

REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH  
CETL Celebrating Teaching Luncheon, March 11, 2008

Every year I look forward to this luncheon, because it gives me an opportunity to thank CETL for its efforts and to commend each one of you for wanting to improve your teaching skills.

At many research universities, the lab is emphasized over the classroom, and undergraduates see research as diverting the attention of faculty away from them. In addition, technophiles are often stereotyped as lacking interpersonal skills. As a result, some people are surprised to learn that Georgia Tech aspires to great teaching. But I believe research and undergraduate education are interrelated activities that can and ought to enrich each other. Our goal is to give students the best of both worlds – the attention to undergraduate education of a liberal arts college and the opportunity for exposure to a world-class research enterprise.

We want our faculty to engage in break-through research, but we also encourage them to teach, injecting the exciting dimension of leading-edge research into the classroom. And we give undergraduates opportunities for hands-on involvement in our research labs. We want to be a community of scholars, all engaged in the discovery of knowledge at some place on the continuum and all involved together in education, in research, and in reaching out beyond our campus.

So, one of my focal points as president has been to make the undergraduate experience more engaging and exciting. We started working on that in the late 1990s, and guess what? Our first-year retention rate jumped up almost immediately. It had been hovering around 84-86 percent for years. In 1999, it leaped up to 90 percent and is now 92 percent.

Obviously, a similar improvement in our graduation rate is going to lag four or five years behind, but that has happened as well. It was languishing around 68 percent for many years. Then it increased to 72 percent in 2004 and has now reached 78 percent. And we believe it has potential to go higher.

These improved retention and graduation numbers reflect the effort that has gone into improving the undergraduate experience. We have focused on improving academic advising and increasing academic services. We have expanded opportunities for undergraduates to engage in meaningful research and created a wide range of exciting study abroad opportunities – and not just in the liberal arts, but for science and engineering majors as well. We created an honors program and began to develop exciting interdisciplinary degrees like computational media, and combinations of modern languages, international affairs, and global economics.

We also began to place more value on teaching in our evaluation of faculty, and offer them opportunities to improve their skills. CETL has made a significant contribution here, and that effort was reflected in the awarding of the Theodore Hesburgh Award for innovative approaches to improving teaching and learning.

To help us drill down a little deeper into the impact of these efforts to improve the undergraduate experience, we began participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement. This is a nationwide survey of first year and fourth year students at participating colleges and universities about their educational and campus experience. It gives us an opportunity to see our students' perspectives on the quality and nature of their educational experience, to see how their perspective are changing with time, and to compare our students against students from other participating research universities around the country.

We have participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement every two years since 2001. And the results are enabling us to see more clearly where we are doing well and where we can still improve in our efforts to make undergraduate education more engaging and productive.

Many of the things the National Survey of Student Engagement tells us make us proud of the undergraduate experience we offer. The students in 2007 survey indicated, for example:

- They are serious about their studies, and work hard to achieve the high academic expectations we place before them – harder than their peers at other research universities.
- They are more likely to collaborate with each other outside the classroom than their peers at other universities – more than 80 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> year students at Georgia Tech reported collaborating with other students on projects and in study groups, compared to about two-thirds at research universities as a whole.
- More than a quarter of Georgia Tech freshmen report making presentations in class, compared to only 15 percent of freshmen at research universities in general.
- Georgia Tech seniors were much more likely to participate in a culminating educational experience such as a capstone course or research thesis – 57 percent of Georgia Tech students had this experience compared to less than 30 percent of their peers.
- As a result of the strengthening of our undergraduate research and study abroad programs, 40 percent of Georgia Tech seniors report participating in meaningful, structured research compared to 30 percent at research universities in general. And almost 30 percent of Georgia Tech seniors report having studied abroad compared to less than 20 percent of their peers.

Many of these responses have been improving since we began the Survey of Student Engagement back in 2001, and the top graph on the hand-out indicates that percent of seniors who believe we are doing a good job is on the rise. This provides quantitative proof that the undergraduate initiative we undertook about eight years ago is having the desired effect.

We have never been known as a party school – in fact we are probably the opposite of the University of Georgia, which is often ranked among the nation's top ten party schools. But we have been working on this aspect of campus life – from building the Campus Rec Center to inaugurating events like Georgia Tech Day at Six Flags – and although we still clearly have more to do, the percentage of seniors who are happy about the social opportunities we provide has doubled since 2001.

The bottom line is the percentage of Georgia Tech seniors who regard their educational experience as “excellent” has surpassed that of seniors at research universities at large. When we first did the Survey of Student Engagement in 2001, the proportion of Georgia Tech seniors who

regarded their educational experience as excellent was about same as their peers at research universities around the nation. The numbers for both Georgia Tech and research universities in general have improved since then, but Georgia Tech has done better than its peers. Forty-six percent of Georgia Tech seniors now consider their educational experience to be excellent, compared to 38 percent of their peers.

But, as the second graph on the hand-out indicates, there are still areas where we have not yet moved the needle as far as we should. As you can see, the green line indicating interaction with faculty has been staying pretty flat:

- Compared to their counterparts at research universities in general, Georgia Tech students indicate lower levels of faculty support. Georgia Tech students do not report the level of friendly and supportive relationships with faculty that other universities provide.
- In addition, only 59 percent of seniors report that the Institute in general provided them with the academic support they needed to thrive, compared to 69 percent of seniors at research universities in general.

The questions that produce these results have to do with opportunities to discuss assignments or grades with professors, to discuss ideas from the course in informal settings outside the classroom, and to get feedback on career options from faculty. They also reflect the level and promptness of feedback on academic performance from professors – either orally or in writing. And they include opportunities to work with faculty on activities outside the classroom, such as committees or student life activities.

“Supportive campus environment,” the yellow line on the second graph, covers a wide range of things and is focused largely on personal growth and relationships, both academic and social, with other students and with faculty and administrative staff. Such relationships are important to a student’s ability to thrive, both socially and academically. As this graph indicates, we are improving, but we still lag behind our peer institutions. Fifty percent of Georgia Tech seniors report that we do well in this regard, compared to 56 percent of their peers at research universities around the nation.

As all of us know, real teachers do not teach subjects. They teach students. Even though we have a focus on technology, even though we are tremendous research engine, Georgia Tech must still excel at its original mission – to educate “a hell of an engineer” – or architect, scientist, business manager, economist, and so on. And it is your initiative and efforts to improve your teaching skills that will help to make education at Georgia Tech more alive, more interactive, and more intriguing.

Our goal is to create the optimal learning environment for everyone – students, certainly, but also faculty and staff. We still have work to do to achieve this goal, but we are making good progress. We have much to be proud of as we consider the quality of the educational experience we offer and the improvement that we see reflected in our retention and graduation rates and in the results of the Survey of Student Engagement. A significant part of that progress is due to the efforts of CETL and each one of you as individual faculty. Your deliberate focus on improve teaching and learning at Georgia Tech are central to our success, and I am glad to have a chance to say, “Thank you.”