of north campus led by student volunteers in the Admissions Office. The VC now connects with as many as 30,000 campus guests each year, most of whom are prospective students and their families.

We were created to provide hospitality for campus visitors and create a positive impression of the university to all we greet. We are in the *hospitality* business.

Ξενία - What is our gift?

“Hospitality” has a long and noble history, and the original Athenians, appropriately, set the standard. The ancient Greeks particularly emphasized the importance of treating strangers with kindness. It was considered so important that the god of [xenia](#) (hospitality) was none other than the king of the gods, Zeus. To not offer kindness to strangers was a significant violation of a fundamental cultural norm. In fact, not only were Greeks expected to take in strangers, it was customary and expected to send visitors away with a gift as well.



We certainly understand the need to treat all visitors with kindness and offer a warm welcome. But wouldn’t it be appropriate also to offer each of our guests a gift that would make their visit with us even more meaningful. We hardly have the budget for any material gift. But we *do have something of great value* we can share with all of our guests:

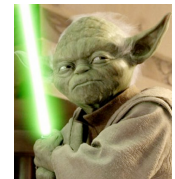
our message of the life-enriching, world-changing power of higher education.

The “gospel of college”

College is way cool. High school is fine, but it’s just the minor leagues, not “the show.” Prospective students can only imagine what it’s truly going to be like for them in college. They’re living a high school reality and swamped in the pressures, limitations, and distractions that go along with that world. It’s our job to paint a picture for them of a dynamic college experience that will inspire them to pursue the college search with purpose and passion and to begin their college years with high expectations, clear focus, and genuine enthusiasm. College is the first great life adventure most of these students will undertake on their own,



and the way they view it and begin it can be greatly influenced by you. In their eyes, you are a master, a wise, experienced guide. You are Yoda to their Luke and Leia. (No, the parents aren’t Darth Vader... at least, *most* of them aren’t.)



True education is powerful stuff. “*Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire,*” said Yeats. Too many students (and their parents) see college only as job training. How sad if that’s all they get from education. As an ambassador of the college experience, not just of UGA, you play a key role in helping prospective students grasp a sense of what higher education can be if they truly “get it.” Those who “get it,” in my opinion, are those who can leave college having been challenged to ask and at least begin answering this ultimate question suggested by Howard Thurman:

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

If you don’t at least begin asking that question in college, where there is an abundance of time and opportunity, when in your busy adult lives will you explore this question? If we can transmit to our guests some measure of our enthusiasm for the college experience and inspire them to see the opportunity in front of them, we will have indeed given them a remarkable gift.

No selling required

Our task is NOT to convince students to choose UGA. The majority of students who walk through our doors will not enroll here. Only slightly more than half of those who apply will be admitted, and only about 60 percent of admitted students typically choose to enroll. And who knows how many we see that never even apply? If all we give guests is a UGA sales pitch, we will miss out on sharing something even more valuable. Of course, if we come across as sales people, we will have little credibility. Paradoxically, by aiming for a higher message and offering something of value beyond our own self-interest, we will even more effectively improve our guests' opinion of UGA.

Our mission... (our mantra?)

So, what should be our mission? I'm inspired by this challenge from the late Mother Teresa:



“Let no one come to you without leaving better and happier.”

We can send our guests away *better* by inspiring and enlightening them with our enthusiasm for and understanding of the true power of education. We can send them away *happier* because of our remarkable hospitality and kindness. This is not exactly conventional mission statement kind of prose, and maybe we will craft our own unique statement. But, for now, it inspires me and offers a clear purpose for every interaction we have with guests.

I would like to narrow our mission down to three or four key words that can effectively and memorably sum up what we do. A brief *mantra* is more memorable and powerful than a traditional mission statement. Here are examples of some organizational mantras:

Nike: “Authentic Athletic Apparel”

Target: “Democratize design”

Hamilton-Berchman Design Group: “The details matter.”

Google: “Don’t be evil.”

With our mission in mind, what three or four words can best serve as a mantra for us? Get back to me on that...

UGA Visitors Center Service Standard

Disney has a longstanding record of offering unparalleled



customer service. Every time I've visited one of their parks or resorts I have been impressed at the consistently remarkable service offered by even the lowest level employee. How do they do it with so many thousands of workers? Well, they have a clearly defined (and bold) mission, or [service theme](#): “*We create happiness.*” But they back it up with clear expectations for their cast members by setting what they call [service standards](#). The Disney service standards are: Safety, Courtesy, Show, and Efficiency.

I propose the following service standards, in order of priority, for the UGA Visitors Center:

Be safe. Be kind. Be authentic. Be remarkable.

1. Be safe.



Safety must be the number one priority as we drive our vehicles on a very crowded campus. We will do our best to ensure the safety of guests, pedestrians, other drivers, and our staff members.

2. Be kind.



We will show kindness to everyone we encounter, whether they seem deserving or not and whether or not they are a guest or a member of our campus community. (We will be nice even to parking renegades...!)

3. Be authentic.



We will be truthful. But we will offer more than factual truth and accurate information; we will be **real**, sharing our true stories and genuine feelings (within reason, of course) and not trying to be something we're not. We will seek to be “microscopically truthful,” conveying our stories well beyond superficial generalizations and stereotypes.

4. Be remarkable.

We will be *remarkable*, giving our guests an experience that will compel them to *remark* about us in the best possible way. We will **amaze** and **delight** visitors. Our guests will leave feeling respected, challenged, enlightened, and inspired.



Conductor Benjamin Zander in [his TED Talk](#) shared that he challenged one of his struggling musicians to become a “one buttock” player. He observed that musicians who leaned in, rising off their chairs a bit, played with more emotion and passion. It’s not enough to just play the notes correctly, or, in our case, to just recite the tour script. We must “lean in,” uncork some passion, and connect with each person we encounter. You will know you’ve done it when, as Zander says, you evoke “shining eyes” from your audience.

“When in doubt, make a fool of yourself. There is a microscopically thin line between being brilliantly creative and acting like the most gigantic idiot on the face of the earth. So, what the hell... leap!”
Cynthia Heimel

If we are **safe, kind, authentic, and remarkable**, we certainly will send our guests away better and happier most of the time. And in the process, we undoubtedly will become better and happier ourselves.

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Sources and Resources

Recommended reading

[If You Want to Write](#) by Brenda Ueland

My favorite book. One of very few that I’ve re-read multiple times. It could just as easily be titled “If You Want To Do Anything Creative” or “If You Want To Truly Live.” Writing is just the specific focus, but you can apply Ueland’s wisdom in all areas of your life.

[Presentation Zen](#) by Garr Reynolds

Some of you have asked about my approach to Powerpoint slides. This author’s approach has inspired me toward a visuals-intensive presentation style. He advocates completely ditching boring bullet points and, instead, using images to support your message and add emotional oomph. This book is as beautifully designed as are his presentations. Check out [his blog](#), too.

[The Art Of Possibility](#) by Rosamund Stone Zander & Benjamin Zander

If you enjoyed orchestra conductor [Benjamin Zander’s TED Talk](#), you will enjoy this book, which further elaborates on the key points from that talk.

[Be Our Guest](#) by the Disney Institute

A primer on “perfecting the art of customer service” with a behind-the-scenes look at how Disney creates an amazing experience for guests.

Quotations used in Module One training:

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Yeats

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” Howard Thurman

“Let no one come to you without leaving better and happier.” Mother Teresa

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.” Leo Buscaglia

“The more you wish to describe a Universal the more minutely and truthfully you must describe a Particular.” Brenda Ueland

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves ‘who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be?... Your playing small doesn’t serve the world. There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you... As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” Marianne Williamson

“Enthusiasm! This is the sign that the creative fountain is in you.” Brenda Ueland

“Enthusiasm is the All in All!” William Blake

“Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

“When in doubt, make a fool of yourself. There is a microscopically thin line between being brilliantly creative and acting like the most gigantic idiot on the face of the earth. So, what the hell... leap!” Cynthia Heimel

“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you will live forever.” Gandhi (Also, see [Ben Dunlap’s TED Talk](#) which ends with this Gandhi quotation.)