REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
Freshman Convocation, August 18, 2002

I’m pleased to add my voice to the chorus and say welcome to Georgia Tech. My role today is to give you a little feel for the history and future of this great institution.

As to history, I am lucky to actually share some of it. I matriculated at Tech in 1959 as a freshman. Over the next six years I completed an undergraduate degree as a co-op student and a master’s degree – much to the surprise of many, myself included.

I came to Tech as a student who grew up in rural South Georgia and was among the first in my family to receive a college degree. My aspirations were to just get a B.S. degree, but Tech helped me understand there was more to life than that, and I later attended U.C. Berkeley to obtain my Ph.D. degree. Georgia Tech launched me on a fulfilling career in engineering, teaching and research that ultimately led to another direct personal link to Georgia Tech when I returned as president in 1994.

I certainly did not expect to have this wonderful opportunity when I was a student here, and for sure, most of the faculty who taught me did not anticipate seeing me again, much less as president. But that is the way life works if you keep at it. Good things happen if you work hard and use what Tech teaches you. Incidentally, the good news about being president is that now I get the best seats for football and basketball games, something all of you might aspire to!

But, Georgia Tech’s history goes back well before I was here. Georgia Tech was created by state law in 1885, and the state provided $65,000 to build the campus and pay for the first year of operation. Undeterred by those slim rations, Georgia Tech opened its doors on October 5, 1888 to 129 students, all of them mechanical engineering majors. The campus had two buildings – the Academic Building, which we now call the Tech Tower and which is still the heart of campus today, and a shop building. Students lived in boarding houses around town.

Life at Tech in those early days was a little different than today. The students, who were all white males, wore suits and ties to class for half the day. Then they changed clothes and spent the other half of the day working in wood and metal shops.
Other things, however, haven’t changed much: In 1893 Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia met for their first football game in Athens. Tech won by a score of 28-6. UGA complained that the officiating wasn’t fair and threw rocks at the Tech team as they ran to board the train back to Atlanta.

It was football that gave Georgia Tech our first national exposure. We were barely 20 years old when our first paid coach, John Heisman, led the team to national prominence and later had the Heisman Trophy named for him. About the same time, in 1912, Tech became the fourth university in the world to begin a cooperative program. Today we have the largest voluntary co-op program in the nation. I was a co-op student, and it is a great educational experience as well as helping to pay for college.

By the time Georgia Tech reached the midpoint of our first century, we had evolved into a noteworthy regional university in the South. We were doing a million dollars of research a year, and beginning to award Ph.D. degrees. Our enrollment had topped 5,400, and the American Society for Engineering Education ranked us first in the South and fourth in the nation in engineering enrollment.

Unfortunately, our campus capacity was for only half that many students, so classes began at 7:00 in the morning and continued past 10:00 at night. It had improved by the 60s when I was a student, but we still had classes on Saturday. You haven’t lived until you’ve had a calculus class at 8:00 on Saturday morning. You will find that the schedule has improved somewhat since then.

The fifties and sixties brought significant changes to the culture of Georgia Tech. In the fall of 1952, Marilyn Monroe appeared on the cover of Look magazine, wearing a Georgia Tech sweater and celebrating the admission of the first two women students. And you will hear more about that in the coming months as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of women at Tech.

Last fall we celebrated the 40th anniversary of another step toward diversity. In 1961, Georgia Tech became the first university in the Deep South to integrate voluntarily.

Today, we have gone from two women to 4,300, and from three minority students to over 5,300. Roughly 30 percent of our students are now women and 35 percent are minority. And I hope before too long, Tech will be like my other alma mater, Berkeley, where there is no “majority” and no minority.
Freshman convocation was already a tradition when I was at Georgia Tech in the 1960s, and I remember only one thing we were told: Look at the person on our left, then at the person on our right. By the time graduation rolled around, we were told, only one of the three of us would be left.

This was the gracious introduction to life as a freshman in the days when students could get in without the best qualifications. The curriculum was very demanding, and many were overwhelmed by the difficulty of their courses. Today the academics are as tough as ever, but the admissions process is much more rigorous. You are the brightest class of freshmen we have ever admitted to Georgia Tech, and I hope and expect to hand every single one of you a Georgia Tech diploma.

But I also echo Steven and Tiffany in encouraging you to reach out... to get help when you need it, to take advantage of academic support services, to form study groups and build networks, to get involved in campus organizations and activities. As a freshman I struggled because I did not know how to study. Only after I sought help did my student experience turn around.

Also, explore your curricula alternatives at Tech. We are known for engineering and it is the biggest major, but we have many other great majors in a wide variety of fields.

Over the years since my student days, Georgia Tech has grown and matured into a research university that today ranks among the nation’s best. Our student body now tops 15,000, and our outstanding students are at the core of our mission and the heart of our endeavors.

While we now rival schools like MIT and Cal Tech in the research lab and classroom, they leave a little to be desired when it comes to athletics. I’ll put our football team and our men’s and women’s basketball teams against theirs any day! Last year 15 of Georgia Tech’s 17 intercollegiate teams went to post-season play, including all eight women’s teams. We are now coming into the fall season with a new football coach who promises excitement on the gridiron, and a volleyball team that includes eight returning letter-winners.

In our early days of scrambling for resources and making machinery for private industry, Georgia Tech developed a practical, entrepreneurial mindset that still characterizes us today. We rank fourth in the nation in industry-sponsored
research and first in technology transfer, which translates the discoveries of the lab into marketable products. Sponsored research now exceeds $300 million. We provide lots of opportunities for undergraduate students to get involved in our research labs, and we hope many of you will take advantage of them over the next four years.

Our hopes and expectations for Georgia Tech are still the same today as they were when Tech was founded more than 100 years ago – that this university and our graduates will lead the way into a new age. Today that new age is dependent in every way on technology. Never has Georgia Tech been better positioned to help society, and never has a Georgia Tech degree, be it in engineering, in the sciences, computing, business, architecture or international affairs, been more valuable.

You can see that reflected in Georgia Tech’s alumni. They include technology stars like Chris Klaus, who founded Internet Security Systems in his Tech dorm room... entrepreneurs like Pat Nettles who has steered his start-up company Ciena through the ups and downs of the Nasdaq... corporate leaders like Deborah Willingham, senior vice president at Microsoft who consistently ranks as one of America’s most powerful businesswomen, and Dave Dorman, who was just announced last month as the next chairman and CEO of AT&T.

It’s fun to talk about Georgia Tech’s past, but our most exciting days are yet to come. Our goal is to define the technological research university of the 21st century. We are a world leader in emerging interdisciplinary fields like biotechnology, nanotechnology, human-computer interaction, and sustainable technology. We are stepping into new global arenas with international campuses, degrees, and partnerships.

We are a leader in designing innovative facilities for our students and faculty. And during the next four years you will see several new facilities open – beginning with the Ford Motor Company Environmental Science and Technology Building, which is our largest academic building, and continuing with Technology Square, which extends our campus across the expressway; the Klaus Advanced Computing Technology Building; the Biomedical Engineering Building; and a new student athletic complex that incorporates the Olympic swimming and diving pools.

You have chosen a university with a rich and wonderful history, and you have become a Georgia Tech Yellow Jacket at one of the most exciting times in all of
that history. So plunge in, get involved, and make the most of the next four years. I guarantee you’ll have the time of your life, and your life will never be the same.