

## Notes from the President

### *Celebrating a Century of Cooperative Education*

09/24/2012

On Sept. 18 we celebrated a [century of cooperative education at Georgia Tech](#), a program that has helped to shape the lives of 50,000 graduates. Cooperative education has been a part of Georgia Tech for almost 80 percent of the Institute's existence, during the leadership of all but two of Tech's presidents. In fact, Georgia Tech was one of the first colleges to adopt cooperative education.

In 1912 under the leadership of President Kenneth Matheson, Tech's program was started with 12 hand-picked freshmen. Students earned a salary of 15 cents an hour, which was pretty good in those days. Upon graduation, they could look forward to earning 25 cents an hour as an engineer or 37.5 cents per hour as a supervisor.

Co-op students formed the Co-op Club in 1915, and held an annual "Mechanics Ball" where they dressed in overalls, complete with accessories such as wrenches and other tools. You might be interested to know that their dates, co-eds from Agnes Scott, wore traditional gingham dresses.

A century later, what began as an experiment is now the nation's largest voluntary co-op program, with 4,000 undergraduate and graduate co-op students.

In celebration of its centennial, Co-op is [publishing a book](#) that includes brief stories from Tech co-op students through the years, including Dean Gary May, and former Tech President and now Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Wayne Clough. John Goodwyne, a 1962 IE graduate, described his experience working at Ford. He helped with assembly line balancing to even out work flow. He said "The whole effort was hamstrung by a lack of computer power, working punch cards as input to a huge room-size computer that had less computing capacity than your smartphone today." He said that co-op gave him a foot in the door of a very major corporation and helped him launch a successful career. Many others echo that theme.

At our celebration event on campus, Dr. Keith Hollingsworth, president of the [Georgia Tech Co-op affinity group](#) talked about how much the program meant to him. His father's grocery store folded his first semester at Tech. Co-op was a way for him to work hard and not only pay his way through Georgia Tech, but also to send money home to help support his family. Through the years the program has helped to make a Georgia Tech education a reality for thousands of students.

Cooperative education students graduate with a competitive advantage from their classroom learning and their work experience. Forty percent of all Tech co-ops are hired by their employers upon graduation. Exit surveys tell us that 80 percent of all co-ops said that their co-op experience helped them find a job after graduation. A concept that author Malcolm Gladwell highlighted in his book *Outliers* is the 10,000 hour preparation rule — the idea that excellence in performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice.

By my rough estimate, in five years a co-op student could graduate with 4,800 hours of on-the-job experience. Gladwell defined outliers as those who have been given opportunities and those who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them. This year we celebrate the first century of opportunities through our outstanding cooperative education program, and look ahead to limitless opportunities for the future.

G. P. "Bud" Peterson  
President, Georgia Tech