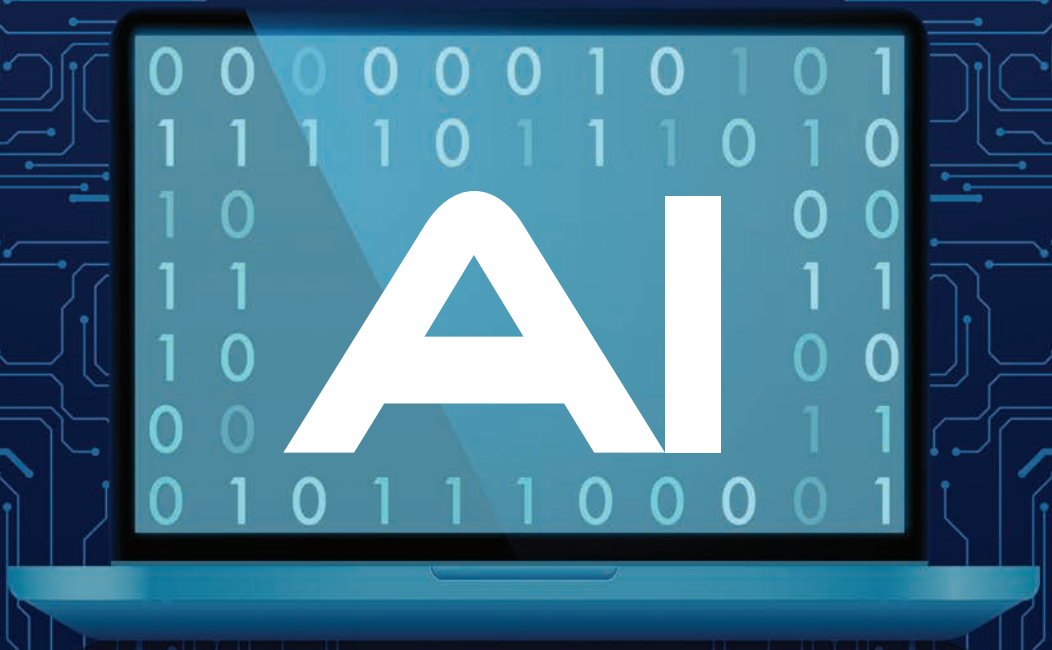
FLORIDA TECH

MAGAZINE

SPRING 2025

How we'll innovate at the speed of AI



PLUS:

THE PROFESSOR WHO CHANGED MY LIFE

BOARD LEADERS LISTEN FIRST

In This Issue

Spring 2025 • Volume 24, Issue 1

Panther Paddle

At the inaugural Panther Paddle event March 8, part of the university's 37 Hours of Giving, 13 teams harnessed their creativity and engineering skills to construct human-sized cardboard boats without using plastic, wood or plastic foam. Each comprising one captain/paddler and three boat builders, teams used squirt guns to slow each other down while captains steered their vessels across the Panther Aquatic Center pool.

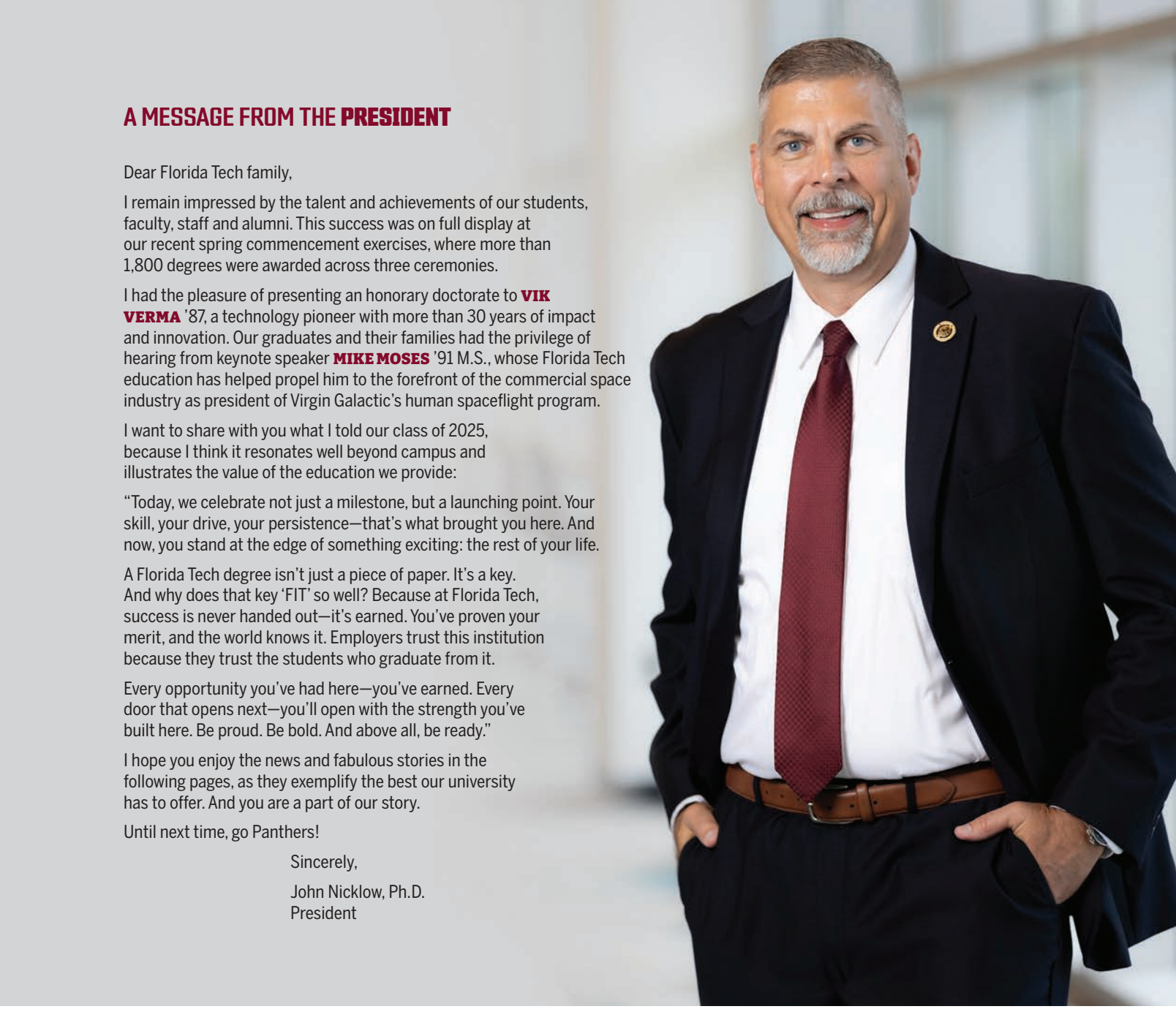
Money raised benefited NCAA Make-A-Wish America, Florida Tech's Scholar-Athlete Advisory Committee and the university's athletics department.

CAMPUS NEWS

ALUMNI NEWS

FEATURES

A MESSAGE FROM THE **PRESIDENT**



Dear Florida Tech family,

I remain impressed by the talent and achievements of our students, faculty, staff and alumni. This success was on full display at our recent spring commencement exercises, where more than 1,800 degrees were awarded across three ceremonies.

I had the pleasure of presenting an honorary doctorate to **VIK VERMA** '87, a technology pioneer with more than 30 years of impact and innovation. Our graduates and their families had the privilege of hearing from keynote speaker **MIKE MOSES** '91 M.S., whose Florida Tech education has helped propel him to the forefront of the commercial space industry as president of Virgin Galactic's human spaceflight program.

I want to share with you what I told our class of 2025, because I think it resonates well beyond campus and illustrates the value of the education we provide:

"Today, we celebrate not just a milestone, but a launching point. Your skill, your drive, your persistence—that's what brought you here. And now, you stand at the edge of something exciting: the rest of your life.

A Florida Tech degree isn't just a piece of paper. It's a key. And why does that key 'FIT' so well? Because at Florida Tech, success is never handed out—it's earned. You've proven your merit, and the world knows it. Employers trust this institution because they trust the students who graduate from it.

Every opportunity you've had here—you've earned. Every door that opens next—you'll open with the strength you've built here. Be proud. Be bold. And above all, be ready."

I hope you enjoy the news and fabulous stories in the following pages, as they exemplify the best our university has to offer. And you are a part of our story.

Until next time, go Panthers!

Sincerely,

John Nicklow, Ph.D.
President

FLORIDA TECH MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL DIRECTOR Andy McIlwraith

ART DIRECTOR Christena Callahan '07 M.S.

MANAGING EDITOR Karly Horn

ASSOCIATE EDITORS Trey Avant, Adam Lowenstein, Madeline Taylor

CONTRIBUTORS Erin Alvarado '16, Kevin Boodoosingh '20, '21 M.S., Jerry Durney, Christina Hardman, Darshan Pahinkar, Erin Peterson

PRODUCTION Kristie Kwong

WEB LAYOUT David Smith

CIRCULATION Daniel Blucker

PHOTOGRAPHY Dominic Agostini, Mike Brown, Adam Palumbo

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Alumni Office

VICE PRESIDENT, PHILANTHROPY
Cassie Pericak, 321-309-3124, *cpericak@fit.edu*

ASSISTANT VICE PRESIDENT, ALUMNI AFFAIRS
Gina Yates '17, '19, 321-674-8428, *gyates@fit.edu*

ALUMNI COMMUNICATIONS & CONTENT MANAGER
Erin Alvarado '16, 321-674-6141, *ealvarado@fit.edu*

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Expert Panel Discusses Future of Space Travel at Smith Distinguished Lecture Series


Joan Higginbotham


James "Jimmy" Jenkins


Lauren-Ann Graham


Winston Scott

A group of space industry figures gathered Feb. 20 for the F. Alan Smith Distinguished Lecture, offering insights into how space transportation has evolved since the Apollo era and where it's heading next.

The panel featured **JOAN HIGGINBOTHAM** '92 M.S., '96 M.S., **JAMES "JIMMY" JENKINS** '98 M.S., **LAUREN-ANN GRAHAM** '20, '23 M.S., and Winston Scott. The evening's master of ceremonies was veteran journalist John Zarrella, who covered spaceflight for CNN for nearly three decades.

Higginbotham, a former NASA astronaut and electrical engineer, shared insights from her 20-year career at the space agency. She reflected on the importance of developing advanced propulsion systems to reach distant planets suitable for human settlement.

"Propulsion is one of the biggest challenges as we try to go deeper into space. We need to travel faster," Higginbotham said. "Once we arrive, we're going to need some type of hydroponics or invest resources to dig up ice from the moon or Mars to separate it into hydrogen and oxygen, so we can have water and rocket fuel."

Graham is a mechanical test engineer at Lockheed Martin Corp. supporting NASA's Gateway program.

"Our goal is to establish a sustainable human presence on another planet, whether Mars or the moon. We're focused on getting humans there—and keeping them there," Graham said. "A lot of technology is being developed to address challenges like radiation exposure and the effects of long-term space travel on bone density."

Jenkins, a retired U.S. Army colonel with nearly 28 years of military service, now serves as president and general manager of the Armed Forces Portfolio at BlueHalo. He discussed the increasing role of autonomous operations in space.

"We're entering an era of autonomy, and we'll see autonomous operations in space expand faster than expected. This will help us improve human operations for long-term missions," Jenkins said.

Scott, a former NASA astronaut and retired U.S. Navy captain, reflected on the psychological and logistical challenges of deep space exploration.

"As we venture to Mars, we'll need a specific type of individual. While some thrive in low Earth orbit or lunar missions, Mars presents a three-year journey with a crew of just six people and the possibility of never returning," Scott said. "The key is selecting team members who can stay calm, work together and ensure mission success and survival."

> "Propulsion is one of the biggest challenges as we try to go deeper into space. We need to travel faster."
>
> —Joan Higginbotham

The lecture series' founder and benefactor is F. Alan Smith, who spent more than three decades in leadership positions at General Motors in the U.S. and Canada, including serving as executive vice president of finance of General Motors and president and general manager of General Motors of Canada Ltd.

SmartStride

A senior design team comprising biomedical, computer and software engineering students set out to address idiopathic toe walking (ITW), a condition that affects up to 24% of children who habitually walk on their toes and can trigger foot muscle weakness, knee instability and other long-term issues. The team's solution: SmartStride, a wearable rehabilitation device—in the form of a compression sock—equipped with sensors to track and transmit data to physicians, helping reduce in-person visits and improving accessibility, convenience and care outcomes.

The SmartStride team won the Best in Show Award for Biomedical Engineering at the 2025 Northrop Grumman Engineering and Science Student Design Showcase in April.

Historic Gathering of Skurla Award Winners at Florida Tech

For the first time in Florida Tech history, 15 recipients of the George M. Skurla Outstanding Alumni Award returned to campus for a single landmark event. The Skurla Award Winners Panel brought together some of the most accomplished College of Aeronautics graduates for a rare and inspiring discussion.

Representing nearly three decades of leadership across aviation and aerospace, the panelists shared personal stories from their careers, reflected on the impact of their Florida Tech education and offered career advice to the next generation of aviation professionals. Their collective presence marked the largest known gathering of Skurla Award winners on campus.

Each panelist brought a unique perspective shaped by years of experience in the field, providing students, faculty and fellow alumni with an opportunity to hear from industry leaders who have helped shape aviation around the world.

JUAN MORENO ’87 reflected on his journey: “Success is the journey. I started in El Salvador, came to the United States not knowing the language, learned it, got an education, knew I wanted to fly and faced the obstacle of figuring out how to make that happen. Now, looking back at what I’ve accomplished over the years, to me, that’s success.”

FIN BONSET ’96, ’99 MSA, emphasized the importance of relationships within the Florida Tech community: “The person sitting next to you might be your boss one day—might be a client someday. I got my first job because I was recommended by professor William Graves. Some of your professors were my students. That’s the beauty of Florida Tech—it’s tight-knit. Take advantage of that.”

HUNTLEY LAWRENCE ’85 spoke about the importance of career versatility and gaining experience: “You can continue to pursue other opportunities outside of being a pilot and find success—just be prepared to work a lot of jobs. There’s a wealth of opportunity in an airport.”

Many students stayed after the panel to ask questions and connect with alumni who once walked the same halls. This historic gathering highlighted the strength of Florida Tech’s alumni network and its lasting impact on the global aviation industry.

The event was the centerpiece of Florida Tech Aeronautics Week, a multiday celebration that also included student events, networking opportunities and a visit to the SUN ’n FUN Aerospace Expo in Lakeland, Florida.

Moderated by **MILO ZONKA** ’95, the panel featured:

1996 Skurla Winner
PARIS MICHAELS
’74 A.S., ’76, ’83 M.S.

2000 Skurla Winner
GREG ZAHORNACKY
’80 A.S., ’82

2008 Skurla Winner
DIEGO RINCON
’92

2009 Skurla Winner
JILL DEMKO
’98 A.S., ’99

2010 Skurla Winner
CLARA BENNETT
’91

2012 Skurla Winner
DAVID BYERS
’78, ’04 Ph.D.

2014 Skurla Winner
BILL JOHNSON
’76 A.S.

2015 Skurla Winner
GREG DONOVAN
’90 A.S., ’91

2016 Skurla Winner
FIN BONSET
’96, ’99 MSA

2017 Skurla Winner
HUNTLEY LAWRENCE
’85

2018 Skurla Winner
MIGUEL ESTREMERA
’98

2019 Skurla Winner
JASON TERRERI
’01

2022 Skurla Winner
JUAN MORENO
’87

2023 Skurla Winner
JILL EANES
’91, ’93 MBA

2024 Skurla Winner
DAVE MECARTNEY
’80, ’82

WISE Women Honored at Florida Tech Event

To honor Women's History Month, the Florida Tech Alumni Association hosted the 2025 Women Inspiring Success and Excellence (WISE) Awards Luncheon March 13.

Inspired by **JOAN BIXBY** '75 M.S., former university administrator, the awards recognize four individuals who exemplify leadership, mentorship and the advancement of women within the Florida Tech community. Each year, a student, alumna, staff member and faculty member are chosen for this distinction.

ALUMNA LEGACY AWARD

Melissa Steinman '06

High school science teacher; president of the Oregon Society of Women in Marine Science

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?
"Sometimes, anxiety can be a catalyst for action."

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF IN YOUR JOURNEY?
"I am most proud of the ecosystem of people that are around me. I have invested significant time and energy in the development of many people, but I do that knowing how many people have made a similar investment in me."

FACULTY EXCELLENCE AWARD

Jessica Smeltz

Associate professor and interim department head, chemistry and chemical engineering department

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?
"You don't have to have everything figured out right now."

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF IN YOUR JOURNEY?
"What I am most proud of in my journey is always staying true to myself. Authenticity has allowed me to form meaningful connections with my colleagues, mentor students with honesty and empathy and lead with a sense of passion and purpose."

JOAN BIXBY STAFF IMPACT AWARD

Jessica Cartagena Assam

Assistant director of sponsor relations, Office of Advancement

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?
"Give and expect nothing in return."

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF IN YOUR JOURNEY?
"I'm most proud of balancing my professional success with community involvement and of the legacy I'm building through my children. I take great pride in empowering others and creating a lasting impact through my work with Florida Tech and local organizations."

STUDENT CATALYST AWARD

Ameerah Alsulami

Ph.D. candidate in computer science; president, Association for Computing Machinery Florida Tech Chapter

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?
"You don't have to have everything figured out today. Just take the next step."

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF IN YOUR JOURNEY?
"I am proud of the times I have helped someone believe in themselves. If even one person saw a new possibility for themselves because of something I did, then that is enough."

New Site at PSFB

Florida Tech is opening a new instructional location at Patrick Space Force Base (PSFB) in June, expanding access to graduate education for military personnel, civilian employees and working professionals on the Space Coast.

The PSFB site will offer four of Florida Tech's most in-demand master's programs: an MBA, the M.S. in acquisition and contract management, the M.S. in space systems and the M.S. in space systems management. Each program is designed for working professionals looking to lead in sectors vital to aerospace advancement, homeland security and economic innovation.

Courses will be taught in eight-week, hybrid terms through a combination of online and classroom instruction, which will be on base in its Education and Training Center.

Florida Tech's site at PSFB reflects a shared commitment to preparing leaders for the complex challenges of tomorrow—on Earth and beyond. Together, Florida Tech and Patrick SFB are uniquely positioned to support those who serve and to fuel the industries most critical to our national prosperity.

Learn more: floridatech.edu/patricksfb

FAMILIAR FACES:

Jacqueline Zappala

A SERIES CATCHING UP WITH THE CAMPUS FIGURES WHO MADE YOUR TIME AT FLORIDA TECH MEMORABLE

> "I love nearly everything about my job, especially the teamwork and cross-department collaboration."
>
> —Jacqueline Zappala

JACQUELINE ZAPPALA '14 M.Ed., '17 Ed.S., started her Florida Tech journey as a graduate student in the science education program. Over the past 12 years, she has built a career rooted in student engagement, mentorship and campus life. Today, as director of Residence Life, Zappala plays a key role in shaping student experiences, fostering a strong sense of community and supporting student-led initiatives that drive change.

How long have you worked at Florida Tech? What's the secret to that kind of longevity?

I've been at Florida Tech for 12 years, starting as a student. What keeps me here is my love for the campus, the students and the incredible people I work with in Residence Life. The dynamic environment and ongoing learning opportunities make every day exciting and new.

How have you seen Florida Tech and our students evolve throughout the years?

I've witnessed Florida Tech's growth driven by student-led initiatives, improving processes and campus life. The student-driven approach to problem-solving and innovation has been the biggest evolution, and I look forward to seeing continued growth.

What role does interacting with the campus community play in keeping your job fresh and exciting?

Working in Residence Life offers cyclical challenges, but new staff and their innovative programming ideas keep my role fresh and exciting. Engaging with events in the halls and seeing teams bring creative solutions keeps my job lively.

What do you love about your job?

I love nearly everything about my job, especially the teamwork and cross-department collaboration. Even on challenging days, knowing I've made a difference makes it all worthwhile.

What makes Florida Tech a unique/great place to work?

The blend of creativity among staff, students and faculty within the scientifically driven atmosphere makes Florida Tech a unique and fantastic place to work.

How would you describe your relationship with the students? Are there any student success stories that resonate with you?

My closest connections are with the ResLife staff. Working on projects and sharing laughs creates lasting memories and bonds. It's always special when alumni reach out to share their successes and life updates, reinforcing the lasting impact of their time at Florida Tech.

How have you seen the university (and/or your department) grow/change over the years?

The campus is always evolving, driven by our students' continuous push for innovation. We're particularly excited about the groundbreaking ceremony for our newest residence hall. The design incorporates intentional programming and communal spaces, aligning with our vision for enhancing student life.

Animal Behavior and Cognition Bachelor's Coming This Fall

Florida Tech's new Bachelor of Science in Animal Behavior and Cognition will be available to psychology students starting this fall, making the university one of just 10 schools in the nation to offer the degree. It combines psychology, ethology and behavioral ecology to uncover how animals perceive, learn, make decisions and solve problems. The program will give students the essential hands-on experience needed to pursue graduate school and animal-focused careers.

Read more: link.fit.edu/abc-bs

Breaking Barriers: Honoring MLK and Local Community Leaders

On Jan. 21, Florida Tech welcomed nearly 200 guests to its annual commemoration honoring the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his legacy.

The event kicked off with the Breaking Barriers Cocktail Reception at Evans Library, home to the powerful "Breaking Barriers" mural featuring Julius Montgomery, the first African American student to enroll at Florida Tech and the first African American professional to work for the United States' nascent space program. After the reception, attendees walked over to Gleason Performing Arts Center for the commemoration.

Proceedings included retired 1st Sgt. Leonard D. Ross' live rendition of King's "I Have a Dream" speech, as well as musical performances, powerful speakers and an awards ceremony to recognize two outstanding community members.

The Rev. Lorenzo Laws received the Dr. Julius Montgomery Pioneer Award and **ALBINO "BINO" CAMPANINI** '90, '92 MBA, received the Rev. Harvey L. Riley Bridge Builder Award for their community contributions.

From left: Lorenzo Laws, Dr. Julius Montgomery Pioneer Award recipient; Michael Cadore, Rockledge city councilman and executive director of community engagement for external affairs at Eastern Florida State College; Bino Campanini, the Rev. Harvey L. Riley Bridge Builder Award recipient; Kendall Moore, Florida Tech trustee; Leonard Ross, King speech orator

The keynote address by the Rev. Steve Brock emphasized King's selflessness and call to stand up "for the least, the lost, the left behind, the looked over," reminding all that "true progress requires consistent effort, unwavering determination."

Ground Broken, Excitement Builds

President John Nicklow, students, faculty, staff and community leaders gathered at Southgate Intramural Field April 11 to celebrate a milestone in Florida Tech's growth and commitment to student success: the official groundbreaking of the university's newest on-campus housing complex that will increase available campus housing by 27% and is expected to be completed in August 2026.

"Motivated by the young people who will live in this impressive structure-to-be," Nicklow said at the event, "we will ensure they also continue to receive a renowned Florida Tech education in between spending time in these cool rooms and spaces."

Watch our progress live: floridatech.edu/newhousing

A Season of Firsts

Panther Volleyball Celebrates a Historic Season

By Jerry Durney

Watch enough college sports, and you'll start to recognize the familiar story of scholar-athletes who chose a program because of its fabled history—Alabama football, North Carolina men's basketball, UConn women's basketball, LSU baseball, etc.

What gets less attention is the allure of making that history. But ask members of the 2024 Florida Tech volleyball team, and they can tell you all about it.

In its more than four-decade history, the Panthers have never lacked talent, as a quick look through the record books will tell you—**KARI WANAT** '00, **ALYS THOMAS** '04, **NATALIA ACEVEDO** '04, **ANGIE LASSMAN** '12, '14 M.S., and many other greats have worn the Crimson and Gray.

To become an elite program, the hurdle Florida Tech scholar-athletes must clear is navigating the challenging Sunshine State Conference (SSC). The SSC has produced eight national champions in volleyball and has been represented at the Elite Eight every year since 1993.

"Coming here, I knew it would be hard," says junior libero Kari Voelstad Bogen. "But part of why I wanted to come here was to help build that legacy and build that winning culture. It's been a really fun challenge."

Following a 9-21 record in 2023, head coach Jordan Willis entered his second season seeking progress in whatever form it took.

"I'm all about one win better than the year before," Willis says. "If I'm being honest, I didn't know what was possible with this group. Would I have imagined everything that's transpired? No, because I was just trying to get us to be one win better than last year."

"Honestly, I had no idea, because we were getting five new players," says sophomore outside hitter Cordelia Kearns. "I was just hoping we'd figure it out, but I had no idea what would happen."

The Panthers emerged from nonconference play in mid-September with a 6-3 record that included the team's first win over a nationally ranked opponent in almost a decade.

Still, the question remained: Could they keep it up against a grueling SSC schedule?

The first sign that things were truly different came Oct. 4, 2024. When facing match point down two sets to none against eventual national champion Lynn University, Florida Tech rallied to win a five-set thriller. That comeback ignited a 10-game winning streak bookended by another five-set win over Lynn and, arguably, the most significant moment in program history.

The season's defining moment happened Oct. 25, 2024, when the fourth-ranked University of Tampa rolled up to the Clemente Center. Sure, you could talk about the Spartans' seven national championships, 29 SSC championships or 84 All-Americans, but when the Panthers play the Spartans, the only number that matters is zero—as in 93 games played, zero Spartan losses.

After Florida Tech took the opening set, Tampa rallied to take the next two and put the Crimson and Gray on the ropes. Backed by a spirited home crowd eager to see history, the Panthers closed the fourth set on a 9-1 run to force a tiebreaking fifth.

This is where all the lessons they had learned and all the physical and mental strength they had built would be put to the test—and the Panthers passed.

In the set that becomes a sprint to 15 points instead of the standard 25, Florida Tech never trailed. The Panthers won, and a crowd of boisterous and emotional fans took to the floor to celebrate.

As the scene unfolded around him, the weight of what his team had accomplished hit Willis.

"When we're moving fans to tears because we won a game, that's crazy," Willis says. "That's how much that meant. I don't know if I've ever had that in a regular-season game. … They were so happy and excited for us—it's amazing."

"It was absolutely amazing for me; I had never experienced something like that," says graduate student middle blocker Chiara Patelli. "I had some really important games back in Italy, but the atmosphere in the gym this season was crazy. … When you're on the court with that atmosphere, you feel great, and you think, 'Okay, I have to show them what we can do.'"

The ultimate reward came Nov. 25, 2024, when, for the first time in program history, the Panthers were called to go to the NCAA Tournament.

While Florida Tech's magical season would end in a competitive four-set loss to Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in the first round, it did not diminish what they had accomplished over the previous three months. Every past Panther has dreamt of ranking among the nation's 64 best teams and playing past Thanksgiving—and they had done it.

> "Part of why I wanted to come here was to help build that legacy and build that winning culture."
>
> —Junior libero Kari Voelstad Bogen

Following the season, the honors rolled in. Kearns and Patelli were named the first American Volleyball Coaches Association (AVCA) All-Americans in program history, with Kearns named to the First Team (the third player in program history) and Patelli earning Honorable Mention. The duo, along with Bogen, were named to the All-SSC Team, marking the first time since 2003 Florida Tech had three players named all-conference.

The Panthers' success was not limited to the court. The team recorded a combined 3.595 GPA, the highest of any women's team at Florida Tech and second highest of the entire athletic department. Seven players posted a perfect 4.0 GPA, while Bogen, Patelli, setter Jeanne Hassoun and outside hitter Antia Vallecas Rodriguez were named to the College Sports Communicators (CSC) Academic All-District Team.

Patelli has found her two years in Melbourne rewarding.

"During practices, I could see the progress we were making. So, when we reached all these goals and set new records this season, it was a huge satisfaction for me because I came here without expecting anything and accomplished a lot," she says. "Also, getting to be a part of a team that did something that hadn't been done before within the program—I don't even know how to describe it, but I'm really proud of it."

As the 2025 season nears, unbridled optimism that the 2024 season was the genesis of the program they want to become is strong among players and staff.

"I definitely want to go back," Voelstad Bogen says. "It's super motivating to keep working because obviously the job's not done yet."

DARSHAN PAHINKAR

Heat to Run a Refrigerator? Heat-driven Systems in the Current Landscape

One of the most significant engineering and societal challenges of today is the continued availability of clean energy with minimal environmental penalties. The current energy landscape is dominated by fossil fuel combustion, which releases waste heat and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This leads to significant environmental consequences that are worsening each year.

Heat-driven energy systems have the potential to address these concerns effectively and offer additional advantages, such as durability, flexibility and energy-efficiency. Funded by the U.S. Department of Energy and National Science Foundation, my Adsorption and Energy Technology Laboratory at Florida Tech focuses on designing and demonstrating a portfolio of these heat-driven energy conversion and storage systems.

The central theme in my research is an energy transport phenomenon called "adsorption." It's a process of preferential attraction in which low-density gaseous molecules, such as those making up carbon dioxide (CO2), cling at a high density onto a solid surface. This phenomenon can be controlled by either the temperature of the solid or the pressure of the gas. The existing embodiments of these adsorption systems, however, suffer in performance and scalability. They use easy-to-fabricate packed adsorbent beds (like silica gel sachets in medicine jars), that limit heat and mass transport.

These two issues can be solved using adsorbent-coated channels, which provide excellent heat and mass transfer characteristics. Such designs eliminate the flow resistance because dedicated flow passages and thin adsorbent layers result in rapid heat and mass exchange, unlike in clunkier adsorbent blocks.

I have demonstrated that this geometry can improve the adsorption-based CO2 separation system capacity by up to two orders of magnitude while maintaining the purity, recovery factors and energy requirement of existing systems. Analogous design can also make very compact heat-driven refrigeration, cooling and heat storage systems.

"The central theme in my research is an energy transport phenomenon called 'adsorption.' It's a process of preferential attraction in which low-density gaseous molecules, such as those making up carbon dioxide (CO2), cling at a high density onto a solid surface."

Darshan Pahinkar
assistant professor, mechanical engineering

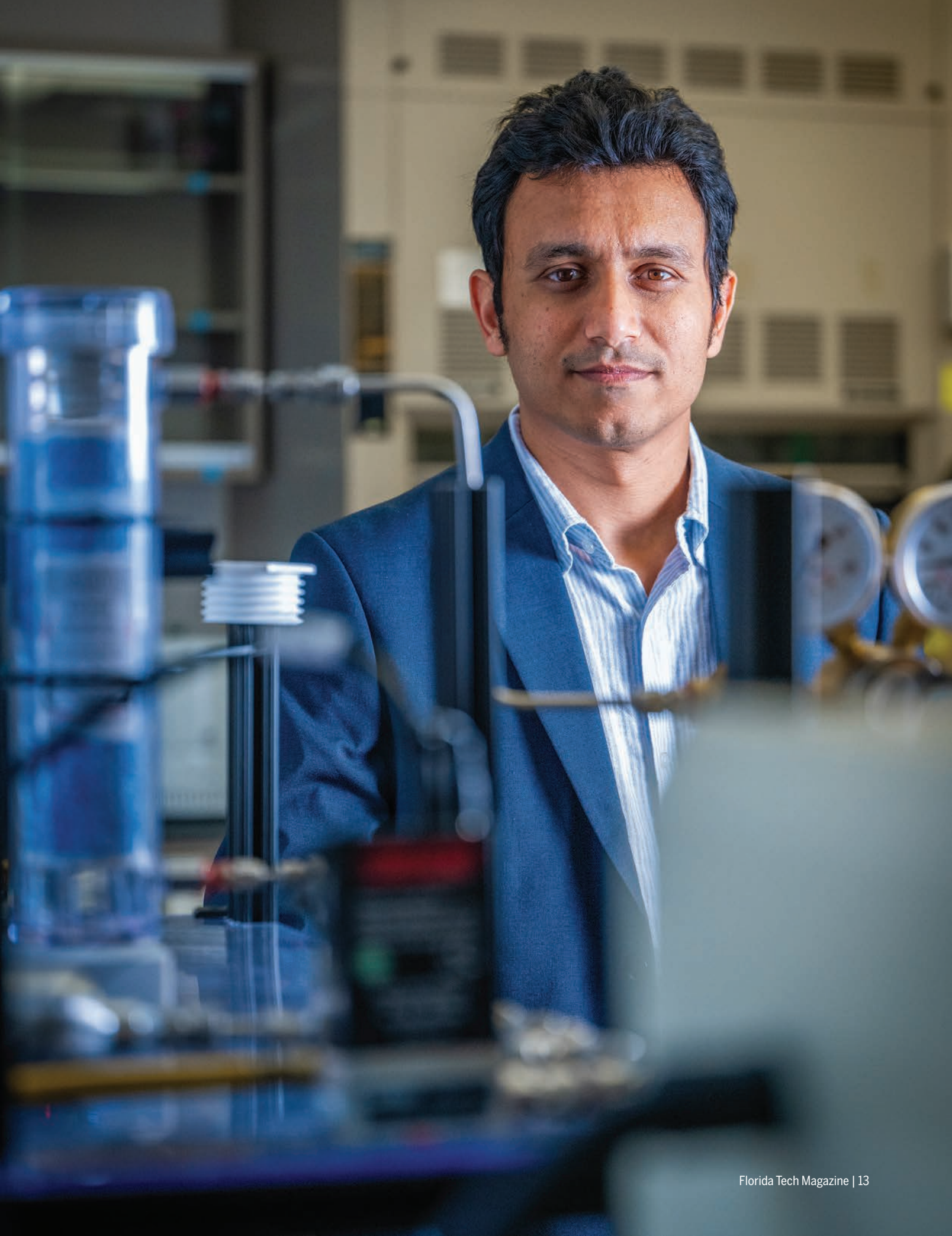
Thin and porous adsorbent coatings are required to materialize these designs. Our lab has created a portfolio of adsorbent coating techniques that are well-calibrated for void volumes, gas uptake (water and CO2), strength and durability. These techniques, including dipcoating, capillary insertion, photopolymer resin curing and yeast engineering, are diverse in terms of approach.

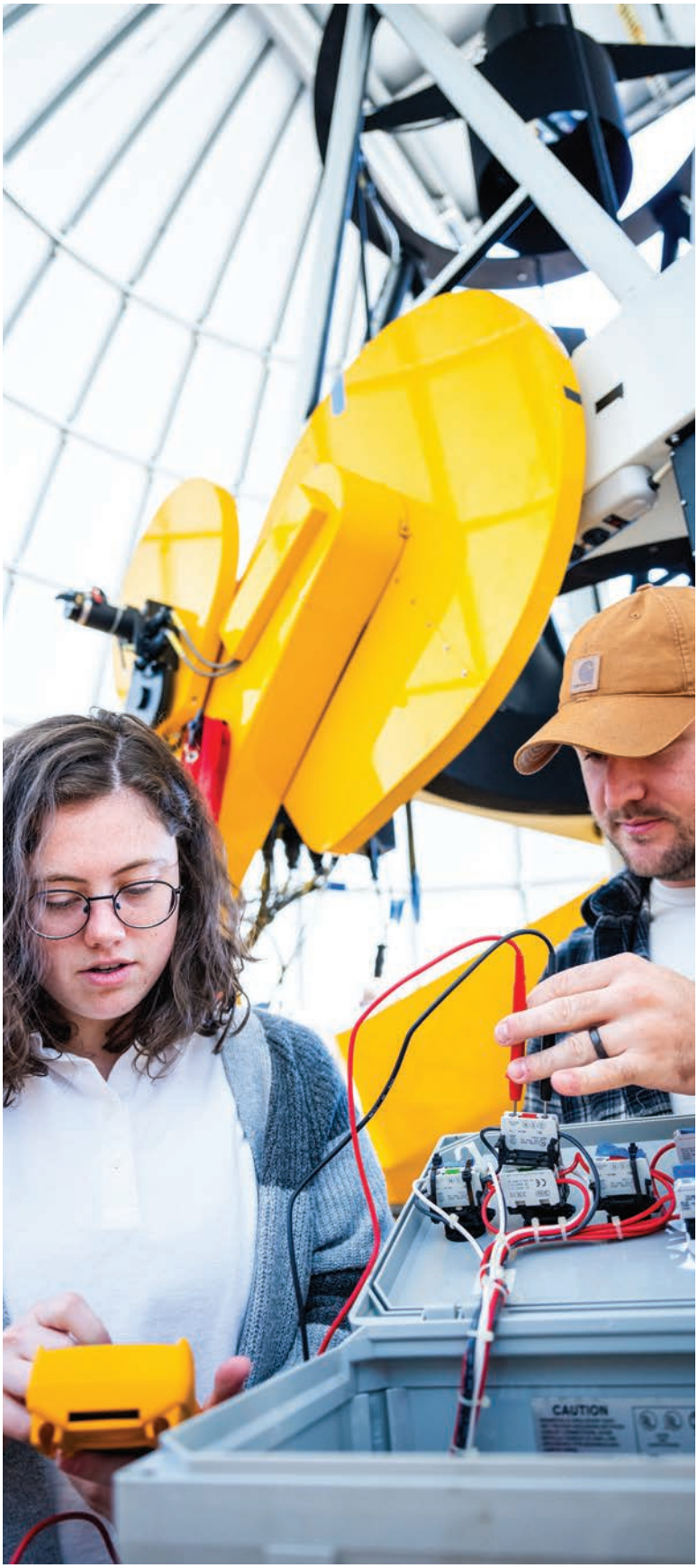
We are also studying the rheology of these complex adsorbent slurries for further refining these manufacturing techniques. These techniques have yielded excellent results in creating spongy and robust adsorbent coatings on the walls of channels. We are also involved in engineering the surface of these coatings to make them hydrophobic for seamless interactions with liquid water.

Our lab has incorporated these techniques to explore removal of carbon dioxide from post-combustion and industrial gaseous waste in an energy-efficient and spatially competitive manner. We have also demonstrated a cooling system that uses resin-cured adsorbent coatings. This system uses heat to circulate refrigerant water in one minute and provide cooling for more than five minutes without using any electricity. This cooling system can be highly competitive in the mainstream HVAC landscape.

With an interdisciplinary approach involving materials, chemical and mechanical engineering, we hope to generate decentralized solutions to mitigate environmental concerns.

Darshan G. Pahinkar is an assistant professor in the mechanical and civil engineering department. He is the director of the Adsorption and Energy Technology Laboratory, and his research is focused on devising heat-driven energy systems.





Reopening a Window to Space

Florida Tech Students and Faculty Carry Out Interdisciplinary Mission to Refurbish Ortega Telescope

Luis Quiroga-Nuñez, director of Florida Tech's Ortega Observatory, is on a mission to refurbish the observatory's primary tenant—a nonfunctioning 32-inch telescope.

The aging telescope, commissioned in 2008, has sat dormant for the last several years. With restoration, the telescope could serve as a powerful tool to train students to use professional telescopes and make observations—critical skills that will help prepare them for their future careers.

Quiroga-Nuñez and engineering instructor Lee Caraway recruited students from areas such as astronomy, electrical engineering and computer science to help with the reverse engineering project, which offers unique, hands-on-learning opportunities, Quiroga-Nuñez said.

"This is like a big Lego for them," he said. "They are learning the process, and the students, I think, will have found a very valuable life experience."

In spring 2024, the telescope moved for the first time in years. Here's how they made it happen.

NEW COMPUTER: Before the telescope could even run, students built and programmed their own computer to replace the previous outdated computer.

NEW MOTORS: MARISA GUERRA '24 developed a blueprint to replace the telescope's old, 40-pound motors using knowledge from her senior design project—a robotic arm. The motors now weigh 2 pounds.

NEW COMMUNICATION SYSTEM: ADRIANNA AGUSTIN '24 spent her senior design project researching internal circuit systems and simplified the telescope's chaotic system, which dated back to the '80s, from 20 wires to two.

Next, they're tackling high astrometric precision—a crucial element of properly tracking movement in space. Perfecting precise movement is expected to take some time, which isn't a bad thing, Quiroga-Nuñez said; it gives even more students a chance to get involved.

Read more: link.fit.edu/telescope-refurbishment

The Monkey Model

Hormone Supplementation in Rhesus Monkeys Points to Potential Autism Treatment

For years, Florida Tech's Catherine Talbot, assistant professor of psychology, has worked to understand the sociality of male rhesus monkeys and how low-social monkeys can serve as a model for humans with autism. Her most recent findings, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences*, show that replenishing a deficient hormone helped the monkeys become more social without increasing their aggression—a discovery that could change autism treatment.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that one in 36 children in the United States is affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD). That's an increase from one in 44 children reported in 2018. Two FDA-approved treatments currently exist, Talbot said, but they only address associated symptoms—not the root of ASD.

Vasopressin is a hormone that is known to contribute to mammalian social behavior. Talbot's research group previously found that vasopressin levels are lower in their low-social rhesus monkey model, as well as in a select group of people with ASD.

In her recent research paper, "Nebulized vasopressin penetrates CSF [cerebral spinal fluid] and improves social cognition without inducing aggression in a rhesus monkey model of autism," Talbot and researchers with Stanford University, the University of California, Davis, and the California National Primate Research Center explored how rhesus monkeys respond to the hormone.

They administered vasopressin through a nebulizer, which the monkeys could opt into. For a few minutes each week, the monkeys voluntarily held their face up to the nebulizer to receive their dose while sipping on white grape juice—a favorite among the monkeys, Talbot said.

They found that normally low-social monkeys began reciprocating affiliative, prosocial behaviors but not aggression. The treatment was successful—vasopressin selectively improved the social cognition of these low-social monkeys.

"It may be that individuals with the lowest levels of vasopressin may benefit the most from it," Talbot said. "That is the step forward toward precision medicine that we now need to study."

Read more:
link.fit.edu/monkey-model

Research Seeks to Improve Rainfall Prediction Accuracy

Pallav Ray, associate professor of ocean engineering and marine sciences, is helping refine climate models with research inspired by his childhood in India's hot climate.

His latest paper, "Rain-Induced Surface Sensible Heat Flux Reduces Monsoonal Rainfall Over India," was published in *Geophysical Research Letters* and highlights a key variable that is often overlooked in climate models but could improve the accuracy of rainfall predictions.

Ray's research, funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, introduces the variable Qp, representing precipitation-induced sensible heat flux, which is a component of surface energy that influences precipitation. It essentially accounts for how precipitation cools land surface temperatures.

This variable is important, Ray explained, because the temperature of raindrops is typically cooler than the temperature of the surface, so when it rains, the surface cools down.

In testing Qp, Ray and his team of researchers ran simulations investigating the variable's role on precipitation. They found that when incorporating it, not only is anticipated precipitation reduced by up to 5%—which he said is a significant reduction—but the models also reflect changes in the spatial distribution of precipitation.

Ray's results generated predictions that were much closer to observed rainfall in India. He said that inclusion of this variable in common climate models could influence India's regional agriculture and irrigation strategies.

Read more:
link.fit.edu/rainfall-research

Prime is a quantity.
Unique, a product unachievable by any two other numbers. *2, 3, 13 ...*

Prime is a quality.
Excellent, of the highest caliber. *Outstanding, Choice, Top-Notch ...*

In both quantity and quality, this column features Prime Examples of what makes us Florida Tech.

PRIME EXAMPLES *of* TEAMWORK

Teamwork is done by a group acting together toward a common goal—winning a game, acing a class project, saving the world. Meant to boost efficacy, working as a team might not always be the easy way. It requires communication, cooperation, synergy. But while simultaneous individual contributions often will, in fact, improve efficiency, a team is almost always greater than the sum of its parts. The magic of teamwork is in its byproducts: perspective, interaction, relationship.

Panthers are team players, and at Florida Tech, we are teeming with teamwork: opportunities to learn, serve, grow—together.

Here are a few prime examples.

2 PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERSHIPS

CA Wildfire Aid

On Feb. 7, College of Aeronautics students Diego Teixeira and Blaise Pasquier departed for Los Angeles to deliver aid to victims of the wildfires that raged across the area most of January, claiming 30 lives and destroying thousands of homes and buildings. Teixeira and Pasquier transported and delivered 800 pounds of clothes and essential goods to the ImpactLA nonprofit, spending a total 13 hours in flight. With the $2,000 they had left, the students took two families who had lost their homes in the fire shopping.

Read more: link.fit.edu/wildfire

Dominican Republic Service Trip

Five College of Engineering and Science students, accompanied by the Rev. Randall Meissen, Florida Tech chaplain and Campus Catholic Ministry director, spent part of their winter break on a humanitarian service trip to the central mountainous region of the Dominican Republic. In the rural village of Los Guayuyos, sophomores Bailey Astor, Elias Orellana and Matt Barfield and first-year students Jacob Ewasko and Aydyn Jones joined with local community members Jan. 5–11 to install a sustainable, low-maintenance, gravity-fed water system designed to provide clean water to the village. The project's approach centered on community involvement and awareness to ensure the water system could be easily maintained and repaired by village residents while also seeking to instill a sense of ownership and solidarity among them.

Read more: link.fit.edu/dr-service

13 COMPETITORS

As part of Florida Tech's 37 Hours of Giving, 13 teams participated in the inaugural Panther Paddle March 8, racing cardboard boats across the pool at Panther Aquatic Center while rival teams sabotaged them with squirt guns. Winning teams received awards for first through third place, as well as Best Design, which took into account boat construction, theme, name and creativity.

1 S.S. Kiss – First Place
Liana Van Woesik, Steven Holmberg and Anna Grimm

2 Will is the Way – Second Place; Best Design
Lexi Lueger, Kari Voelstad Bogen, Jeanne Hassoun and Tessa Mati representing Panther volleyball

3 Freeling Lucky – Third Place
Representing women's soccer: Katie Ormerod, Emme Henkel, Sofia Posner and Lyneth Restrepo

4 Hull Yeah
Nihaara Sawhney, Jackson Moxley, Juan Salazar Zurita, Susan Nelson

5 Ship Happens
Kendra Tiger, John Fonseca, Jennavive Nelson, Gabrielle Yeager

6 The Water Panthers
Representing men's/women's swimming: Matteo Caruso, Joshua Cajust, Mo Olhasso, Landon Best

7 She-Hulk
Grace Gamage, Dr. Amanda Moske

8 FIT WBB
Nadine Johnson, Dalma Ehmann, Lana Ammash, Kyandra Poitier

9 YAY-SME
Carys Daly, Karissa Hawk, Isaac Weisbroad, Brandon Byrne

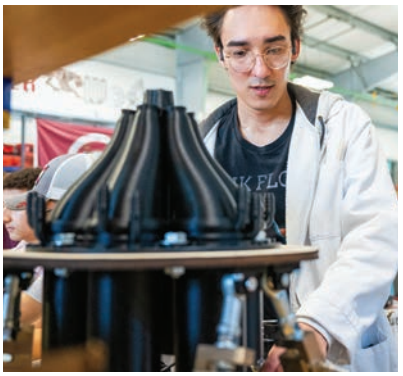
10 USS Brad
George Nehma, Niall Harris, Shane Hall

11 Holy Grail
Ryan Walker, Clayton Wiseman, Sam Newton

12 Sea Ya Later
Bella Mendoza, Chloe Caldrich, Nick Santamaria, Johann Vennick

13 No Race Scheduled
Mary Penny, Lily Penny, Vincent Wright, Carys Napier

3 SENIOR DESIGN PROJECTS

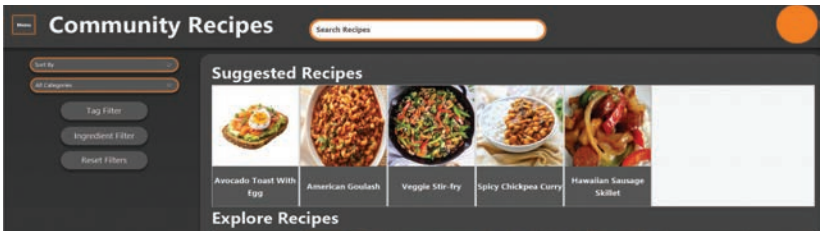


PROJECT VULCAN

TEAM MEMBERS: Timur Bedelbaev, Braden Hartlieb, Micéle Leita, Matthew Poirier, Jorge Sanchez, Abigail Smith, Joshua Spectre, Cam'Ron Valliere, Victor Z

Aerospace, Physics and Space Sciences

Winner of the President's Cup, this team created a proof-of-concept metal 3D-printed clustered chambered aerospike engine featuring an integrated Liquid-Injected Thrust Vector Control (LITVC). Developed with Vaya Space and its Dauntless vehicle, this innovation supports sustainable, affordable space access for small satellite launches.



KITCHENSYNC

TEAM MEMBERS: Chris Nederhoed, Tyler Son, David Tran

Electrical Engineering and Computer Science

This team created KitchenSync, a smart pantry and meal-planning desktop application for inventory management, recipe discovery and meal planning. Designed for home cooks, busy families and students, the app offers seamless inventory tracking with manual entry, barcode scans or receipt uploads; organization by location and custom tags; comprehensive recipe management for creating, storing and sharing recipes, nutrition data and flavor pairing; intelligent meal planning and "What Can I Cook Now?" functions based on real-time inventory; and more.

PROJECT B.E. D.R.I.P.

TEAM MEMBERS: Elizabeth Arrajj, Elijah Doan, Marguerite Fidd, Parker Hathaway, Gabriel Kuntz, Lindsey Shapiro, Callie Siering

Mechanical and Civil Engineering

Winner of Best in Show for Civil Engineering and Construction Management, this team installed sensors and cameras to gather data on flooding issues and erosion control problems in the Joy and Gordon Patterson Botanical Garden. Members have proposed civil engineering and construction solutions, including a living shoreline and rain garden, to minimize the need for hard infrastructure and costly maintenance. Professor Gordon Patterson, one-half of the garden's namesake, donated $1,000 of the royalties from his book, *Missiles, Mischief And Mayhem: The Secret History of Florida Tech*, to help fund the project.

See all of this year's senior design projects: floridatech.edu/student-design-showcase

Listen First

Florida Tech's board of trustees welcomes new leadership committed to building upon the campus engagement that has shaped the past five transformative years.

By Karly Horn

When **TRAVIS PROCTOR** '98 was elected chairman of the Florida Tech board of trustees, the university was in pretty good shape. Enrollment was solid, the institution was financially healthy and people basically told him, "Just don't mess anything up."

Simple enough, he thought.

That was January 2020. Two months later, the world shut down.

COVID-19 was sweeping the country. Businesses locked their doors, college campuses went on lockdown and Florida Tech, along with every other university in the nation, had to figure out how to survive as an institution without compromising the health and safety of its students, faculty and staff.

It was not exactly what Proctor had signed up for. But it was the start of a historic, profoundly transformative five years for the board of trustees, the university community and higher education as a whole.

With Proctor at the helm, Florida Tech navigated a global pandemic, rapid leadership change—including the hiring of a new university president—and the subsequent strategic and master planning processes with a speed, unpredictability and fluctuation that Proctor can only describe as a roller coaster.

"I love roller coasters," Proctor says. "There are parts of them that are exhilarating; there are parts where you're hanging on for dear life, a little bit afraid; and—at least for me—at the end, there is that feeling of, 'That was an awesome ride. Let's do it again!'"

Proctor's term has come to an end, and on Feb. 27, the board elected Kirsten Dreggors as its new chair. Dreggors, a Northrop Grumman vice president and the board's first woman chair, served as vice chair for most of Proctor's term and, he says, is equally responsible for the university's continued growth and success.

"I'm excited to bring a diverse perspective to this role. I am honored and eager to build upon the remarkable work and strong foundation laid by my predecessors," Dreggors says. "It's a great opportunity, and I think everyone on the board is really excited about what's ahead for us."

Together, the two have provided stable leadership through a great deal of change at Florida Tech. Now, they reflect on the last five years and draw from both their shared and unique experiences, along with the rest of the board and university leadership, to chart a path of continued progress at Florida Tech.

Engagement to Action

You wouldn't know it, but Travis Proctor is an introvert and a self-proclaimed "geek" who finds public speaking "incredibly intimidating."

So, when he first came to Florida Tech in 1994 as a computer science freshman from Colorado, taking on any sort of prominent leadership role was not something he had seriously considered.

"I was the behind-the-scenes kind of person for sure," Proctor says. "So, being out front is not something that I would have normally done."

But stronger than his reservations were his drive and entrepreneurial spirit.

Proctor, who came to Florida Tech for its business-heavy computer science program—a rarity in the '90s, he says—became involved in the Student Government Association (SGA) early on and was eventually elected student body president.

"Being engaged in student government and student activities added a depth to my student experience that I really enjoyed," Proctor says. "And that was my first exposure to the board of trustees, really—speaking to and interacting with board members who, at the time, felt like these scary, important figures who were making all the critical decisions for the university. But ultimately, I was able to actually connect with some folks."

His sophomore year, Proctor founded Artemis IT, a small information technology management and consulting company whose first full-time employee was **TERESA HO** '95, '98 MBA, then his Florida Tech classmate and 13 years later, his wife. When they graduated, the two worked full time on the business, which today, is a thriving company that serves clients throughout Central Florida and was named the Melbourne Regional Chamber of Commerce's 2019 Business of the Year.

He continued to be involved with the university, mostly through philanthropic endeavors, such as the Florida Tech Sporting Affair, which he served as chair for about 10 years, and was eventually approached about joining the board.

"It was certainly because of my time at SGA, but really my affinity for Florida Tech as a student, that I humbly and very excitedly accepted the invitation to join the board," Proctor says. "It's a big responsibility, but there is that feeling that you are having an impact on and enhancing an institution that you already love—it's fulfilling to be engaged at that level."

continued on page 20

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And when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in those early days of his chairmanship, engagement, he found, was key.

At a time of ample what-ifs and minimal answers, Proctor recalls, the Florida Tech community banded together in a way he hadn't seen before. The board and executive leadership decided pretty quickly to keep campus at least partially open. And everyone—students printing face shields and other necessities; faculty reformatting their lessons to virtual and hybrid models; IT putting systems in place to do so; facilities implementing "social distancing" and other safety measures across campus; university communications and leadership working to do it all with a new level of transparency—rallied.

"I'm really proud of how the institution responded—how everyone engaged to figure out, 'How do we ensure we deliver on our mission to provide quality education to students?'" Proctor says. "I think it actually allowed Florida Tech to have some growth a couple years during COVID, when most institutions were shrinking."

In fact, at a time when similar institutions—private, nonprofit, four-year schools—saw an 8.5% drop in freshman enrollment, Florida Tech's overall enrollment increased by over 3%, according to a December 2020 *Forbes* article.

"One of the hardest leadership challenges is making the best choices that you can with such a lack of information," Dreggors says. "We worked our way through it, and it paved the way for how we do things now."

> "There are so many interesting things going on in our community ... with the space and commercial elements. So, staying focused is going to be really important as the area grows—and we grow with it."
>
> —Kirsten Dreggors

Listen First

Kirsten Dreggors' approach to leadership is simple: Listen first.

The mantra has served her well throughout her nearly 30-year career at Northrop Grumman, where she got her first job after graduating from the University of Central Florida with her bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering and has continued to rise through the ranks to her current role as Aeronautics Systems sector vice president of engineering.

While Dreggors has been with the same company all that time, when the enterprise has about 100,000 employees and 550 locations across the globe, there is no shortage of opportunity, she says. She has spent most of her career in Florida but also worked in California for several years, honing her leadership skills and building valuable connections through company development and leadership programs throughout the years.

She credits her career growth to her willingness to listen and eagerness to learn.

"It's funny, I used to think that I had a short attention span because I would change jobs every couple of years," Dreggors says. "But I later realized it was the need to continue to grow and learn."

Having reached the executive level in her professional career, Dreggors has branched out to the community as a new mechanism for education and personal growth.

No stranger to community involvement, Dreggors first engaged with Florida Tech through the Northrop Grumman Engineering and Science Student Design Showcase, listening to students' presentations and judging their capstone projects.

"Joining the board at Florida Tech was a way for me to learn more about academia," she says. "I had never been exposed to that, and learning from Travis and the other board members over the last few years has been exciting to me. Now, I'm ready to take on a new challenge as chair."

But first, she listens.

Invoking her tried-and-true methodology, since being named board of trustees chair, Dreggors has begun scheduling one-on-one conversations with her fellow board members, seeking to understand their perspectives and learn about the skills and expertise that they bring to the table.

"One of Kirsten's great strengths is that she can sometimes be a little quiet, but you know that she is just taking it all in," Proctor says. "And when she speaks, she does so with authority and gravitas. She doesn't shy away from engaging everybody who needs to be part of the conversation."

It's an approach that parallels how the board and university leadership have strived to confront each of the major decisions with universitywide impacts that have arisen the past five years.

The campus community had barely gotten its bearings after weathering the pandemic and all its ramifications when it was faced with its next unexpected hurdle: a presidential vacancy.

"The rapid change in leadership was, to a degree, destabilizing for the university," Proctor says. "But I think it began some really critical healing that needed to occur because of the stress of COVID."

What do we need in our future leadership?

Where are the issues we might have from a campus culture perspective?

What is the future of Florida Tech?

> When [Kirsten] speaks, she does so with authority and gravitas. She doesn't shy away from engaging everybody who needs to be part of the conversation."
>
> —Travis Proctor

"These are all questions we were able to ask the entire campus community. And, in hindsight, I think that process happened at a critical time in Florida Tech's evolution," he says.

Proctor and Dreggors both served on the university's presidential search committee, which enlisted the services of an executive search firm to help identify and pare back a list of 112 highly qualified applicants. The process involved listening sessions, community forums and small group meetings.

It was extensive, but it was important, and the search committee vowed not to rush. So, in July 2022, Florida Tech hired Robert L. King to serve as interim president.

"I think Bob really did a lot for the university in a very short period of time," Dreggors says. "He really helped bring in a new energy to the university and bring the faculty and staff together."

"I think he came in and did a good job beginning to open people's minds to think a bit differently about how we're going to do things," Proctor adds.

The committee narrowed down the candidates to five finalists who came to campus for open community forums, after which feedback was gathered through more than 400 survey responses.

Ultimately, the university hired John Nicklow, who started in July 2023 and was formally installed as Florida Tech's sixth president Jan. 26, 2024.

"We had great candidates from across the nation who were interested in Florida Tech because of where we were and who we were," Proctor says. "Dr. Nicklow stood out as someone who was not coming to Florida Tech to finish his career, retiring in Florida. He saw this as an opportunity to really accelerate on our strong foundation—build on something that was already very good to make a great institution."

Plotting the Course

To build that "great institution" takes a plan—several plans, really.

So, upon Nicklow's installation, the board of trustees prioritized establishing a new strategic plan for the university.

Again, they listened first.

Through electronic surveys, one-on-one interviews, a diverse steering committee and more, the university captured feedback from students, faculty and staff, board members, peer institutions and some of Florida Tech's top employers, rounding out to about 1,200 voices.

With collaboration and transparency, the university established Forward Together, Boundless Potential, a dynamic, living document that outlines a framework for decision-making based on the university's future goals and the steps necessary to achieve them.

Part of the plan includes the development of a "master plan," for which the university enlisted the services of a higher education consulting firm, who assesses all the university's physical spaces, gathers input from the Florida Tech community and helps determine what needs renovation and enhancement.

"I think, ultimately, the board's objective is to make sure we have a strategic vision that everyone understands, we've got the right leader in place to make it happen and we can then help identify the resources to get there," Proctor says.

With these plans as their guide, Proctor and Dreggors agree that the next few years will focus on tactical progress: addressing the student housing need, finding the right balance of laboratory and classroom space and envisioning the ideal campus infrastructure.

In the slightly longer term, as Florida Tech continues to increase enrollment and, naturally, become more selective, attention can shift to developing the specific degree and research programs that strategically align with the goals of the university—and of the Space Coast.

"It's so easy to get distracted, honestly," Dreggors says. "There are so many interesting things going on in our community—amazing growth here in Brevard with the space and commercial elements. So, staying focused is going to be really important as the area grows—and we grow with it."

The need to maintain focus translates to industry partnerships, as well as the board itself, they say.

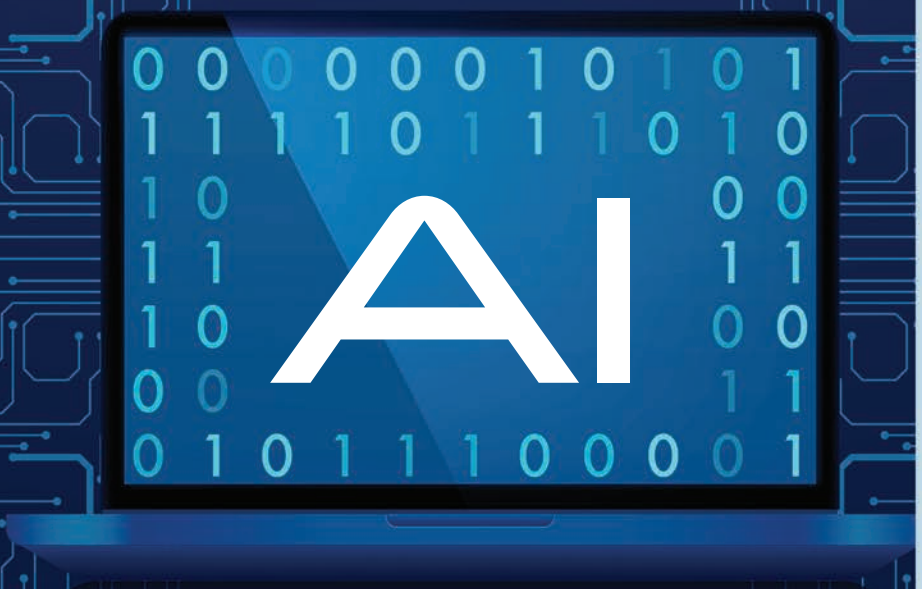
Over the last few years, the board has decreased in size, aiming to align members' talents with the strategic direction of the university.

"Going forward, John [Nicklow] and I can partner with the rest of the board to bring in some new folks," Dreggors says. "We'll look at the diversity of skills that we have among the board, see if there are any gaps and fill them with the right people."

Fueled by the support and enthusiasm of their fellow board members, Proctor and Dreggors are looking forward to settling into their new roles and tackling whatever comes next.

"I think we've had a strong partnership that will continue now with a different dynamic, and Kirsten is more than ready to lead," Proctor says. "The board has confidence in her because they know that she's not going to do this alone. She will lead; she will do what she needs to do—but she's bringing all of us along with her."

How we'll innovate at the speed of AI



Few technological revolutions have taken hold as quickly as AI. What's ahead? Bisk College of Business experts share their insights.

By Erin Peterson

Call him the antidoomer: In a world that artificial intelligence (AI) seems poised to fundamentally upend, professor of management Abram Walton sees boundless potential.

"I've been teaching and researching technology, leadership strategy, human capital management and innovation for 20 years," he says. "And I see AI as a catalyst for human flourishing."

And while he understands the peril of AI in the hands of bad actors, he says those most poised to benefit from AI's massive power are those who embrace its possibilities.

"It's true that people often don't want to change," he says. "But when we encourage people to lean into it and embrace it, as these waves are coming, they won't get knocked down by them. They'll be able to ride them."

Many at Florida Tech's Bisk College of Business share Walton's fundamental optimism. They are diving deep into the technology to understand its impact in their own areas of expertise and teaching its nuances to students in their classes.

College of Business experts see AI as an incredible tool that can speed progress in uncountable ways. It can supercharge productivity, fuel corporate insights and give smaller companies a better chance to compete with the behemoths, for starters. They're clear-eyed about the dangers—but also, ready to harness its strengths for good.

Here, they share their vision of a future shaped by AI—one that, with the right steps, can become reality.

We can create an AI-fueled world that is innovative and ethical.

JIGNYA PATEL IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS.

Right now, we seem to live in an AI landscape with two camps: people who want faster, bigger and better AI, and those who want much more regulation, guardrails and frameworks for its responsible use and development.

But we shouldn't be fighting—we should be having more conversations. We need to put all the power players in one room to have a brainstorming session. That would include leaders of companies like OpenAI, Apple, Meta and Amazon. It would include major political leaders from around the world. And it would include the world's top ethicists. The goal would be to come up with ideas and solutions together. This is important because AI is so powerful and dangerous.

We know that there are historical precedents for collaborative efforts with similarly transformational innovations, such as nuclear technology. We have many guardrails around nuclear power, and it works. We don't see stories about people stealing uranium and threatening to bomb something.

It did take time to do the right thing with nuclear technology, but we know we can do the right thing. AI is moving fast, so we need to come up with ground rules, penalties and consequences at the same speed.

That's why I'd like to see all these people coming together to talk, because they can have a huge influence on the trajectory of this technology.

We can level the playing field for smaller accounting firms.

ANGEL OTERO '01 M.S., '22 MBA, IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ACCOUNTING.

Imagine a world where AI is not just a tool reserved for the "Big Four" accounting firms but an accessible, game-changing asset for smaller, public accounting firms. These smaller firms, which serve countless businesses and organizations, often lack the financial and technological resources to compete with industry giants. However, with the right investment, AI could revolutionize how these firms operate, enhancing efficiency, accuracy and client service, while leveling the playing field in the accounting profession.

The Big Four have already demonstrated AI's transformative potential by developing proprietary platforms and investing billions in AI-powered analytics, risk assessment and predictive insights. These advancements allow them to streamline audits, detect fraud more effectively and provide deeper business insights to their clients, among others.

But why should only the largest firms reap these benefits? The real opportunity lies in democratizing AI, ensuring that even small and midsized firms can harness its power to optimize their operations.

My vision is to develop an AI-powered ecosystem for smaller accounting firms. This platform would provide affordable, scalable AI solutions, from predictive financial analysis to automated risk detection and chatbot-driven client communications.

By leveraging AI, these firms could conduct audits more efficiently, identify irregularities with greater precision and offer personalized financial insights—capabilities that were once exclusive to their larger counterparts.

The impact would be profound: increased efficiency, reduced costs, enhanced fraud detection and improved client services. More importantly, it would foster a more competitive and diverse accounting industry—one where innovation is not confined to a select few but is accessible to all.

By empowering smaller firms with AI, the accounting landscape can be reshaped, ensuring that businesses receive high-quality, data-driven insights regardless of the size of the firm they engage with. This is the future of accounting—one where AI is not an exclusive advantage but a universal tool for progress.

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what if [employees] could use AI as a coach and mentor to help identify their talents, get encouragement and move forward in their careers? AI can be their customized, always-available sounding board.

We can unleash untapped human potential at every level through the strategic use of AI.

PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT ABRAM WALTON IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR INNOVATION MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS ANALYTICS.

For decades, the Lean Six Sigma philosophy has focused on eliminating waste and improving process flow in seven areas: inventory, motion, overprocessing, overproduction, waiting, transport and defects. But in recent years, it became clear that there was an eighth factor that might be even more important: untapped human potential.

Such untapped human potential includes people who are disengaged in their jobs or people who are in areas of the world where they don't have the coaching or access to opportunity to thrive and flourish. But this untapped potential also exists at the corporate level and an even more macro level.

For example, surveys typically show that about two-thirds of people are disengaged at their jobs. But what if they could use AI as a coach and mentor to help identify their talents, get encouragement and move forward in their careers? AI can be their customized, always-available sounding board.

At the corporate level, AI systems could be built to minimize fraud, abuse and waste. We have whole industries built on top of the idea of deterring or monitoring these problems, like title insurance for homes. Transferring titles is time-consuming and expensive. But by using AI and pairing it with transparent "smart contracts" that are on the blockchain, we wouldn't need title insurance at all.

At a global level, we know that intentional, multinational cooperation—typically through cooperative trading agreements—provides a winning economic model and a shared benefit of avoiding wars. By helping optimize supply chains across countries or anticipating potential trade disruptions, AI will allow us to collaborate and flourish in new ways.

AI can help not just people become the best versions of themselves but also organizations and countries become the best versions of themselves.

We can supercharge business innovation by strengthening AI safety measures.

ALINA MALKOVA IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF BUSINESS.

While AI can help businesses increase profits and lead to business expansion, we also know that most businesses are hesitant to use some types of AI because of security and unreliability.

Bigger firms, especially, are often taking a more conservative approach. This makes sense: They don't want to disclose sensitive or personal data. They want to protect their intellectual property. And they worry about mistakes.

In many cases, firms are trying to develop their own internal AI systems. But it's a slow, complicated and expensive process. You've got to create the technology and train the models. AI requires extensive computational resources, and it will likely require retraining for many workers. And while AI will probably replace some workers, right now, people are often still cheaper than this technology.

> when firms feel confident that AI systems are safe and reliable, we will see a huge boost in productivity and profitability.

Some things that could help further the transformation include laws and regulations that protect corporate property rights and intellectual property. In some cases, because of the ways that AI systems are improving, we still don't know the ways that corporations will need to protect themselves in the future.

When firms feel confident that AI systems are safe and reliable, we will see a huge boost in productivity and profitability.

We can prepare all students to succeed in tomorrow's world.

Through cutting-edge courses, hands-on practicum experiences and powerful industry partnerships, students gain the skills and real-world exposure to excel in a rapidly changing world.

CHRISTIAN SONNENBERG '04, '07 M.S., '13 Ph.D., associate dean of the Bisk College of Business, knows that there's plenty of hand-wringing in the academic world about AI in the classroom.

But he and his colleagues see AI as a tool, not a threat.

"In my classes, for example, students have created their own Microsoft Copilots—like chatbots or specialized widgets—to handle specific topics," he says. "AI is something that they'll have access to when they're in the workforce, just like any other tool. So, knowing how to leverage it is going to provide benefits."

At Florida Tech, faculty embrace change, develop practical approaches to integrating emerging technologies into the curriculum and give students the tools they need to thrive. Through a focused mix of business fundamentals, cutting-edge courses, extracurricular opportunities and real-world experiences with top companies, students graduate from Florida Tech with advantages that make them irresistible to employers—and well equipped for whatever the future might bring.

Here are just a few ways that the College of Business is designing meaningful learning experiences that will allow students to make the most of every moment at Florida Tech.

- **BUSINESS FUNDAMENTALS PAIRED WITH LEADING-EDGE TECH TOPICS.** Students are grounded in business fundamentals through foundational courses in mathematics, economics and accounting. But they can also take courses so novel that students are more likely to be studying breaking news push notifications than a dusty textbook. One example: Applied AI and Machine Learning in Finance, a course that will roll out this fall.
- **PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES.** All seniors have a practicum experience—an internship with a sponsoring organization and guidance from a Florida Tech practicum coordinator. "The goal is for every student to have work experience before they graduate," Sonnenberg says.
- **STUDENT BUSINESS INCUBATOR.** The business incubator offers a long-term support structure that gives students opportunities to work on new ventures, get guidance from faculty members on how to run a business and even land funding to get their projects up and running.
- **POWERFUL PARTNERSHIPS.** Partnerships with large, highly regarded companies, including Northrop Grumman Corp. and Lockheed Martin Corp., as well as Patrick Space Force Base, offer a range of opportunities to students, including practicum and incubator-related work. Current employees of top firms often earn advanced degrees from Florida Tech.
- **CASE STUDY COMPETITIONS.** Students participate in case study competitions around the country. Recent competitions include the Templeton Business Ethics Case Competition at Stetson University, the Global Scaling Challenge at the University of New Mexico and the IACBE International Business Challenge. College of Business students are earning plenty of laurels: Last spring, for example, a team of Florida Tech students landed top honors at the Direct Effect Innovation Challenge in Jacksonville, creating an effective marketing campaign for LEGOLAND.

While Sonnenberg is proud of the work the College of Business is already doing, he adds that they continue to expand and improve their programming to make a business degree from Florida Tech even more valuable.

"Our goal is to position a student not only to have a career ready for them when they graduate, but also to be in a position to succeed in that career," he says.

The Professor Who Changed My Life

Alumni stories about the faculty who went from teachers to mentors to so much more.

By Erin Alvarado '16

When you ask Florida Tech alumni to describe "the professor who changed your life," the attributes start accumulating: Dedicated. Patient. Supportive. Approachable. Fair. Resourceful. Inspiring.

We asked Panthers to tell us about the faculty members who went the extra mile and made a lasting impact on their lives—here are their stories!

"Teaching is something I love. It goes beyond the classroom. It goes beyond activities like our concrete canoe competition. It goes past the sports fields.

The combination of these types of activities allows students to watch themselves fail and learn from their failures. I've learned the most from mine.

I've been preaching that to be successful, engineers need to conquer 'the four C's': clearly communicate complicated concepts! Although engineering principles are complex, with enough practice, they can be mastered. But if they are not communicated clearly, then success does not follow.

Our job is to make them leaders, not just engineers or scientists, but compassionate, caring individuals who know they have been given a gift."

—Paul Cosentino

"Dr. Cos brought a very down-to-earth approach to a difficult major."

Paul Cosentino

PROFESSOR, CIVIL ENGINEERING AND CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Affectionately known by most of his students as "Dr. Cos," Cosentino has 40 years of research, teaching and consulting experience. This background has allowed him to teach 18 courses, ranging from freshman to graduate levels.

He strives to teach FUNdamentals at every level.

"Dr. Cos brought a very down-to-earth approach to a difficult major. He always had an open door and was able to assure me that I could excel in the field of engineering."

—**DONALD "JOE" SALLS III** '07

Cosentino's breadth of knowledge has enabled him to serve as the principal investigator on over $5 million in funded research for 28 state- and nationally funded projects.

Outside of the classroom, Cosentino has served as the American Society of Civil Engineers student chapter's faculty advisor for over 30 years. Under his guidance, Florida Tech won the National Concrete Canoe Competition—the only private university to ever accomplish this feat—hosted the event twice, qualified for nationals eight times and established an endowment for the student chapter in honor of **ERIC PRIMAVERA** '92, '95 M.S.

"I cried to him my senior year because 'I wasn't nearly as smart as my classmates,' and I thought I could never make it in my profession. Struggled a lot. I thought I would be a failure.

He told me that I would be more successful than every single one of them because it's not intellect that makes you successful, it's personality, tenacity and devotion. He saw those traits in me before I even knew I had them.

Whenever I feel underqualified, I remember how he believed in me. Those words have gotten me through 20+ years in the industry."

—**TIFFANIE DEMARIA ARTIGAS** '03

continued on page 28

continued from page 27

> “Just because something was clear and sensible to one person, doesn’t mean it will be clear and sensible to the average person.”

Meredith Carroll ’03 M.S.

PROFESSOR, COLLEGE OF AERONAUTICS; DIRECTOR, ADVANCING TECHNOLOGY-INTERACTION AND LEARNING IN AVIATION SYSTEMS (ATLAS) LAB

With over 20 years of experience studying human/team performance and training in complex systems, Carroll focuses her research on decision-making in complex systems, cognition and learning, human-autonomy teaming, performance and expertise assessment, and adaptive training.

“Dr. Carroll highlighted how human factors was a methodical science and not just common sense. Just because something was clear and sensible to one person, doesn’t mean it will be clear and sensible to the average person.

The biggest way Dr. Carroll changed the entire course of my life was with a group project where she assigned the groups.

She assigned me to a group with a fellow classmate, ADAM HRUSZCZYK ’14, ’17 M.S., and one thing led to another, and Adam and I have now been married for a year.”

—**SHERISSE PIERRE** ’15, ’17 M.S.

“I am a mother of four, and being a mom has really shaped the way I teach.

I always try to establish a relationship in which I support the student and enjoy them (this is key!) but also hold them to the standard that I know they can achieve.

This looks different for every student because they are all so unique in their abilities and personalities, but I try my best to figure them out and do what I can.”

—Meredith Carroll

Rodd Newcombe ’14 Ed.S., ’25 Ph.D.

INSTRUCTOR, BISK COLLEGE OF BUSINESS; DIRECTOR, STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

For nearly a quarter of a century, Newcombe has been a steadfast presence at Florida Tech, dedicating his career to supporting student success and fostering a thriving academic community.

“Rodd was able to help me find guidance as I completed my studies and throughout my college years as I got ready for the workforce. To this day, Rodd is a terrific mentor and friend who I look up to and call every so often to catch up and let him know about the latest in my life.”

—**KENNETH “KENNY” PEDEN** ’16, ’18 MSA

From his beginnings as a systems librarian to his current role as director of academic support services, Newcombe has witnessed and contributed to the university’s evolution through innovation and unwavering dedication to students.

“Rodd had often encouraged me to pursue my doctoral degree, but I was unsure of which program would work best for me. My father had his doctoral degree, and obtaining my degree was a bucket list item.

In talking things through with Rodd, he mentioned that I should reach out to the program chair, Dr. Vogt, to see if my degree in student personnel administration could be suitable to still apply for acceptance into our Doctor of Business Administration program. … A few weeks later, I was accepted into the program.

The program was demanding and required commitment to complete, but I graduated in 2019 with my Doctor of Business Administration degree.”

—**GREG CONNELL** ’19 DBA

“Having an impact on others’ lives is only a part of the impact on your own.

I hope that all the students I have helped, advised, taught or just interacted with are doing amazing.

It is always great to hear that they remember you. But, truthfully, so many of my students over the almost 25 years at Florida Tech have left an impact on me, as well.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity I have had at Florida Tech. Our students and alumni are outstanding!”

—Rodd Newcombe

“Dr. Kasweck* was both a great instructor, as well as a fraternity brother and friend.”

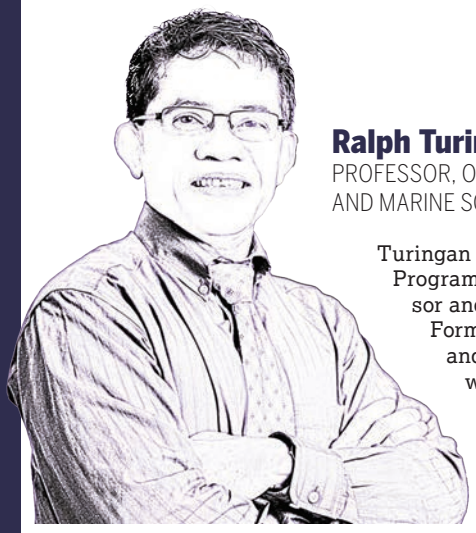
Kenneth Kasweck
FORMER ADJUNCT PROFESSOR, BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

“Dr. Kasweck was both a great instructor, as well as a fraternity brother and friend. As an advisor to TKE [Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity], he attended our meetings and functions and provided his valuable input. He showed a lot of personal interest in the students and had great school spirit.

He was a great example of how to be fair and even-handed as a professional and mentor, while at the same time, being approachable and part of the gang. This was a great lesson that I attempted to emulate in my career, first as a supervisor and later, as manager and business owner.

Ken would take a group of us out on his sailboat to teach us the basics of sailing in the Indian River, usually on Fridays after classes. We would raise the Jolly Roger on our outings and learn some ‘colorful’ nautical terms. It was great fun and a way to build teamwork, something that I will never forget.”

—**DANIEL ALESANDRO** ’77



Ralph Turingan
PROFESSOR, OCEAN ENGINEERING AND MARINE SCIENCES

Turingan is Florida Tech’s Florida Sea Grant Program coordinator, Fulbright Program advisor and aquaculture laboratories director. Formerly head of the ocean engineering and marine sciences department, he has worked at Florida Tech for 30 years.

“Ralph accepted me into his lab to do undergraduate research, which allowed me to run experiments on my own and jump right into applied science as an early undergraduate.

“Ralph … encouraged [us] to not be afraid of paving our path in science that [may] be nontraditional.”

I then attended his field course to Puerto Rico, where I first experienced scientific diving and field research, which changed and influenced the trajectory of my career. It was there I decided I wanted to pursue graduate school.

Ralph mentored me and advised me to apply to the FastTrack program and worked with me to hone my research and laboratory skills so I could successfully graduate from this program with a thesis.

Later, after getting into the doctoral program at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, Ralph also encouraged me (and my husband, EVAN TUOHY ‘09) to not be afraid of paving our path in science that [may] be nontraditional.

This ultimately led to the creation of my business, Isla Mar, and set the stage for a successful and rewarding 10 years and counting as an independent marine scientist.

Ralph was the reader at my wedding. He and his wife, Joy, became like family to us. They traveled across the U.S. to attend my wedding in Texas, and we make it a point to see them when we are back in Florida whenever possible.

Thank you for believing in me and encouraging me to dream big and approach challenges with courage, especially in a male-dominated field of STEM, and to also remember that my quality of life is still the most important goal.”

—**CHELSEA HARMS-TUOHY** ’10, ’11 M.S.

“Dr. Szabo has a way of encouraging his students to celebrate their strengths.”

Thomas Szabo
FORMER ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

“Dr. Szabo has a way of encouraging his students to celebrate their strengths. I was in my little world in class, and all I was trying to do was pass. Dr. Szabo saw something in me and provided me with the opportunity to make something out of the ordinary happen.

Additionally, Dr. Szabo nominated me for Outstanding Student of the Year, which was an award that I got to share with my dad before he passed.”

—**JEANEDEE MALENAB** ’20 M.A.

continued on page 30

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"If Philip hadn't taken a chance on hiring me back then, my path would have taken a different shape."

Philip Chan

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING AND COMPUTER SCIENCE

An expert in machine learning, data mining, anomaly detection and learning from imbalanced data, Chan has been a Florida Tech faculty member for about 30 years. He earned all of his degrees in computer science and also worked as a visiting scientist in MIT's Laboratory of Computer Science for a year. Through his thoughtful approach to teaching, Chan encourages his students to go forward with curiosity and determination.

"He introduced me to the field of machine learning—and [to] an extent, natural language processing, too—by hiring me as a student researcher after my sophomore year (summer 2004).

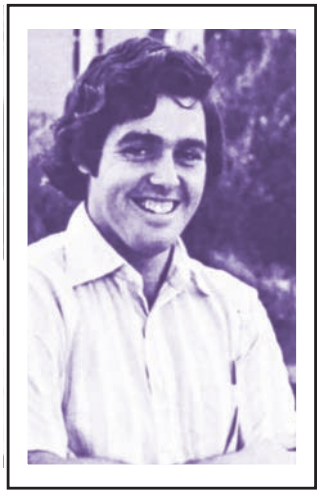
The position was intended for graduate students, and I barely met the minimum course requirements to be considered. Our two-year collaboration sparked enough excitement that I've continued to research machine learning and NLP ever since.

Twenty years later, I now lead my research lab in industry (Kensho) and teach the subjects at MIT. If Philip hadn't taken a chance on hiring me back then, my path would have taken a different shape."

—**CHRIS TANNER** '06

"My approach to teaching is to help students understand not just the 'what' and 'how,' but also the 'why.' A deeper understanding might potentially lead students to improve existing ideas and/or create new ones."

—Phillip Chan



"Thanks to Hennon*, I devoted my entire career to trying to effect change."

John Hennon

FORMER FACULTY, MARINE SCIENCES, JENSEN BEACH CAMPUS

"He taught that when you got engaged and committed to making a change, you can accomplish that.

With his guidance (before the widespread availability of infrared photography), we went into a mangrove swamp and placed white cotton sheets atop mangrove trees so aerial photos could be taken, thus mapping a part of the swamp that a developer had earmarked for destruction for a condo development. The effort was successful, and the development was never built.

Thanks to Hennon, I devoted my entire career to trying to effect change to protect the environment (and people) from short-sighted or simply wrong decisions that ignore ecological realities."

—**KEVIN HYLTON** '79

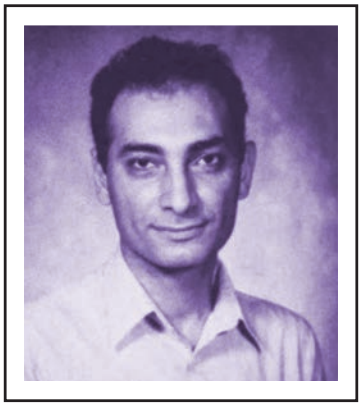
"Dr. Mohit taught me to 'read the problem five times.'"

Kouros Mohit

FORMER FACULTY MEMBER, MATHEMATICS/COMPUTER SCIENCE

"Dr. Mohit taught me to 'read the problem five times.' I use that in every single area of my life. That's next level. It forces you to slow down, absorb the details and avoid knee-jerk reactions."

—**TIMOTHY "CHAZ" STEVENS** '87



Gnana Bhaskar Tenali

PROFESSOR AND DEPARTMENT HEAD, MATHEMATICS AND SYSTEMS ENGINEERING

Tenali has worked at Florida Tech for over 20 years and is an expert in nonlinear functional differential equations and set valued differential equations. He earned his Ph.D. in mathematics in India and has brought his lifelong passion for the subject to his research and students for over 30 years. But, according to some, even more influential than his vast applied mathematics knowledge is his care and compassion for others.

"Should I write about the kindness of his family sheltering me during the 2004 hurricanes? Or the countless hours he dedicated to listening to my presentations? The unwavering support through my academic journey? The insightful book recommendations? The conversations over meals at his home? All these moments profoundly shaped me.

Professor Tenali has been a guiding force in my life since 2001, providing constant inspiration and guidance. He instilled in me the importance of a growth mindset, profoundly shaping my path.

Through his teaching and research, he ignited my passion for differential equations, and I continue to aspire to his style. He's been a steadfast mentor, offering unwavering support and encouragement. I continue to build upon the foundation he provided."

—**KARTHIKEYA SAMEER KUMAR MAMILLAPALLE** '07 Ph.D.

> "Professor Tenali has been a guiding force in my life since 2001..."

"I believe that teaching goes beyond just delivering information—it's about fostering curiosity, encouraging critical thinking and quenching the thirst for knowledge.

A strong teacher-student relationship is built on mutual respect, guidance and encouragement. I strive to create an environment where students feel empowered to grow, knowing they have a mentor who believes in them."

—Gnana Bhaskar Tenali

Nikos Orphanoudakis*

FACULTY MEMBER, MARINE SCIENCES, JENSEN BEACH CAMPUS

"Math wasn't my strong point up until I met Nikos. It took a Greek to explain Greek, I guess.

He could tell I was struggling and that I had innate mathematical skills—but simply didn't get it. Plus, my study habits were not mature. Nikos had me study the history of math, beginning with the Greek philosophers and onward through history, to understand the underpinnings of math and how it could be used in practical applications.

From the point I began as his student, my math skills improved dramatically, my study habits improved and this one opportunity set me on a career and life path that is still going strong today."

—**KENNETH ANTHONY** '83

> Nikos had a gift when it came to explaining mathematical concepts."

"Nikos had a gift when it came to explaining mathematical concepts. He was one of the best teachers I had in all of the four degree programs associated with my Ph.D."

—**JAMES RUETZ** '78

**Corrected spelling* Note: Some quotes were slightly trimmed or modified for clarity and/or concision. We did our best to confirm faculty employment, departments and name spelling, but let us know if we made an error so that we can correct it in the future.

A MESSAGE FROM THE FLORIDA TECH ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Hi, Panthers!

Spring is here, and it is a beautiful time of the year to welcome all our spring 2025 graduates into the Florida Tech Alumni Association following another spectacular commencement weekend.

On behalf of the Florida Tech Alumni Association, we wish you much success as you follow the goals and dreams you have worked so hard on over the years!

When I was a student, I remember the days leading up to graduation were exciting, stressful and full of happiness across campus, as Panthers prepared to walk across the stage and receive their diplomas.

For myself, I look back fondly on that time and love to see it remain the same on campus today.

One of my favorite memories from my commencement was clutching my diploma tightly, as I smiled at the camera, hoping I wouldn't trip as I made my way down the stairs. I found myself still holding my breath until I made it back to my seat and opened the portfolio to be sure my diploma was there!

It was only after I saw that long-sought piece of paper with my name on it that I exhaled and felt a surge of accomplishment run through my veins.

I hope that these new alumni have made many memories during their time at Florida Tech, and the Alumni Association wants you to share those special moments with us!

Make sure you follow us on social media and join Florida Tech Connect, your go-to hub for all things alumni-related.

New grads, the Florida Tech Alumni Association is here for you as you navigate your careers, and we are a great resource for you as you search for employment. Alumni love to hire alumni!

Remember, no matter when you graduate, you will always be a #Panther4Life and a member of the Florida Tech Alumni Association family.

Go Panthers!

Yours,

Sherry Acanfora-Ruohomaki
'93, '00, '05 M.S.
FTAA President

PS: A huge thank you to everyone who participated in Florida Tech's 37 Hours of Giving. It was a huge success and made possible by our alumni and friends who continue to support our great university!

YOUR ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OFFICERS

Sherry Acanfora-Ruohomaki
'93, '00, '05 M.S.
President | Melbourne, FL
sherry@facetscg.com

Ameen Sarkees '89
Vice President | Merritt Island, FL
aysarkees@yahoo.com

Warren Pittorie '15, '18 M.S., '22 Ph.D.
Treasurer | Melbourne, FL
wpittorie2012@fit.edu

John Robertson '13
Secretary | San Juan Capistrano, CA
jtrobertson2009@gmail.com

Chris Fernando '02
Member-at-Large | Raleigh, NC
cfernando@gmail.com

Fin Bonset '96, '99 MSA
Past President | Indialantic, FL
fbonset@vhb.com

37 HOURS OF GIVING

Thanks, Panthers!

During Florida Tech's 37 Hours of Giving this year, we focused on making a direct impact through academics, athletics, scholarships and the Student Emergency Fund, and Panther Nation showed up in a big way!

Together, we raised nearly 750 gifts, totaling more than $100,000 in support of student success.

SUBMIT YOUR NEWS TO
alumnotes@fit.edu

1970s

GLENN ANDREW '74 has been named one of 2024's top real estate agents by BestAgents.us, which recognizes the top real estate professionals across the nation to help buyers, sellers and investors match with the most qualified agents in their area.

1980s

THOMAS BELL '86 MBA was selected for The Virginia Power 50 List. Bell is CEO at Leidos and previously served as chairman and CEO of Rolls-Royce North America.

1 **DON WOODRUFF** '86 (left) was awarded the Build Iowa Award at the Master Builders of Iowa Winter Conference. This award recognizes his outstanding contributions to the construction industry and celebrates his decadeslong dedication to innovation, safety, workforce development and community service.

THOMAS HATFIELD '87 has been included in Marquis Who's Who, which spotlights the lives of the most accomplished individuals and innovators from every significant field, including politics, business, medicine, law, education, art, religion and entertainment.

1990s

ANDREW CALLAHAN '94 MBA has been named an operating advisor with Clayton, Dubilier and Rice (CD&R). Before joining CD&R, Callahan was the president, CEO and executive director at Hostess Brands Inc. from 2018 to 2023.

2 **GUADALUPE "WALLY" GONZALEZ JR.** '94 M.S. released the book *John 3:16.5 The Rest of The Story*, a practical guide to reading the Bible and understanding Christianity.

CORA RICHARDSON HODGE '95 has been elected Anguilla's first female premier. In a stunning political shift, the Anguilla United Front (AUF) has unseated the ruling Anguilla Progressive Movement (APM) in a decisive victory.

SEAN MCGEOUGH '95, '05 M.S., who is executive vice president of Jet Support Services Inc., has been selected by the International Aircraft Dealers Association (IADA) board of directors as IADA Foundation Board chair.

2000s

DEIRDRE GONSALVES-JACKSON '04 Ph.D. has been promoted to provost and vice president at Virginia Wesleyan University. Gonsalves-Jackson received the Florida Tech Alumni Association's Alumna Legacy Award in 2022.

3 **MATTHEW HILL** '07 was awarded the "10 Day Dream" experience with the Atlanta Hawks created in partnership with Michelob ULTRA, the global beer sponsor of the NBA. He gained access to pro-level coaching, traveling with the team,

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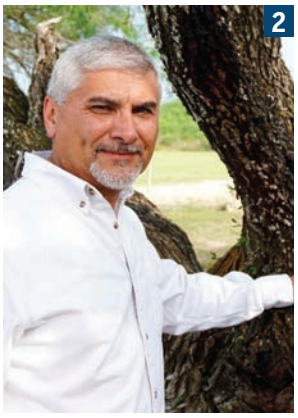
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FLORIDA TECH ATHLETICS

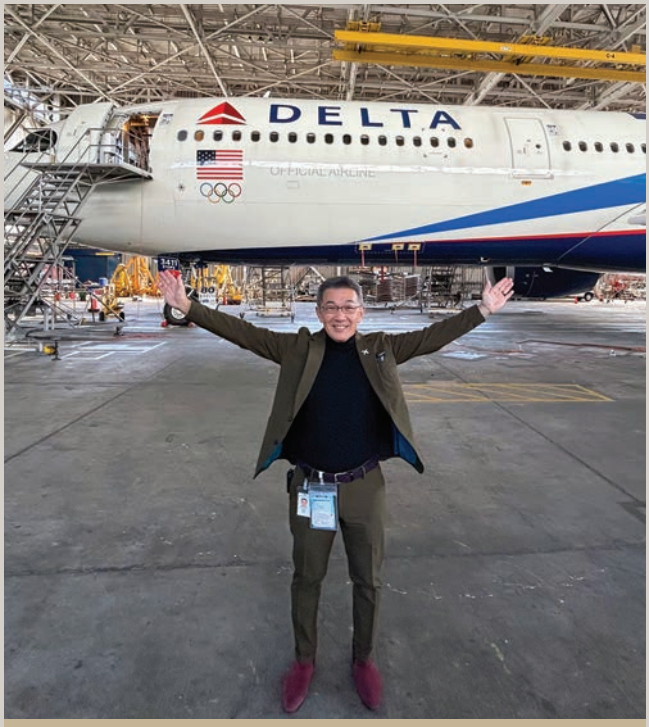
CALLING ALL ATHLETICS ALUMNI!

Help us update our athletics alumni database and identify candidates for the "Where They Are Now" section of floridatechsports.com. Complete the form »

Welcomed a Panther Cub?

Contact us for a free infant T-shirt or onesie. Then, send a photo of your cub in his/her Panther swag with an AlumNote about yourself, and it may appear in the magazine.

For details: **alumni@fit.edu**



SPOTLIGHT ON

Victor Osumi

FLORIDA TECH CONNECTION: '85 A.S. aviation management/flight technology, '86 B.S. aviation management/flight technology

FAVORITE ATHLETE: Shohei Ohtani, pitcher and hitter for the Los Angeles Dodgers

HOBBY: Playing golf with my wife and friends

HIDDEN TALENT: Singing

TOP TRAVEL DESTINATION: The moon

FAVORITE QUOTE: "Success is never accidental."

After working for over 27 years in the hotel industry, **VICTOR OSUMI** '85 A.S., '86, has returned to his aviation roots by serving as the managing director and president for Delta Air Lines Japan.

"Florida Tech's broader experiences and educational opportunities gave me multiple options to navigating through my career journey," Osumi explains. "If I had attended a strictly flight school, my knowledge and educational level would not have given me as many options."

Before he transitioned to Delta, Osumi worked for Marriott International, where he served as area vice president in Japan and Guam. In this role, he was responsible for the operations of 43 Marriott-branded hotels and over 30 new hotels that were under development.

One of his career highlights so far has been working for a private equity company leading a project to acquire an Australian hotel group.

"To make the first step toward your goals, be sure to take any opportunity that arises," Osumi says. "So often, people narrow down to a specific area of a job and miss out on an opportunity. Don't forget to think about the long term."

Today, Osumi's day-to-day tasks vary from government advocacy to managing supply chain issues and working closely with airport operations teams.

"With my responsibilities with Delta, my education from Florida Tech helps me with my day-to-day job across the airline operations."

In January 2024, Osumi was elected as president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan (ACCJ), which consists of over 3,000 members who represent 600 companies and more than 40 countries. Before that, he served as the vice president in 2023.

Osumi fondly recalls his favorite memory from his time at Florida Tech as his first solo flight at Melbourne Orlando International Airport.

"My passion for aviation never left my heart, and my experiences at Florida Tech have kept me in tune with the industry related through the alumni community."

—Erin Alvarado '16

continued from page 33

and connecting with Hawks players and staff—all while experiencing the lifestyle of an NBA pro. Hill played for Florida Tech's men's basketball team from 2003–2007.

2010s

STEVE BELTON '10, **LAURA CANHAM** '08 and **DARREN L'APPANNA** '11, '13 MSA, were recognized as 2024 *Airport Business* Top 40 Under 40 aviation professionals. Belton is the airport operations superintendent at Philadelphia International Airport; Canham, a licensed pilot and airport planner, is McFarland Johnson's New England aviation planning lead; and L'Appanna serves as the manager of air service and business development at Orlando International Airport.

KEITH WILTFONG '10 M.S., '12 MBA, recently published *Make Life Happen: Your Guide to The Better Retirement Journey*, a book now available on Amazon.

3 **WILLIAM "ZACK" BELDON** '12 and **MELISSA BELDON** '16, '17 M.S., welcomed their Panther cub, Billy, in August 2024.

4 **TIZIANO BERNARD** '15, '16 M.S., '18 Ph.D., (left) was named Best Flight Instructor in the United States by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA). Bernard is an experimental flight test engineer with Gulfstream Aerospace in Savannah, Georgia.

5 **PABLO CUERVO** '16, '19 M.S., (left) Florida Tech director of government affairs and strategic partnerships **ROB SALONEN** '19 MPA (right) and university board of trustees member Frank DiBello (middle) delved into the demad for aerospace technology funding at Space Foundation's Innovate Space:

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Photo courtesy of Savannah Aviation Flight Training
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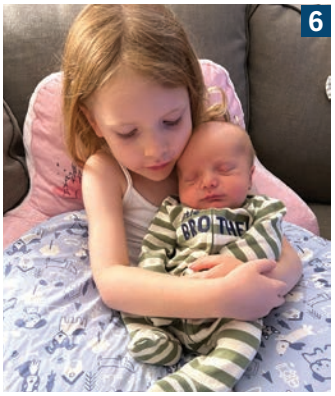
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Finance Forum in January in Coral Gables, Florida.

6 MARY (VESTGARD) TRUJILLO '16 and her husband, **ROBERT TRUJILLO** '12, welcomed their son, Austin, Oct. 25, 2024. He is pictured with his big sister, Emily, age 5.

HARRY HOBBS '17 DBA was appointed to the Alabama Commission on Higher Education in February 2025.

7 JULIANNA (FISCHER) WALSH '17 M.S., '19 Ph.D., upon graduating from Florida Tech, moved to London, where she worked in consulting and technology before launching her business, LeadHerself. The business's mission is to start a movement of women owning their careers with courage and confidence.

ALEXANDRA WOOD '18 has been named senior marketing manager at the Hilton West Palm Beach, which is a AAA Four Diamond hotel. She will lead the planning and execution of all marketing strategies, brand positioning and annual strategic planning and will manage social media strategy and performance.

2020s

8 JOSSELYN SLAGLE '20, '23 MSA, has been nominated for the 2025 FAA Safety Team Representative of the Year award and will receive the honor at the Oshkosh air show in July. Since graduating from Florida Tech, she has used her master's degree in many ways throughout her career.

9 LIVIA MARTINEZ '22 A.S. is a network administrator for cybersecurity for a K–12 private school. As the only female in her department, she strives to inspire students to pursue careers in technology and cybersecurity.

10 KRYSTALYNN DORIA '23 M.A. became a board-certified behavior analyst after graduating from Florida Tech. She and her husband have started a wildlife park, where she is the director of animal behavior and welfare. They take in exotic animals from unfortunate circumstances and give them the appropriate care, diets and enrichment.

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SPOTLIGHT ON

Corrie Presland-Byrne

FLORIDA TECH CONNECTION: ’21 M.S. conservation technology

WHAT ANIMAL WOULD YOU BE: Bull shark

THREE ITEMS YOU’D BRING IF STRANDED ON A DESERT ISLAND: A flare gun, a water filter and a photo of my family

FAVORITE CONCERT: Lollapalooza in Argentina

How does someone with a passion for conservation and data combine the two dreams into a reality?

CORRIE PRESLAND-BYRNE ’21 M.S. found the answer: Attend Florida Tech!

“When I was looking to further my education after receiving my bachelor’s degree, I was thrilled to discover there was a university that offered exactly what I wanted: a degree in conservation technology,” Presland-Byrne says.

Even though she was only on campus for two months before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic caused the campus to close and convert to virtual classes, Presland-Byrne looks back fondly on her Florida Tech experience.

“I’ll never forget the experience of virtually graduating at my parents’ house, with the ceremony streaming on their TV and walking across the living room in my cap, gown and … house slippers.”

Today, Presland-Byrne serves as the director of conservation technology and operations manager at Hammerhead Technology.

Founded in 2019 by her father, Peter Presland-Byrne, Hammerhead Technology focuses on integrating technology into conservation efforts with the main goal of creating technology for the greater good.

“Bad data is worse than no data,” Presland-Byrne says. “So, I work to get clients the most accurate data that helps them reach whatever their end goal is, whether it be for saving animals or protecting the environment. I also do custom application and website development and am the GIS lead for the company.”

One of her research projects is investigating the impacts of human infrastructure on howler monkeys in Costa Rica.

“When I graduated from Florida Tech, I received an internship in Costa Rica to become a scuba diving instructor while also doing field research in my spare time,” Presland-Byrne says. “I fell in love with the country and its wildlife.”

The issue is monkeys’ inability to differentiate between vines or branches and power lines, resulting in frequent electrocutions when they try to cross over roads.

Since the conclusion of her internship and through her work at Hammerhead Technology, Presland-Byrne discovered that it is better financially for electric companies to take preventative action than to deal with the costs of repair, rescue and rehabilitation.

Using GIS technology, Presland-Byrne can track where the incidents happen so that power companies can take preventative action, such as burying the problem power lines, regularly trimming trees the monkeys frequent, building more wildlife bridges and insulating the electric infrastructure.

When Presland-Byrne first started presenting her findings in November 2023, it didn’t pick up traction. But through hard work and determination, the community has started to take notice.

“My research has now been published by Esri on three different occasions, as well as been picked up by a few different Costa Rican newspapers,” Presland-Byrne says. “I’m super excited because my work with the wildlife electrocutions has picked up a lot of interest, and I’m incredibly passionate about it.”

—Erin Alvarado ’16

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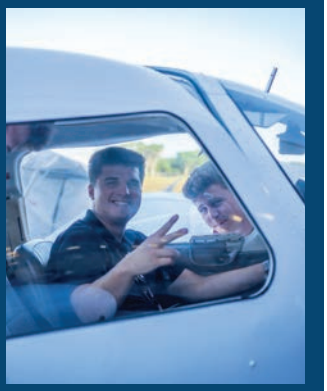
HADASSAH ETIENNE ’23 has been named executive director of the Brevard Symphony Orchestra. She has served as executive assistant with the Brevard Symphony Orchestra since August 2023.

11 TRENTON “TRENT” WRIGHT ’23, ’24 M.S., was featured as a contestant on the newest season of “American Idol” on ABC Network. A flight test engineer, Wright had never sung in front of people before his audition. After seeing some videos he had posted to TikTok, one of the show’s producers reached out encouraging him to try out for the show. Eventually, he was invited to Nashville to participate in live auditions in front of the judges. His audition aired March 31, and he made it to the top 46 before he was eliminated during the April 7 episode that narrowed down the group to 24 contestants.

12 VICTORIA RAMOS ’24 has accepted a position with The Haskell Co. as an assistant project manager, working on large commercial and industrial projects. She is grateful to professor Bleakley and the construction management professors at Florida Tech for their guidance, which prepared her for this opportunity.



Aeronautics Week

In April, Florida Tech's College of Aeronautics (COA) hosted its inaugural Aeronautics Week—several days of events that culminated in the return of a long-missed tradition: the hangar networking event. With over 220 attendees, the event fostered meaningful connections between students and alumni and, for many, became one of the most memorable parts of the week.

Also that week, the Safety Stand Down reinforced the COA's uncompromising focus on safety; the advisory board breakout sessions allowed alumni to share their expertise and help guide the college's future; and the Skurla Award Winners Panel brought together some of the college's most accomplished graduates for a rare and inspiring discussion (see page 6).

"These events are more than just celebrations—they're strategic investments in student success and community engagement," COA Dean John Deaton said. "We're excited to build on this momentum, ensuring these experiences continue to grow as signature College of Aeronautics traditions, and we look forward to next year."

IN MEMORIAM

EDWARD WRASMANN '77 M.S. passed away at age 84 Feb. 11 in Melbourne. Wrasmann was a U.S. Army veteran, a talented chemist, an avid sailor and loved to travel.

RANDALL PINGLEY '84 M.S. passed away at age 76 Dec. 11, 2024, in Williamsburg, Virginia. He served 28 years in the U.S. Army and retired as a colonel from Fort McPherson in 1999. After his military retirement, Pingley served four years as the director of transportation for Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools.

BERNARD "MATT" DUNLEVY '85 passed away unexpectedly Feb. 21 at age 62 in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. While attending Florida Tech, Dunlevy was a proud member of the men's rowing team and won the Division II championship in 1982. In 1988, Dunlevy was hired by Delta and shortly after, separated from the Air National Guard as a major, flight commander and formation flight lead pilot. He retired from Delta in 2020 as a B737-900 captain.

RONALD "RON" GLOCKNER '90 MBA passed away Jan. 21 in Leonardtown, Maryland. He worked as the chief engineer for flight systems at STRIKE aircraft aboard the Naval Air Station Patuxent River before retiring in 2006. Glockner was active in the local community, serving as treasurer for the St. Mary's County United Way chapter for 15 years.

LESLIE WARREN passed away Feb. 11 in Palm Coast, Florida, at age 78. Warren attended Florida Tech and served in the U.S. Air Force. Loved by his students, Warren was a math teacher, tutor, special education counselor and coach for the New Hampshire Olympics of the Mind program.

Retired Lt. Col. **PAUL BATTAGLIA**, who spent over 25 years teaching business courses at Florida Tech's off-campus sites, passed away peacefully at home in Berkley Springs, West Virginia, Feb. 20. A decorated Army veteran who served in Vietnam, Battaglia was a staunch believer in the power of education. He earned a bachelor's degree, two master's degrees and a DBA in management and econometrics and quantitative economics.

FACES OF GREATNESS

Susie Allen-Sierpinski

By Erin Alvarado '16

Since age 4, **SUSIE ALLEN-SIERPINSKI** '05, '07 MSA, has dreamed of being an astronaut.

Now, as a Gateway Deep Space Logistics (DSL) DSL-1 Mission integration engineer with NASA, Allen-Sierpinski is that much closer to reaching the stars.

"I did not think working on space toilets was going to be in my repertoire when I left Florida Tech," Allen-Sierpinski laughs. "But here we are!"

Born and raised in Nottingham, England, Allen-Sierpinski's passion for space was first sparked by a trip to NASA's Kennedy Space Center on a family vacation to Florida.

She quickly became a self-proclaimed "space nerd," and her parents encouraged her interest, sending her back to Kennedy Space Center for Space Camp Florida.

As the years went by, Allen-Sierpinski's passion for space grew. So, when her family decided to move to the United States, it only made sense to relocate to the Space Coast.

That's when she found Florida Tech.

"I was 16 when I enrolled at the university," Allen-Sierpinski says. "Moving to a new country and being younger than most of my peers was challenging, but Florida Tech made the experience perfect with its small campus and class sizes."

While a student, Allen-Sierpinski dove into the college experience and joined the women's rowing team, which she helped clench the Sunshine State Conference Championship in 2001.

"The small community I gained from the women's rowing team helped me learn that everyone has something to bring to the table as a group," Allen-Sierpinski says. "That lesson has carried on with me throughout my career."

After graduation, Allen-Sierpinski was ready to take off.

Throughout her illustrious career, she has held positions in the private industry with Boeing's C-17 Propulsion Systems Division and United Space Alliance's space shuttle program, and she worked on the Orion spacecraft before joining the government as part of the Federal Aviation Administration's Commercial Space Transportation Office and on to the Naval Air Systems Command before landing at NASA.

In her current role as part of NASA's Gateway Deep Space Logistics Project office, Allen-Sierpinski gives mission updates to the team working on the DSL-1 Mission as a part of the agency's broader Artemis campaign.

"As an integration engineer, I get to touch a lot of different systems and work with a diverse group of engineers, contractors, business folks and lawyers," Allen-Sierpinski says. "All the little things that we do contribute to the larger goal of having a space station around the moon."

In 2012, Allen-Sierpinski won the Space Coast Distinguished New Woman Engineer Award, and she was inducted as an American Institute of Aeronautics Associate Fellow in January.

In the words of acting NASA administrator Janet Petro, Allen-Sierpinski's message to fellow space nerds is to always "Embrace the challenge.

FLORIDA TECH CONNECTION: '05 B.S. aerospace engineering, '07 MSA applied aviation safety

LAST BOOK YOU READ: *Through the Glass Ceiling to the Stars: The Story of the First American Woman to Command a Space Mission*, by retired U.S. Air Force Col. Eileen M. Collins and Jonathan H. Ward

FAVORITE HOBBY: Taekwondo

WHAT'S ON YOUR BUCKET LIST: Spaceflight and visit Australia

IF YOU COULD BE A PLANET, WHICH PLANET WOULD YOU BE: Earth

WHAT ARE THE THREE MOST-USED APPS ON YOUR PHONE?: Camera, Instagram and Kindle

Office of Marketing and Communications
Florida Institute of Technology
150 W. University Blvd.
Melbourne, FL 32901-6975

BACK IN THE DAY

1970s
1980s
1990s
2000s

50 Years on the Air

In the late 1960s, the Florida Tech Ham Radio Club sought to establish a student-run campus radio station. After years setting up shop in some dorm rooms and acquiring generously donated necessities—turntables, cartridge tape machines and a transmitter—on April 4, 1975, DJ Charlie Brown announced for the first time, "This is WFIT 91.5 in Melbourne, Florida."

Now at a frequency of 89.5, WFIT has been a voice for the community for 50 years, continuing its mission to provide quality programming that enhances East Central Florida's cultural and educational environment. Pictured here: WFIT's first general manager, Gary Bowie, left, joins Florida Tech's founder and first president, Jerome Keuper, in the broadcast booth.

Learn more about WFIT's "Secret History": link.fit.edu/radio