

REMARKS BY DR. G. WAYNE CLOUGH
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“Prospecting for Gold: Mining the Opportunities”

I'm pleased to welcome all of you to Atlanta on behalf of Georgia Tech.

Georgia Tech began its undergraduate cooperative program in 1912, just six years after the University of Cincinnati started the very first co-op program in the United States.

That early program offered placements to Georgia Tech students in mechanical and electrical engineering. And its stated goals pretty much still hold today. It claimed to identify weak students early, and develop maturity in the rest. It brought students into contact with up-to-date equipment and modern industrial practice. It gave poor students a way to earn their way through college, and enabled its graduates to go directly into productive work without needing a training period.

Georgia Tech's program has always involved a year-round schedule that enabled students to earn a bachelor's degree in five years. But those first Georgia Tech co-op students alternated between the workplace and the classroom every week, and it was a dizzy, arduous schedule.

The first industry to hire Tech co-ops was the railroads. Many an early co-op student went to class Monday through Saturday noon, then immediately hopped on a train out of Atlanta. He would arrive in the rail yards and shop areas in Illinois Sunday evening, just in time to go to sleep in the bed of the student who had been there the prior week and was at that moment just getting off a train in Atlanta for a week of classes.

After a few years of exhausted co-op students shuttling halfway across the country every weekend, Tech switched to alternating students between the workplace and the classroom every two weeks, then every four weeks.

But the program was nearly 20 years old before it finally settled into a schedule that alternated based on academic terms. By that time, Georgia Tech was placing co-op students in work assignments throughout the eastern half of the United States, and the academic term schedule was the only one that made sense.

Our co-op program has a history of mining its opportunities. Today it is the fourth oldest of its kind in the world, and the largest voluntary program in the United States. Each year, we have about 3,700 undergraduate co-op students, which is 36 percent of our undergraduate student body, plus another 400 graduate students, about 10 percent of our graduate student body. They work at more than 600 companies throughout the nation and even internationally.

The latest development for cooperative programs, of course, is the movement toward accreditation. And we recently welcomed an accreditation team to our campus at Georgia Tech. We want to offer an outstanding program, and we believe it is good idea to re-evaluate what we're doing on a regular basis.

We see accreditation as a way to benchmark ourselves against our own history and the programs of others... a tool that helps us learn how we can improve... and a seal of quality that assures both students and businesses of the excellence of our program.

The co-op program gives students the opportunity to test their career choices early in college, and sometimes they change majors based on their co-op experience. They also gain valuable work experience and often a foot in the door for their first job after graduation. In aggregate, Georgia Tech co-op students earn about \$22 million a year, which they use to help finance their education.

So we are very proud of our co-op program. I can speak to its value from personal experience, because I put myself through Georgia Tech as an undergraduate co-op student in civil engineering. I went off to my first co-op job in fall quarter of my sophomore year, and for the rest of my undergraduate days I spent fall and spring quarters working and winter and summer quarters studying.

I worked for the railroad, doing surveying and drafting up and down the line between Atlanta and Cincinnati. These railroad surveys were the basis for the plat maps of towns all along the rail line. In addition to keeping them up to date, we surveyed for new industrial parks with rail sidings.

We also measured the arcs of curves and the height of tunnels, overpasses and bridges with ironwork across the top, to see if the new triple-decker train cars that were designed to carry automobiles would fit. If a tunnel was too low, we would test the bed to see if the tracks could be lowered.

That co-op job taught me one thing about my chosen major of civil engineering, and that was that I did not want to become a surveyor after I graduated. I enjoyed being outside, but I wasn't too thrilled about searching for survey monuments in piggens that had been built over them since the last survey was taken. So I became a geo-technical engineer instead, and never used the surveying skills I had learned on my co-op job.

That actually was not much of a loss. Co-op students are always at the bottom of the ladder doing relatively menial things, and I suspect that five years later very few of them are doing the same thing that they did as a co-op student.

But my co-op experience was invaluable for the bigger things I learned – lessons that are still with me and influence my life even today. And as Yogi Berra once said of his baseball career, “If I had to do it all over again, I’d do it all over again.”

There is nothing like a co-op experience to teach a young person responsibility and self-reliance. And there is nothing like the sense of self-worth and self-confidence that comes from knowing that you are capable of good work and of earning money to support yourself.

Co-oping also teaches valuable human relations skills. Lately we've been hearing a lot in the news about high school cliques, and how students in one clique tease and taunt students in another clique, or how devastating it is for students not to be included in a clique. The students who come into our co-op programs come from that setting, where you choose your friends and get in a clique with them and look down your nose at everyone else.

But when you are a co-op student at the bottom of the heap in the workplace, you cannot choose your co-workers. You are stuck with whoever they are. They are more diverse than any group you've ever been part of, and you have to learn to relate to them and get along with them.

Co-op students also learn to work. They learn to get up early and arrive at work on time. They learn the etiquette of their workplace and what is appropriate in the way of dress and behavior.

And they learn the importance of doing their job well. On campus, the "C" students have the same opportunities as the "A" students. They have the same choice of classes and extracurricular activities, and they rise up through the ranks from freshman to senior on the same schedule. In the workplace it's a different story. The "C" workers do not get the same opportunities as the "A" workers, and they do not rise up through the ranks like the "A" workers do.

Co-op students learn the value of being "A" workers... of taking their responsibilities seriously and doing their jobs well, which tends to make them better students while they are in college and better employees after they graduate.

I occasionally get calls from distraught parents who are upset because their son or daughter did not get a scholarship. I always recommend the co-op program. And I sincerely believe that in the final analysis, the co-op students graduate with a healthier sense of self-worth and self-reliance, and a more accurate sense of their own abilities than the scholarship students who have had their education handed to them on a platter.

Someone once said that your real education is what you remember when you've forgotten everything you were taught in class. Co-op programs are part of that real education. They are gold mines of opportunity for students to learn the valuable big-picture skills and truths that will serve them well all of their lives.

Co-op programs give students the opportunity to explore – to explore the world of work, and at least in the case of Georgia Tech which has co-op assignments all over the country, to explore new places. They offer students the opportunity to grow in responsibility and maturity. And they offer them the opportunity to develop an ability to relate and work in cooperation with others who are different than they are.

These opportunities are what our co-op students are really prospecting for. They represent the real "gold" of our co-op programs – the enduring treasures that students will carry with them for the rest of their lives.