

Notes from the President

2016 — Celebrating the MLK Legacy

01/13/2016

This month, as we do every January, Georgia Tech is hosting a series of [special events](#) as part of the Institute's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration. It is an opportunity for the entire Georgia Tech community to come together and focus on the legacy bequeathed to us by this towering figure of the American civil rights movement, as well as to identify and discuss how we can make even greater strides going forward.

For 25 years, in conjunction with the MLK Celebration, Georgia Tech has sponsored the Focus Program, which brings together some of the nation's brightest minority students to our campus, encourages them to pursue graduate degrees, and helps them plan their academic future beyond their undergraduate years. This year's event is Jan. 14-17.

Focus is a remarkable success story. Its alumni have served as exceptional role models for undergraduates who are considering graduate school. At least six Focus alumni have been hired into tenure-track positions at Georgia Tech, and 12 Focus alumni are in tenure-track positions at other institutions.

Focus represents an important step, but it's not a destination. These and other initiatives are part of Georgia Tech's ongoing journey along the path of building a more inclusive community. Some of the significant progress to date:

- Women were first admitted to Georgia Tech in 1952. This year, for the first time in Georgia Tech's history, our freshman class exceeded 40 percent women, and it is trending even higher for next fall.
- In 1961 Georgia Tech became the Southeast's first state university to desegregate without a court order. This past fall we welcomed the largest number of African-American students in Georgia Tech's history.
- In 2001 Georgia Tech became the first university in U.S. history to have graduated the largest number of African-American engineers at all degree levels during the same year. It also celebrated the 40th anniversary of its integration. Today, we are the largest provider of engineering bachelor's degrees to women and minority students. Georgia Tech is No. 2 in awarding engineering bachelor's degrees to African-Americans and No. 1 in doctoral engineering degrees to African-Americans. Our College of Engineering is routinely ranked No. 1 in the U.S. for Hispanic graduate students.

From the time frame, it's evident that these changes did not happen overnight. There were clearly some challenges, yet the journey continues. We're tremendously proud of all the Georgia Tech community members who have stepped up through the years to help us build a welcoming and inclusive community, and we continue to make great strides.

The pioneering work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lives on through our Ivan Allen Prize for Social Courage. It lives on through our students who participate in some 400 student organizations, volunteer in the community, and study abroad to gain new perspectives. It lives on through our faculty who mentor students, and through our staff who provide individual and program support in a multitude of areas.

It also lives on through such events as our sixth annual MLK Day of Service on Jan. 18, a campuswide initiative to honor Dr. King's legacy with hands-on activities. This year community members are participating as volunteers in projects with 11 local organizations.

Today, our nation is facing some difficult issues and desperately needs all of us to step up and lead within our circles of influence. We need mutual understanding; we need to improve the channels of communication and continue sharing our perspectives; and we need to value all individuals. If we do this, we will build an even more inclusive community — one where all people are respected and can share their thoughts openly and without fear of reprisals.

More often than not it is our universities that identify and define a vision for the future. Not just an individual's future, but also the future of our society. Here at Georgia Tech, we have an Institute-wide goal of inclusive excellence, but the simple truth is that excellence isn't possible without an inclusive community.

Reaching our highest potential requires including people from all backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives, and having them come together to work toward our common goals for the betterment of humankind.

At Georgia Tech we are a community of diverse people. With students from more than 115 countries, we come together to accomplish great things, ranging from service projects with metro Atlanta community partners for the MLK Day of Service mentioned above, to diverse, interdisciplinary teams that develop breakthroughs in healthcare, IT, engineering, science, and numerous other areas.

Just the year before I started college, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. After the 1969 moon landing, people began the comparison. If we can land a man on the moon, surely we can . . . — you fill in the blank — with everything from curing cancer to solving the global problem of clean drinking water and addressing the many social challenges that lie before us.

This fall, Georgia Tech scientists, working with NASA, discovered water on Mars. Suddenly, the improbable becomes possible. So maybe the challenge should be, "If Georgia Tech can discover water on Mars, surely we can lead in our efforts to create a truly inclusive environment where all people and all perspectives are valued!"

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