



The Culture of Grace House at Georgia Tech

I. What is Grace House?

According to their website, gracepeople.org:

“Grace House is a joint ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta and the Southeastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We proudly serve the Georgia Tech community in Atlanta, Georgia. Grace House is a community of friendship, direction, authenticity, service, and a home away from home.”

On campus, Grace House is most known for its weekly Thursday coffee event where students can stop by for a free cup. However, Grace House does so much more than just engage the community through coffee. Whether someone is interested about growing in their faith or looking for a kind and openhearted environment that accepts them for who they are, Grace House’s mission is to be a safe and welcoming space on Georgia Tech’s campus. As an organization, Grace House is dedicated to serving the community and supporting students in any way possible. They offer a variety of resources from a pantry fully stocked with food and toiletries, contraceptives, and even an extra bedroom for students who require short-term crisis housing.



This is the Grace House sign that is in their front yard. The sign has their motto: “Radical Love. Safe Inquiry. Inclusive Justice.” And other values listed that show it is a safe space for members of the LGBTQA+ community. This sign also lists all the resources they offer students from safe sex supplies, free food, a study space, notary service, etc.



II. Research Methods and Overview

For this study, I wanted to examine Grace House’s culture in how they interact with the Georgia Tech community and how the student and staff members interact with each other. I conducted this study by attending and observing the Thursday coffee events for a few hours each week, looking at their website, and attending one of their small groups.

The findings in this report are divided into two main sections: community impact and internal identity. The community impact section includes subsections that cover the coffee event, campus pantry and other resources offered to the community. The internal identity section includes subsections about the small group and house decor. Each of these subsections reveal Grace House’s overall culture of openness, acceptance, and hope.

III. Community Impact

1. Thursday Coffee Event

Every Thursday from 1:00 pm to 6:00 pm, Grace House offers free coffee and encourages students to grab a cup on their way to or from class. When someone comes up to get coffee, they are immediately greeted by the member on coffee duty and asked if they would like hot or iced coffee. They also offer a variety of flavor-syrups and a dairy and dairy-free milk option to accommodate everyone’s needs. While the member is preparing the student’s drink, they typically ask how the student is doing and about their week. Each member on duty has a different approach to conversation with the people coming in, but each is genuine in their care of how the person getting a coffee is doing. Everyone that stops by is encouraged to stay and hang out on the couches and talk to people.

The goal of this event is to make people’s day brighter not just by giving them free coffee but by asking them how they’re doing and showing genuine care about their wellbeing. Throughout my research, I observed regulars come in and talk about how they always look forward to Thursdays because they can’t wait for the event. The Grace House members are on a first name basis with many regulars and get excited to

see them and remember key details about what is going on in their life and follow up on things they did the previous weekend. This event is a huge part of Grace House culture because it showcases their welcoming and giving nature by treating everyone that stops by like a close friend. They welcome anyone to stop by and emphasize that while they are a Christian organization, they accept everyone as they are regardless of their religious affiliation or other aspects of their identity that may make them feel unwelcome.



The first picture shows the sign Grace House puts out every Thursday to let campus know that they are doing their weekly coffee event. The second picture is a sign that talks about how they believe that “y’all means ALL” and that people of varying sexual orientations, gender identities, socioeconomic standing, and religious affiliations are welcome at Grace House.

“We **cherish** your identities and do not want to change you. We **accept** you as you are.”

2. Resources

a. Campus Pantry

On one of the days I went to Grace House, I asked to see the pantry they have located behind their house under the deck. I was shown a large stretch of cabinets each labeled with the resource it contained. There were cabinets full of canned goods like soup and beans, granola bars, and various spices. In the fridge, there were premade meals, fruit, bread, and milk. I was told that one of the staff members makes sure that everything is kept stocked up and ready for someone to take. Along with food products, some cabinets contain toiletries like shampoo, toothpaste, and soap. There is also a cabinet designated for menstrual products that is supplied with a range of pads and tampons. The pantry is listed as one of the resources the Georgia Tech community is encouraged to use on the sign outside of their house. They want to serve the community and help better the community by providing meals and toiletries to those struggling to help give them one less thing to worry about.



The picture on the left shows the fridge stocked with premade meals that just need to be heated up and other foods like bread, cheese, and apple sauce. The picture on the right shows the cabinet for menstrual supplies. The fridge and cabinets are checked regularly and kept stocked for the community.

b. Miscellaneous Resources

Grace House also offers other resources that are available in their living room by the exit. There is a designated resource table that has safe sex supplies like condoms and dental dams, emergency contraceptives, fentanyl testing strips, and Narcan nasal spray. On two of the Thursdays I went to Grace House, there was also free HIV/AIDS and syphilis testing available without prior reservation. Grace House believes in providing the community with important resources and empowering students to adopt safe practices in their lifestyles without judgement. I witnessed people grab Narcan spray, condoms, and fentanyl test strips freely without anyone batting an eye. This reflects Grace House's open culture and lack of judgment. Topics like safe sex are often not talked about in Christian organizations. Grace House differs from other organizations because they make an effort to talk about being informed in the choices you make and being safe, rather than preaching about abstinence and saying it is the only correct way to live life as a practicing Christian.



This picture shows the resource table Grace House has by their exit door. There are condoms, a dental dam, fentanyl testing strips, Narcan nasal spray, and plan B all available for students to take as they need. The table is purposefully placed next to the exit for people to see it easily and grab whatever resource they need.

IV. Internal Identity

1. Small Group

I sat in on a small group to gain a better understanding of Grace House's internal culture. The small group took place on their back porch which had personal prayers hanging from the ceiling and a large cross at the front of the room. The small group was set up so that it was a circle, and everyone was able to see each other. One of the student members led the group, and started by asking everyone what their high, low, and "in-between" (inside joke of the members of Grace House meaning neutral event) of the week was. Each member introduced themselves and talked about what was great, what was neutral, and what wasn't great about their week while everyone listened and asked questions. Books were passed out and shared between two people. The student leading began to read the chapter and then the next person read the next paragraph. When it got to me, I was encouraged to read if I was comfortable and found that moment to show how welcoming they are and how they would treat someone looking to join their ministry. After reading, the group discussed what they felt the chapter meant to them. Everyone was encouraged to share their thoughts and views on the topics covered. I noticed that there was an active effort to make sure the space was welcoming and a judgement free zone. The couches being close together and the sharing of books showed how close-knit, yet welcoming everyone is. The group ended with everyone laughing with one another and talking about the fun plans they had for the weekend.



This is Grace House's back porch. It has personal prayers hanging from the ceiling and a large cross. When this space is not being used for small group, it is not uncommon to see students studying at the tables or talking by the couches.

2. House Décor

Grace House's interior and exterior décor are important because they reflect the beliefs of the students and staff members of the organization. Outside of Grace House, there is a Black Lives Matter flag and an LGBTQA+ Pride flag hung directly to the right of the front door, proudly on display and visible from the sidewalk. These flags are important to the members of Grace House because certain members identify as a member of the LGBTQA+ and it is important for an organization that they are a part of to support movements they believe in. The flags reveal what is important to members. Inside the house, there is a wide variety of art that shows the values of members. There are several religious pieces of art that show a religious figure with a rainbow, showing that someone can be a member of the LGBTQA+ community and still be a Christian. There are posters about transgender rights and resources for those who identify as transgender. There are also a bunch of posters of the word "welcome" in different languages to show the support of different cultural identities within the community. The way Grace House decorated their space reveals their internal culture because how people decorate their space is intentional and reflects what is important to them. Grace House members come from a variety of different backgrounds and identities, so it is important that their house reflects that.



The picture on the left shows the two flags outside of Grace House. The picture on the right shows Christian artwork that incorporates the beliefs and identities of the Grace House members.



V. Conclusions

After completing my observations of Grace House's culture in the way they interact with the community and their internal identity, I believe that their open, accepting, and friendly culture make it the safe space on campus that it aims to be, both for members and non-members.

Everything they do to engage the community, whether it is their famous coffee event, or the resources they provide directly, correlates to their culture and mission. Grace House aims to help the community and make Georgia Tech a better place by helping students in need, spreading hope, and being a place of acceptance for everyone.

For a future study, it would be valuable to sit in on Grace House's service projects for nonprofits around Atlanta to see how their culture extends to the Atlanta community beyond Georgia Tech's campus.

While I was conducting my study, I started to look forward to Thursday coffee events just like their regular coffee-goers because while I observed interactions, I experienced first-hand their kindness as I was greeted by name each week when I stopped by and encouraged to hang out in the living room or on the back porch. By the end of this study, I had gotten to know each member well and developed friendships. While this study is over, I will continue to go to Grace House's coffee events because of their welcoming, friendly, and accepting culture.