REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
Dinner honoring Robert Nerem, April 28, 2003

I am delighted to join with all of you in honoring Dr. Robert Nerem and celebrating his many contributions to bioengineering. This wonderful symposium has been a tribute to Bob's outstanding accomplishments as an eminent, internationally known research scholar. And over the course of the past two days, the sessions and presentations have traced his career from hemodynamics to tissue engineering. Tonight, I would like to begin the festivities by coming a little closer home, and giving all of you, who have come from across the nation and around the world, a sense of what it has meant for Georgia Tech and Atlanta to have had Bob here for the past 16 years.

When Bob came to Georgia Tech in 1987 to assume the Distinguished Professorial Chair in Engineering and Medicine, Georgia Tech had a few fragmented collaborative research projects in biotechnology with Emory University, but that was all. We had no established programs in biotechnology, nor was Atlanta either among the nation's traditional medical powerhouses or among its leading biotechnology centers.

I'm not sure what convinced Bob Nerem to risk the considerable prestige of his career by coming to a university that had no programs in biomedical engineering and was hundreds of miles away from all of the large, established centers of biotechnology. But his arrival at Georgia Tech conveyed instant credibility to that little research initiative we had underway with Emory University. And he has kept us on the fast track ever since.

He has been the driving force behind the rapid development of a full-blown research and education program in biomedical engineering that is now ranked sixth in the nation, and that has not one but two marvelous new facilities built without any help from state government.

And when the Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness at the Harvard Business School mapped the nation's 20 biggest biotech cities by number of jobs in 1998, there we were. Granted, Atlanta was still in the bottom quartile with a little less than 18,500 jobs, but we were on the map – the only major biotech city east of Houston, Texas, and south of Washington, D.C.

The same year Atlanta made it onto the biotech map, our growing prominence in bioengineering was acknowledged in another way. In 1998, the National Science Foundation awarded Georgia Tech and Emory University the nation's first and only Engineering Research Center for the Engineering of Living Tissues. Today the Georgia Tech/Emory Center for the Engineering of Living Tissues focuses on the core technologies necessary to develop tissue-engineered products that are immune acceptable, available off the shelf, and able to be manufactured on a medically relevant scale. The Center also has a comprehensive educational strategy that reaches out to K-12 students and teachers and industrial professionals as well as providing undergraduates and graduate students with exceptional research opportunities.

The key to attracting this national center of engineering excellence was the Parker H. Petit Institute of Bioengineering and Bioscience, which was all of three years old at the time – having been created in 1995. The Petit Institute gathers faculty and students from across several science and engineering disciplines in a new building with an innovative design. Instead of organizing faculty and students by academic discipline, the building gathers them into research neighborhoods by topic. A biochemist might have a mechanical engineer working on once side and a computer engineer on the other. This daily cross-fertilization of disciplines is one of the things that has made biotechnology so dynamic at Georgia Tech.

Then there is the educational component of bioengineering at Georgia Tech. Bob Nerem got us started with a master's degree program in 1992. Today, a decade later, we have more than 130 students enrolled in a Department of Biomedical Engineering that is a unique joint program between Georgia Tech, which is a public university, and Emory, which is a private university. And in June we will welcome Larry McIntire, a prominent biotechnology expert from Rice University in Houston, as the new department chair.

The department has 28 faculty and offers degrees at all three levels – undergraduate, master's and doctoral. In fact, doctoral students can choose either a Ph.D. in bioengineering or a dual degree – a Ph.D. in biomedical engineering from Georgia Tech and an M.D. from Emory University. And within a few months, the department will move into a striking new home adjacent to the Petit Institute.

Now, although Bob Nerem was the chief engineer of this rapid explosion of Georgia Tech onto the biotechnology scene, he did not do it alone. Any story about biotechnology at Georgia Tech would be remiss if it did not mention the extraordinary help and support he has had from Pete Petit, a Georgia Tech alumnus and successful biotechnology entrepreneur, who endowed the chair that attracted Bob to Georgia Tech and has since provided significant support for the Institute of Bioengineering and Bioscience, which is named in his honor.

The Department of Biomedical Engineering is named for Wallace H. Coulter, and its new state-of-the-art facility is named for U.A. Whitaker, reflecting the incredible support that the Coulter and Whitaker Foundations have provided. But it has been Bob Nerem's leadership that has inspired these foundations and Pete Petit to invest in Georgia Tech.

The joint bioengineering effort by Georgia Tech and Emory University has proven so successful that we have created EmTec Bio, an economic development initiative to attract and spin-off new biotech companies. It includes an incubator for start-up biotech companies operated by Georgia Tech's national award-winning Advanced Technology Development Center.

This focus on translating our research into products and services that improve medical care and the quality of life has helped Atlanta to move onto the map. And the metro area is trying to capitalize on it to strengthen and build up the presence of biotechnology industries here.Georgia Tech and Emory University, together with the Georgia Research Alliance and the Metro Atlanta Bioscience Council, are part of an initiative to create a bio-ring around Atlanta.

As you can see, Bob Nerem was the catalyst and primary driver whose initiative, hard work, and inspiration yielded many fruitful partnerships and helped to propel Georgia Tech and Atlanta to the forefront of bioengineering in a very short period of time. And on behalf of Georgia Tech, I am delighted to have this opportunity to say thank you.