REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH  
Faculty-Staff Retirement Dinner, May 23, 2006

Just last Saturday at the Georgia Dome not far from here I greeted 2000 new graduates from Georgia Tech. Very impressive numbers for a technologically focused institution. Those of you here tonight had a lot to do with the graduation of these bright and talented young people. In fact, many of you have been here long enough to experience a revolution you may not have noticed because it was so quiet. If you worked here for at least ten years you might be surprised to learn that we graduated as many Ph.D’s during this time as we did in the entire previous life of the Institute. If you worked here for twenty years, you might be surprised to know that at the undergraduate level, we produced as many graduates during this time as we did in the entire previous history of the Institute.

As an alumnus of Georgia Tech, I fall in what might be termed the historical part of these statistics. Sobering. But, I am glad to have been able to return here as president and to experience the dramatic changes that have seen Georgia Tech become an ever more respected institution. I am sure you feel the same about your time as an employee of Georgia Tech.

But working at a university is special in that you have more than a past to look back on. When you think about the remarkable number of talented young people all of us have helped educate, you realize your contributions are more about what is yet to come than anything related to the past.

Of course, as interesting as the numbers are, the real story is about the people. Just before graduation last Saturday, I received a moving letter from a young woman who emigrated to the U.S from China and who was to receive her Ph.D in aerospace engineering. This in itself was not remarkable, but she told me she was following in the footsteps of her two elder brothers, each of whom received their Ph.D’s from Georgia Tech in recent years. When I met with the family she told me it was her mother and father’s dream from their distant home in China to have their children educated at Georgia Tech. Their only regret was that their father had died and was not here to see this day, but they told me….their dream had come true. I dare to suggest that that is what your work was all about. Making dreams come true. And creating opportunity, helping young people see what is possible, improving life and offering hope – this is what our work was all about, but we often forget because it is continuously happening before our eyes.

Last Saturday among the many other stories at graduation, one began when I hugged my grandniece, DeAnna Clough, as she crossed the stage. She came to Tech from the Midwest to get a masters in one of our new programs our faculty and staff have created, Orthotics and Prosthetics, which is designed to use technology to help those who have lost limbs. This is one of a very small number of such programs, and DeAnna was thrilled with her experience as she looked forward to a life where she can help others. I met Bryan Swanagan, son of Jeff Swanagan, who is the Executive Director of the Georgia Aquarium. Bryan is a mathematics major who is going on to become a K-12 teacher, where he will fill a gap our nation faces as we try to educate young people in math skills. Another story of optimism and hope among the many present that
joyful day last week. These folks, and all of those who crossed the stage, represent that intangible “dream come true, opportunity created thing” behind the numbers.

We saw this tangibly expressed when hundreds of our students volunteered to spend a week helping victims of Katrina rather than go on a holiday break. We understood something special was happening when we learned that Georgia Tech and its partner, Emory University, won one of the nation’s first centers of excellence in the use of nanotechnology to fight cancer. We were proud to have won that competition, but this is really about creating new hope for cancer victims through research and technology, something Georgia Tech was able to do in earlier years.

While you were here, we watched as our science programs made dramatic improvement in their national rankings, something that pleased those of us who worked to plant the seeds for it. When it was announced that we now have the 41st most powerful computer in the world to facilitate research in developing ways to use the human genome to attack disease, we knew a milestone had been passed, particularly for our sciences. However, more important these developments in themselves, is the opportunity they represent for the rapidly growing numbers of our entering students who want to major in the sciences so they can realize their dreams.

While you were here, we created programs for undergraduate research so that 40 percent of our undergraduate students now participate in undergraduate research. But more important than the number itself, it speaks to providing opportunity. Such experiences have given students a chance to work in small groups with famous faculty members, giving them more reason to want to learn what else Tech has to offer and to stay here to graduate. When our graduation rate reached 76 percent this year, an all time high, this in turn is related to having opportunities like undergraduate research that enrich a student’s educational experience. And the higher graduation rate is about people too – specifically, those graduates from Tech who we might have lost in the past, but today receive diplomas and will be proud alumni.

I am sure like me, you share a sense of pride when you hear about the numbers for the new Georgia Tech that you have helped create, but most especially when you learn about the human dimensions behind them. These stories tell us that Georgia Tech is really an institution that can fulfill dreams.

During the course of your career at Georgia Tech you have contributed to this noble endeavor. While your work is coming to a close, the future is better for all you did, and the thousands of young people who received an education here will make the future better for all of humankind. I thank you on behalf of Georgia Tech and all of those you have helped on their way to their lives beyond our campus.