# FLORIDA TECH

MAGAZINE

WINTER 2026

# Pitch Perfect

## PANTHER WOMEN'S SOCCER WINS NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

# In This Issue

Winter 2026 • Volume 24, Issue 3

## A Sweet Tradition

The Founders Day Ice Cream Social brought faculty, staff and students together to celebrate Florida Tech's 67 years of growth and community. Hosted in the Clemente Center and featuring ice cream from Cosmic Creamery, the September event highlighted Florida Tech's journey from humble beginnings to the vibrant university it is today. Attendees enjoyed sweet treats, lively conversation and plenty of Panther Pride as they connected across departments and generations.


## CAMPUS NEWS

A Message from the President . . . . . 3
The Pursuit . . . . . 4
Panther Athletics . . . . . 10
The Relentless . . . . . 12
Research . . . . . 14
Prime Examples: Wellness . . . . . 16

## ALUMNI NEWS

From the FTAA President . . . . . 32
AlumNotes . . . . . 34
In Memoriam . . . . . 38
Faces of Greatness: Duane De Freese . . . . . 39

## FEATURES

18 **Dream. Plan. Act.**
Florida Tech is poised for another era of growth. In May 2024, the university partnered with Credo, a higher education consulting firm, to aid in developing a master plan, a vital component in defining the Florida Tech of the future.

24 **Homegrown Scholars**
Graduation often marks the end of one story and the beginning of another, but for some Florida Tech students, the next chapter begins right where the last one ended.

28 **Big, Fun Alumni Survey**
This year's tasty theme brought in responses from foodies of all ages whose opinions vary as much as their pizza preferences. See how your responses compare to those of your fellow Panthers.

On the cover: From left, women's soccer players Mia Otero, Sienna Solomonson and Carolina Falcao celebrate their team's 3-0 victory against Franklin Pierce University Dec. 13, 2025, at Weidner Field in Colorado Springs, Colorado, securing the Panthers' first national championship in program history.

## A MESSAGE FROM THE **PRESIDENT**

Dear Florida Tech family,

A new year brings renewed energy to our campus, and I continue to be inspired by the momentum that characterizes Florida Tech. Everywhere you look, progress is taking shape, both in the classroom and across our growing university landscape. Success is in the air, in the classroom and on the field—as witnessed by our women's soccer national championship win!

Careful planning is a key component to success. Through our Campus Master Plan, which you can read more about in this issue of *Florida Tech Magazine*, we are turning bold aspirations into tangible results. The first major project, Crimson Crossing, is taking shape and remains on track for a fall 2026 opening. This 556-bed residence hall expands campus housing while creating additional spaces for community and collaboration, important first steps in our strategic effort to enhance how students live, learn and connect.

As we work together to bring new buildings to life, we are also deepening strategic partnerships and advancing innovation on the Space Coast and beyond. Our Vertex Applied Innovation Hub has welcomed new businesses in residence and recently opened additional laboratories and workspaces, including one of the largest and most technologically advanced indoor drone-testing facilities in the country. Vertex is quickly becoming a place where ideas are transformed into solutions that strengthen our community and drive economic growth across the state of Florida and beyond.

As we boldly step into 2026, I continue to be inspired by the dedication of our students, faculty, staff and alumni. Your passion and collective efforts continue to move our university forward in remarkable ways. I invite you to deepen your connection with us—share your expertise with students, attend alumni events or support scholarships and programs that open doors for future Panthers. Thank you for being part of this extraordinary community and for your ongoing support that will help shape Florida Tech for generations to come.

Go Panthers!

Sincerely,

John Nicklow, Ph.D.
President


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# FTRI at 1:

## Powerful Faculty Resource Now Fully Operational, Attracting Research

Having closed out its first year of full operations, the Florida Tech Research Institute (FTRI) is proceeding strongly, building critical strategic partnerships, attracting externally funded research and earning high marks from government inspectors for standards and compliance at its secure operations on campus.

"Things are moving very well," said Marco Carvalho, the distinguished computer scientist and executive director of the L3Harris Institute for Assured Information whom Florida Tech President John Nicklow appointed to lead FTRI. "We are establishing ourselves and getting very good responses from industry and government."

Since the institute became fully operational in fall 2024, it has secured over $500,000 in externally funded research contracts. Additionally, it has established several Cooperative Research and Development Agreements, or CRADAS, with different government organizations and local companies.

"We are building new research initiatives, as well as strong partnership agreements, with government, local industry and other academic institutes as we continue to strengthen our recognition and reputation in this space," Carvalho said.

FTRI is a new, specialized university research institute and faculty resource that is already substantially enhancing Florida Tech's capacity to conduct applied research for the Department of Defense and the defense industrial base sector. It is a separate legal entity, wholly owned by the university and chartered with supporting and advancing Florida Tech's applied controlled research for defense, national and industrial security.

President John Nicklow has recently designated the institute the Florida Tech organization responsible for managing, operating and safeguarding key types of information for the university. That includes Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI), which is the federal designation for sensitive information that is not classified but still requires safeguarding from public release due to legal, privacy or national security reasons, and information under export control, including International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) and Export Administration Regulations (EAR).

"With the development and early success of FTRI, the scope of research Florida Tech is approved and equipped to handle has broadened in important ways," Nicklow said. "The institute is a powerful addition to our research operations, and I encourage eligible faculty to understand and utilize its capabilities as we continue to grow this critical asset."

If faculty members who are also permanent residents or U.S. citizens are interested in pursuing or developing research opportunities that involve controlled information, they and Florida Tech may leverage and coordinate those initiatives and opportunities through FTRI.

"FTRI provides the mechanism to put that faculty member through training to enable them to engage with potentially controlled research. They can do it seamlessly through the institute," Carvalho said.

The establishment of FTRI brings Florida Tech in line with other top schools that feature similar facilities, including Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech Research Institute), Carnegie Mellon University (Software Engineering Institute), Johns Hopkins University (Applied Physics Laboratory) and MIT (Lincoln Laboratory).

> "With the development and early success of FTRI, the scope of research Florida Tech is approved and equipped to handle has broadened in important ways. The institute is a powerful addition to our research operations."
>
> President John Nicklow

## Autonomous Mowers

Florida Tech has expanded its sustainable maintenance efforts with the addition of three Kress RTKn autonomous mowers. The mowers' precise GPS programming and daily microcutting system reduce emissions, conserve resources and support healthier lawns. Facilities Operations actively monitors each mower's route and performance, freeing the grounds crew to focus on more specialized, high-impact landscaping work that elevates the overall campus environment.

FAMILIAR FACES:

# Tim Muth

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

> "I love working with motivated students, meeting interesting people, unlimited educational opportunities and traveling to new places."
>
> —Tim Muth

For more than 18 years, Tim Muth has been a driving force in the Bisk College of Business (COB), bringing real-world insight, student-centered dedication and an unwavering commitment to Florida Tech's mission. After joining the university in 2007 following a long corporate career, he has become a trusted instructor known for motivating students, embracing innovation and fostering collaboration across campus. We caught up with him to reflect on his journey and what continues to inspire his work.

**Working as a COB instructor, how have you seen Florida Tech and its students evolve?**

Change is constant—the growth of social media, the pandemic, economic and political events and the rise of AI have all influenced students, staff and faculty. To thrive, Florida Tech must keep adapting. I remember when online courses were introduced in 2008; today AI is challenging us to incorporate new technology while ensuring students still develop critical-thinking and communication skills.

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

I enjoy working with people across Florida Tech. While it is easier to stay inside your own silo, it is more rewarding to learn new things from other areas and to implement programs that help the entire university.

**What do you love about your job?**

I love working with motivated students, meeting interesting people, unlimited educational opportunities and traveling to new places.

**What makes Florida Tech a unique place to work?**

Small class sizes allow us to get to know our students; the presence of foreign students exposes us to different cultures; and we have the freedom to bring unique learning experiences into our classrooms.

**Favorite Florida Tech memory?**

There are many: watching students give professional presentations to local businesses, seeing them help each other on projects, taking them to business competitions, hearing about alumni career successes, playing on COB dodgeball and kickball teams, watching students grasp new concepts and sharing their excitement when they get their first job.

**How would you describe your relationship with students? Any success stories?**

I'm always available to meet with students. I try to be a role model, motivate them to always give 100% effort, remind them they have unlimited potential, show them a sense of humor and encourage them to stay positive. I have many student success stories—too many to summarize easily.

**How have you seen the university or your department change?**

I've seen physical growth, rising enrollment—both on campus and online—expanding athletic programs and new educational technologies. I've also had the privilege of meeting many smart and kind people.

**What do you see in your future, personally or professionally?**

My goals are to continue motivating students, travel internationally, keep learning every day, volunteer in the community and give thanks for my loving family.


## Campus Pond Awarded for Cleanliness, Ecological Protection

Florida Tech received Melbourne's Valuable Pond (MVP) Award for the outstanding maintenance and function of its on-campus stormwater pond. The university received a commemorative sign that highlights how the pond, which runs along Panther Place and Psychology Place near Panther Dining Hall, supports the health of the Indian River Lagoon.

The city's Beautification and Energy Efficiency Board launched the MVP Program in May 2025 to celebrate well-maintained stormwater ponds that also effectively reduce pollution.

# ‘Spacewoman’ Screening:

## Astronaut Eileen Collins Talks Spaceflight With Students


> “Whether you’re teaching at the university or designing rockets and spacecraft that explore our solar system … what a great time we live in. I think we live in very interesting times; there’s this renaissance going on in spaceflight, as well as science and astronomy.
>
> —Eileen Collins

At Gleason Performing Arts Center Oct. 4, 2025, Florida Tech welcomed Eileen Collins, the first woman to pilot and command a space shuttle, for a special screening of “SPACEWOMAN,” the new documentary about her extraordinary journey to space. Collins met with students before the event, sharing her insights on leadership and space exploration.

## weVENTURE WBC Launches ‘HerStory’ Podcast

This semester, weVENTURE Women’s Business Center (WBC) is slated to launch “HerStory,” a collaborative new podcast series that will give listeners an inside look at the journey to success for changemakers. That goal is reflected in the podcast’s tagline: “Inspirational origin stories of entrepreneurs from the Space and Treasure Coasts.”

“HerStory” will be hosted by small-business owners Darcy Manning, a professional makeup artist and founder of The Darcymm Collective, and KyAlea Monma, an award-winning brand strategist, storytelling expert and founder of HOKU Design Group. The duo will conduct heartfelt, unscripted conversations that highlight the triumphs, pivots and lessons that have defined the unpredictable path to success. Each episode will pull back the curtain to reveal what it truly takes to build and sustain a business.

“HerStory will be a founder-led podcast where entrepreneurs will discuss what they decided, where they pivoted, what broke, what they fixed and the beliefs that kept them moving,” said Kathryn Rudloff, weVENTURE WBC executive director.

Individuals can apply to be part of Season One and inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs. Businesses interested in aligning their brand with authentic voices in business leadership can also partner as sponsors.

For application details, episode releases and sponsorship information, visit weVENTURE.fit.edu.

# Aerospace on Campus Panel:

## Professionals Share Advice for Thriving in Space Industry

Presented by the Wings Club Foundation and Aviation Week Network in September 2025, Aerospace on Campus brought leading voices from the aerospace industry to Florida Tech. At the event, executives, mentors and editors from top aerospace companies, airlines and *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine shared career insights with students during an expert panel and presentation. The discussion covered hiring trends, networking strategies and practical tips for navigating the aerospace industry.

Here, we've compiled some of the best advice for aerospace hopefuls that speakers shared at the event.

"You might think what you know today will work for your professional career, but there will be detours along the way. … Be flexible, recognize that you have a strong foundation and continue to build and expand your knowledge so you remain competitive in the workplace."

**— HUNTLEY A. LAWRENCE '85**,
CEO and Managing Partner, HAL Strategy Group

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"Stay working on what you're really interested in."

**— IRENE KLOTZ**, Senior Space Editor, Aviation Week Network

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"Just ask. If you're interested, if you're ambitious, if you know you're hardworking—just ask. If you don't, you may never get those doors to open up to you. Don't be shy."

**— JOE BUSSENGER '13**,
Senior Director of Launch Operations, Relativity Space

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"There's a difference between confidence and cockiness. So, portray a willingness to learn. Even when you're 10 years into your career, you're still learning."

**— ZACHARY EWING '22**,
Fluids Engineer of Launch Infrastructure, Blue Origin

"You'll find Florida Tech grads everywhere you go. Talking to other alumni is a great way to really understand what's available in a career path."

**— KENNY PEDEN '16, '18 MSA**, Pilot, JetBlue

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"Tell people your dream. Tell people your goals. Be passionate, and don't be afraid to go right up to them and say, 'Hey, I want to go to space. What can you do to help me get there?' Put yourself out there, and don't ever underestimate yourself because you never know what opportunities might come out of it."

**— LAUREN-ANN GRAHAM '20, '23 M.S.**, Orion Test Engineer, NASA

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"Take advantage of the extracurricular activities Florida Tech has to offer because those will benefit your career more than you know. Building relationships, networking with people who are different from you, sharing your perspective and using that to reach thoughtful conclusions are all valuable experiences."

**— LETWAN SUTTON '20 A.A., '20, '21 MBA**,
Aviation Tax Manager, MySky

# New Partnership Brings High-Tech Boost to Weather Education, Research

Florida Tech has partnered with Climavision, a firm that provides highly detailed, AI-driven weather modeling from global to neighborhood levels and operates a national network of weather radars that fills in gaps between government-operated NEXRAD radar sites.

Under the new partnership, Florida Tech students, researchers and faculty gain access to these cutting-edge resources, as well as Climavision workshops and expertise.

These new capabilities and resources better equip meteorology students and faculty to study and understand embedded circulations and tornadoes within tropical storms and hurricanes in Florida and the development of hurricanes and other weather phenomena.

The partnership will not only provide real-world weather data, but also deepen students' exposure to machine learning, numerical weather prediction and AI-driven forecasting.

"Climavision operates in the areas of meteorology that are advancing quickly, providing our students a unique opportunity to conduct impactful research powered by the technology they will likely encounter in the real world," said meteorology professor Steven Lazarus.

The partnership will also be valuable to the College of Aeronautics, which plans to integrate the company's data into a range of class projects and research, such as understanding weather at lower altitudes, including how it influences myriad operations, from general and commercial aviation to search-and-rescue and medical transport. This low-altitude data will also support research into the fast-growing fields of drone services and advanced air mobility in Florida.

"Weather is so important to aviation," said assistant professor of meteorology Michael Splitt. "Having access to these Climavision resources will give our students an edge in their learning and, ultimately, position them to better support the rapidly evolving aviation industry.

### THE CLIMAVISION PARTNERSHIP WILL TEACH STUDENTS ABOUT ...

- Embedded circulations and tornadoes within tropical storms and hurricanes
- Hurricane and other weather phenomenon development
- Machine-learning applications in forecasting and data
- Numerical weather prediction
- AI-driven forecasting
- Low-altitude weather impacts on aviation and advanced air mobility

## Florida Tech Board of Trustees Welcomes 4 New Members

In October 2025, Florida Tech announced the addition of four new members to its board of trustees, bringing it to 20 active and six emeritus members. They begin their service this semester. Please join the university in welcoming our newest trustees:

### JOHN CALCAGNO

**PRESIDENT AND CEO, PIPER AIRCRAFT INC.**

Before being appointed to his current role, Calcagno served as Piper's chief financial officer for 11 years. With a wealth of experience managing finance operations and sales, he is a seasoned executive known for driving success across diverse industries.

### GREG DONOVAN '91

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MELBOURNE ORLANDO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT**

Throughout his 36 years of aviation industry experience, Donovan has served as a top executive and professional at major airports across the country. He is nationally accredited by the American Association of Executives and is a recipient of the Florida Department of Transportation's Aviation Professional of the Year award.

### TERRY FORDE

**PRESIDENT AND CEO, HEALTH FIRST**

Forde has served in a range of leadership roles for nearly 25 years with health care organizations in Kansas, Missouri and Colorado. Among his accolades, he has earned the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for his leadership while at Adventist Health Care in Maryland, where he served for a decade before accepting his current role.

### MIKE MOSES '91 M.S.

**PRESIDENT OF SPACELINE, VIRGIN GALACTIC**

An evangelist for private commercial spaceflight, Moses joined Virgin Galactic in 2011 after a distinguished 17-year tenure at NASA, where he received the NASA Exceptional Leadership Medal, among others. Today, he leads the Spaceline team in all aspects of safety, mission operations and FAA regulatory compliance.

# ‘Everyone Put Something Into It’

## Florida Tech Women’s Soccer Earns First National Championship on Ride of a Lifetime

By Jerry Durney

It is the single most coveted title in college athletics: national champion.

And Dec. 13, 2025, at the conclusion of the team’s 22nd season, Florida Tech women’s soccer claimed it. Defeating Franklin Pierce University 3-0 in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the team earned the program’s first-ever national championship.

The Panthers’ rise to prominence has not been sudden. Under the guidance of the late, great **FIDGI HAIG** ’90, the Panthers made their first Final Four appearance in 2010, also earning their first regular-season Sunshine State Conference (SSC) title.

Then, led by **RYAN MOON** ’11, the Crimson and Gray made a surprise run to the Elite Eight in 2021 before a dominant 2023 that saw Florida Tech win another regular-season SSC title, followed by a dramatic run to the Final Four.

Upon Moon’s departure, then-volunteer assistant coach Katy Freels took the lead as head coach. She kept the momentum rolling, guiding Florida Tech to an SSC regular-season and conference tournament double with a 13-3-3 record, earning the No. 2 seed in the South region.

Everything appeared to be lining up for the Panthers to make another deep NCAA Tournament run, but a goal in the 82nd minute of the second-round match against the University of Montevallo saw the 2024 season end.

As the 2025 season dawned, there was a belief that the team could continue its conference success of recent years, but the thought of scaling the biggest mountain?

“I think we weren’t satisfied after the end of last season,” senior goalkeeper Kaitlin Sinkler says. “We thought that we could have done better, and so we definitely wanted to strive for something more. We thought we had the players and the potential to do it.”

The Panthers were again among the SSC’s best during the regular season, earning a third-place finish thanks to a 9-3-5 record. After dispatching the University of Tampa and Rollins College in the SSC Tournament, the team’s dreams of repeating were dashed in the final, falling to Nova Southeastern University in a penalty shootout.

Coming so close to another trophy and falling at the last hurdle would’ve deflated many teams, but the Panthers walked away with confidence that if they crossed paths with the Sharks again, the outcome would be different.

“I think going into the SSC Final was when we started really feeling good about how we were playing,” says Sinkler.

The Panthers qualified for the NCAA Tournament as the South region’s No. 4 seed, defeating SSC rival Embry-Riddle University 2-0 in the first round.

Two days later, the Crimson and Gray faced the University of West Florida, the region’s No. 1 seed, who entered the game with an 18-0-2 record. The game was tied at 1 as it reached the final 10 minutes of regulation time, when senior defender Rebecca Storr provided one of the most memorable moments of the season with a thunderbolt from nearly 35 yards out, clinching the Panthers’ 2-1 victory.

The win sent the Panthers to the Sweet 16 and the South Region Championship, where once again, they faced a Nova Southeastern team that now stood at 16-0-4. This time, the Panthers bested the Sharks 1-0.

Florida Tech was off to the Elite Eight for the fourth time, where the team earned another victory in an emotional homefield match against Lenoir-Rhyne University. The Panthers were off to their second Final Four in three years.

> “It’s bigger than just a personal achievement. There are so many of us on the team who made it happen.”
>
> — Savannah Oxley, senior midfielder and team captain

In Colorado Springs, they met defending national champion California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, in the national semifinal. The Broncos entered the game with an 18-2-3 record,


having just defeated the No. 1-ranked Dallas Baptist University to reach the Final Four themselves.

The Panther defense controlled the game, securing a 1-0 victory that brought them to within 90 minutes of the ultimate goal.

The final pitted Florida Tech against Franklin Pierce, a team the Panthers had played to a 1-1 draw in early October 2025. But players entered the championship game knowing they had grown as a team.

The game's potentially most critical moment came in its opening minute, as Franklin Pierce threatened to score almost as soon as they won the kickoff. But Sinkler again met the moment, denying the Ravens twice.

"Those first few minutes, it was like, 'What just happened?'" Freels says. "Kaitlin made a couple of unbelievable saves, and I just kept reassuring everyone on the sideline, 'We're good.' … And then through action, our passing, our composure on the ball, we got ourselves out of it."

The Panthers continued to hold firm along the back line, as FPU advanced into the attacking third. Then, in the 14th minute, a beautiful pass from Alice Mottershead sprung free Lauryn Wood, who then fired from along the end line, and with multiple Ravens defenders in the area, scored, putting the Panthers in the lead.

Then, with just over a quarter of an hour to play, Sinkler punched away a deflected shot that proved to be the Ravens' last chance to equalize. When Sofia Posner found freshman Peyton White for a header to make it 2-0, the job was nearly complete. Another freshman, Rio Naganawa, removed all doubt with just over 2 1/2 minutes from full time with a perfectly placed strike from the top of the box.

"It wasn't until the third goal that I was like … 'What do we do? Like, how do we celebrate?'" Freels says.

The national championship victory was meaningful to everyone involved.

"My dad flew in from Switzerland for the [last] two games," says Storr. "I was so happy that he was able to celebrate with me and live those moments with me. Because he coached me growing up and was always one of the people who would support me no matter what."

For Sinkler, named Most Outstanding Player of the NCAA Tournament, going on a run like this meant getting to continue doing what she loves most with some of her favorite people.

"I think what's filled my heart during this time has been that we got to play as long as we did with each other and that we had the entire season to play with each other," she says. "I think that's been more special to me right now than having the title."

Senior midfielder and team captain Savannah Oxley, the program's record holder for career appearances, is proud of her team.

"It's bigger than just a personal achievement," the Melbourne native says. "There are so many of us on the team who made it happen. My work here, at this university, is what I'm really proud of. All the support from everyone—the staff, the coaches, everyone put something into it, and to see that pay off in my last year, I have so much love and gratitude for this school."

DEBORAH CARSTENS

# From 'The Jetsons' to 'Star Wars': Lessons from Fiction About the Future of Flight

What do aircraft, spacecraft and robots have in common? In my experiences at NASA and Florida Tech, I've learned that the future of flight isn't just about futuristic "flying taxis" or highly accurate and functional robots; it's about people.

At the heart of every complex technology are humans interacting with automation and each other to enhance safety on the ground, in the sky and in space. My human factors and safety research has taught me repeatedly that even the most advanced technology depends on understanding humans.

My introduction to this concept wasn't in a university classroom or on a jobsite. I grew up watching "Star Wars" and reruns of "The Jetsons." I was mesmerized by the automation of the starship fleet and by Rosie, the robot performing household chores.

At the same time, I was fortunate to have access to my very own rocket scientist, whom I fondly referred to as "Dad," a Delta rocket propulsion team member for over 30 years.

My interest in aeronautics began at birth. I viewed rocket launches from my front yard and explored Delta rocket control rooms on employee family days. That propelled me into an 11-year career at NASA-Kennedy Space Center (KSC) before I began my tenure as a Florida Tech faculty member.

Last year, I returned to my roots on a sabbatical working with NASA on a control room research study for the In-Situ Resource Utilization Pilot Excavator (IPEx)—a robot created to dig up regolith, or lunar soil, to extract and transport hydrogen, oxygen and water resources essential for life support.

The research identified 50 recommendations for enhancing the next-generation control room design to optimize humans' ability to monitor robotic excavators.

> "The biggest challenges aren't just technical—they're human. That's why human factors research will always be the bridge between imagination and implementation."
>
> .....
>
> Deborah Carstens
> *aeronautics professor*

In my first lesson, I recalled "The Jetsons" and "Star Wars": Automation augments human performance. IPEx may be the brawn, but the brains behind it are the humans who designed and developed the robot and supporting systems and directed it to perform.

Advanced Air Mobility (AAM), another of my research interests, promises to revolutionize transportation with electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) vehicles, which could be crewed or uncrewed.

While exciting, it presents new challenges, such as when operations become uncrewed and decision-making and problem-solving by a ground-based operations manager or remote pilot in command (RPIC) become vital in detecting anomalies differently from how a traditional pilot does.

That brings me to the second lesson: Redundancy is at the core of safety. Every "Star Wars" mission had a backup plan, and Rosie was the backup for fixing malfunctioning machines.

In the real world, there are layers of redundancy, from backup systems to human oversight of automation, resulting in safer operations.

The first two lessons lead to a third: trust. In "Star Wars," human characters believed in flying cars and flying support from R2-D2. In the real world, consumers and operators must have that same level of trust for new concepts to succeed.

The takeaway: The biggest challenges aren't just technical—they're human. That's why human factors research will always be the bridge between imagination and implementation.

**DEBORAH CARSTENS** '96 MBA has a Ph.D. in industrial engineering and is director of the Human Factors in Aeronautics, Safety, Sociability, Interfaces, Stress, and Training (HF ASSIST) Lab. Her research interests are safety and efficiency optimization of human performance, interfaces and processes.

An image of Lake Cormorán, where extracted sediment helped researchers illuminate the changing landscapes in eastern Ecuador's Upano River Valley.

# Unearthing the Changing Ecology of Ecuador's 'Lost City of the Amazon'

The inhabitants of the 'Lost City of the Amazon' in Ecuador's Upano River Valley grew corn and planted alder trees for over 1,200 years, but a later occupation that lasted just 300 years was the one that changed the ecology of the forest.

A new study led by professor Mark Bush and University of Amsterdam professor **CRYSTAL MCMICHAEL** '12 Ph.D. used microfossils extracted from the sediment of Lake Cormorán to provide the first detailed, 2,700-year-long view of changing landscapes in the Upano River Valley. The work, "Ecological Legacies and Recent Footprints of the Amazon's Lost City," is published in *Nature Communications*.

Their work builds on existing archaeological studies that documented over 7,000 structures hidden by the forests of the Upano River Valley that have been described by some researchers as the Lost City of the Amazon.

"Our study provides an improved timeline of human activity in the valley, as we see people moving in and out of the landscape and different styles of cultivation coming and going," said Bush, who leads the Institute for Global Ecology at Florida Tech.

About 750 B.C., the Upano civilization started its occupation of the valley. By about A.D. 250, their influence on the area began to weaken before disappearing about A.D. 550. The authors refute an existing idea that a large ashfall from the Sangay volcano caused the abandonment, instead finding that it was a gradual decline over several hundred years.

> "This work highlights the importance of looking into the past to understand the present."
>
> —Crystal McMichael '12 Ph.D.

After the abandonment, the forest closed over traces of human presence until a new wave of occupants arrived about A.D. 1500. These people farmed corn until they, too, abandoned the land about A.D. 1800. The forest that recovered after that abandonment was rich in tall palms, creating a forest type that had not been seen in the prior millennia.

The authors conclude that a blend of climate change and human impacts has shaped the modern forests of the Upano River Valley and that though the forests appear natural, they have only existed in their modern form for about 200 years.

The modern forests around Lake Cormorán are protected by the Sangay National Park.

## Civilization in the Upano River Valley

Upano River Valley events · Global civilization events

**4000 B.C.** *Emergence of early human civilization in Mesopotamia (what is now Iraq)*

**1800 B.C.** *Earliest findings of the Mayan Empire in Guatemala's tropical lowlands*

**750 B.C.** Upano civilization is born in Ecuador's Upano River Valley

**250 B.C.** The Upano influence on the area begins to weaken; civilization slowly dissolves

**A.D. 550** The Upano civilization fully disappears, forest buries remaining traces of human presence

**A.D. 800–1200** Huapula settlement briefly occupies Upano River Valley

**A.D. 1200** *Inca Civilization begins to emerge in Peru*

**A.D. 1492** *Christopher Columbus voyages to the "New World," beginning European colonization of the Americas*

**A.D. 1500** A new wave of corn-farming occupants flocks to Upano River Valley; their land use provokes shift in forest composition

**A.D. 1800** The new occupants abandon the forest, leaving distinctive new forests, rich in tall palms, to grow within the region

# Ph.D. Student Aims to Refine Stellar Distance Measurements with NASA Grant

Ph.D. student Lauren Hoffman won a prestigious NASA Future Investigators in NASA Earth and Space Science and Technology (FINESST) research grant to study the Milky Way's luminous stellar makeup and refine how distance is measured in outer space. The grant is one of the most competitive graduate research awards offered by the agency and is awarded to just 5% of applicants annually.

Hoffman's research proposal was one of just 24 selected from the 456 submitted to NASA's Astrophysics Division, which gives student recipients $150,000 in grant funding over three years to support research, educational development and outreach efforts to engage the public with astronomy.

The project, "Investigating the Period-Luminosity Relation of Long-Period Variable Stars in the Local Milky Way," is supervised by principal investigator Luis Quiroga-Nuñez, an assistant professor of space sciences, director of the Ortega Observatory and Hoffman's Ph.D. advisor. Hoffman will analyze long-period variable stars within about 10,000 light-years of the sun using data from facilities and missions across the world.

Astronomers use variable stars as a guide to cosmic distance and stellar evolution by utilizing a measurement called the period-luminosity relation. The formula uses the correlation between a star's intrinsic luminosity to the time its light takes to pulsate to estimate distance.

Hoffman hopes to build a better understanding of long-period variable stars—stars that regularly change in brightness—for their community of astronomers. She also predicts that her findings will help refine the period-luminosity relation, which will lead to a more accurate and detailed map of the Milky Way's stellar environment. The insights may complement major NASA missions, such as the James Webb Space Telescope and the upcoming Roman Space Telescope.

"I never, in a 100 million years, expected to get this research grant. I almost can't even describe how excited I was," Hoffman said. "It's such an honor, and I'm so incredibly ecstatic to get the opportunity to do this research."

Ph.D. student Lauren Hoffman and principal investigaor Luis Quiroga-Nuñez

# NSF-Funded Initiative Supports Decision-Making in Complex Engineering Problems

Mechanical engineering assistant professor Anand Balu Nellippallil is collaborating on a new initiative funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) that aims to support problem-solvers. He's developing a program that can easily retrieve relevant public data, such as models and formulas, to help engineers make decisions efficiently when solving complex design problems.

The NSF granted $300,000 to the project, "Open-Source Decision Support in the Design of Engineering Systems," through its Pathways to Enable Open-Source Ecosystems (POSE) program, which supports organizational management by promoting collaboration and innovation. The collaborative open-source platform will empower more distributed developers and designers to perform multidisciplinary design, explore design alternatives and make informed decisions more efficiently. Users of the platform will be able to inspect, modify and enhance public data.

With this grant, Nellippallil—a co-principal investigator alongside principal investigator Lin Guo and co-principal investigator Suhao Chen, both from the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology—hopes to develop a domain-independent decision support platform that can synthesize all questions an engineer may have while working through a complex problem, from designing an engine to designing software. The platform would pull public data and tools to offer relevant solutions and to make the design process more efficient. It will also remember each step of the process and tailor its recommendations to provide more relevant guidance.

Nellippallil hopes this collaborative technology can eventually support a wide range of industries looking to solve societal challenges, such as materials, advanced manufacturing, supply chains and national defense, through the collective knowledge of researchers, educators and industry professionals.

"It will create quantitative, decision-centric linkages in digital and open-source design, advancing how such problems are approached and solved," Nellippallil said.

The researchers also hope their platform will help strengthen science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education. Once the platform is established, Nellippallil plans to teach his students how to use it on design problems of their own.

**Prime is a quantity.**
Unique, a product unachievable by any two other numbers. *2, 3, 7 …*

**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* WELLNESS

To be well is to be healthy. Physically. Mentally. Emotionally.

While wellness in one area does not necessarily require it in the others, they are undeniably linked. Personal fitness, intellectual acuity, emotional maturity: Ultimate wellness commands all three—a balance that leads to satisfaction, fulfillment, happiness. Like most things, achieving it takes effort, consistency, evaluation, adaptation. And proactivity is key.

Whether for our students, faculty, staff or the greater community, at Florida Tech, we make wellness a priority.

**Here are a few prime examples.**

## 2 MENTAL HEALTH ACCOLADES

### *INSIGHT INTO ACADEMIA* MAGAZINE'S 2025 EXCELLENCE IN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AWARD

Among 71 schools in the country—and just five in the state—to receive the recognition, Florida Tech received the award for its dozens of mental health resources for students, faculty and staff. The university's award application highlighted two unique campus programs:

- The **"YOU MATTER" INITIATIVE**: a campaign sponsored by the Parent Leadership Council that installed three benches engraved with the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline across campus to create conversation and share resources about mental health, suicide awareness and suicide prevention
- The **"PSYCHOLOGY SCIENCE MINUTE"**: a quick and engaging WFIT- and School of Psychology-sponsored weekly radio segment that presents relevant, interesting and digestible research to the public, covering topics such as happiness, healthy relationships, the importance of sleep and burnout

### *THE PRINCETON REVIEW*'S 2026 MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES HONOR ROLL

Now in its second year, this designation recognizes just 30 institutions nationwide for their "exceptional dedication and commitment to their students' mental health and well-being" based on data from the publication's Campus Mental Health Survey, which polled administrators at 540 colleges about their schools' counseling, mental health and wellness services for students.

# 3 PROACTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

### BEHIND YOU

Florida Tech's Community Psychological Services is providing free telehealth therapy sessions to food and beverage workers through Behind You, a multistate effort run by Houston-based nonprofit Southern Smoke Foundation. The foundation aims to help food and beverage workers by reducing barriers to treatment, establishing support systems and creating industrywide national dialogue about mental health. Florida Tech's pilot program kicked off Sept. 1, 2025, and is being carried out by advanced clinical psychology Psy.D. students and Scott Gustafson, professor and CPS director.

### WINTER HAVEN HOSPITAL FOUNDATION

After five years implementing integrative mental and physical health training for Florida Tech Psy.D. students, the School of Psychology has renewed its partnership with Winter Haven Hospital Foundation and Florida State University College of Medicine. The partnership, established by Joel Thomas '97 MBA and assistant professor of clinical psychology Patrick Aragon, gives doctoral students from both universities a chance to gain unique clinical experience while helping expand access to mental health services in Polk County. Thirteen Florida Tech students have served more than 2,000 patients since the program was established in 2020, Thomas said.

### WHO WE PLAY FOR

With the health and safety of Florida Tech scholar-athletes in mind, the athletic department partners with Who We Play For (WWPF), a local nonprofit that raises awareness for cardiac treatment and preventive care. Each fall before practices begin, WWPF comes to campus and performs electrocardiograms (ECGs) for all Florida Tech scholar-athletes, a practice that can detect preventable conditions, such as hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, and potentially, save lives.

# 7 HELPFUL CAMPUS RESOURCES

**1**

### CHARLES AND RUTH CLEMENTE CENTER FOR SPORTS AND RECREATION

Campus gym and fitness center + healthy dining area

**2**

### O.A. HOLZER STUDENT HEALTH CENTER

Health services center offering medical consulting and services to students

**3**

### STUDENT COUNSELING CENTER

Facility where mental health professionals offer crisis intervention, counseling for common stressors—like anxiety and depression—and outreach and education programs

**4**

### CARE TEAM

A behavioral intervention team that helps identify and assist students struggling with mental, physical and behavioral health

**5**

### PANTHER PEER MENTOR PROGRAM

Program pairing upperclassmen mentors with incoming and returning students

**6**

### PANTHERA

AI-enabled chatbot representative that checks in with students about their Florida Tech experience how and when they need

**7**

### TALKCAMPUS

App that safely and anonymously connects students around the world to talk about their problems before they escalate

# Dream. Plan. Act.

## Building the Florida Tech of the Future

By Karly Horn and Andy McIlwraith

Florida Tech's first "campus" was three rented junior high school classrooms.

But what founding President Jerome P. Keuper lacked in land and laboratories, he made up for in confidence, vision and ingenuity.

As Florida Tech grew, so did Keuper's aspirations. He dreamed. He planned. He acted.

Less than 70 years later, Florida Tech's campus spans 130 acres, including everything from the conventional—library, classrooms, labs, dining and residence halls, sports and recreation facilities—to the uniquely Florida Tech—botanical garden, public radio station, performing arts, student design, manufacturing, aviation and marine centers.

Today, Florida Tech is poised for another era of growth.

Traditional and online student enrollment has increased more than 27% since 2019, reaching over 10,000 students in fall 2025. During that same timeframe, first-time-in-college students have jumped over 43%, and the fall-to-fall retention rate increased from 74.3% in 2022 to 83.3% in 2025.

"We're in a sustainable growth mindset," says Brian Ehrlich, Florida Tech's vice president of enrollment management. "As we grow, we want to have the best and brightest students, excellent staff, the top faculty. And the best people want to be in a great environment so they can do their best work—that's what we need."

So, in the spirit of Keuper, we dream, we plan and, over time, we act.

In May 2024, Florida Tech partnered with Credo, a higher education consulting firm, to aid in developing a master plan, a vital component of the university's Forward Together, Boundless Potential Strategic Plan.

During the yearlong process, Credo helped evaluate current campus utilization, compared it with academia benchmarks and combined it with university goals and feedback from conversations and focus groups conducted with hundreds of community members, alumni, students, faculty, staff and more.

And in fall 2025, Florida Tech unveiled the Campus Master Plan.

"My voice and the voices of the rest of the community echo through every facet of the Campus Master Plan," says Student Government Association (SGA) President Bryson Noble, a software engineering junior. "From the addition of more communal outdoor spaces to the academic facility renovations, housing enhancements and parking improvements, I can say with confidence that the master plan checks every box."

Less a prescriptive checklist and more a dynamic, adaptable framework, the Campus Master Plan identifies areas most ripe for growth, removal and enhancement in the next decade and beyond.

"As a construction management student, I've observed firsthand the potential our historic, yet distinctive campus holds," says Genevieve Spitaletto, a senior and SGA treasurer. "When I first arrived four years ago, I noticed several areas that could benefit from modernization. Seeing the university now take tangible steps to enhance and revitalize the campus is truly inspiring, and it makes me very excited for the future of Florida Tech."

By aligning the university's physical spaces with its mission, the plan aims to create a dynamic living-and-learning ecosystem that attracts and empowers the next generation of Panthers.

"This Campus Master Plan is a clear statement of our confidence in the future of Florida Tech and its people," President John Nicklow says in his Campus Master Plan introductory letter. "As we move forward together, we do so with clarity of vision and unwavering resolve."

The Campus Master Plan segments proposed projects into four phases: foundational work, followed by tier one, two and three priorities. Here, we showcase a few of the exciting, transformative projects set to revitalize and unify campus—the Florida Tech of the future.

*continued on page 20*

> "In terms of inclusion and transparency and giving everyone an opportunity to participate and be heard, the master planning process set a new precedent for Florida Tech. It really demonstrates the values of the university in a practical application."
>
> —Brian Ehrlich, vice president, enrollment management


RESEARCH AND INNOVATION CENTER
PHASE III
PHASE I
BABCOCK ST.
UNIVERSITY BLVD.
WELCOME CENTER
FLORIDA INSTITUTE

*continued from page 19*

## FOUNDATIONAL PROJECT SPOTLIGHTS

Several high-impact initiatives are already underway, laying the foundation for Florida Tech's campus transformation. These projects address immediate needs while setting the stage for larger changes to come.

> "The Master Plan sends a strong message to prospective students: We are building the future of higher education around you, and we want to succeed together."
>
> —Bryson Noble, software engineering junior, SGA president

## Crimson Crossing

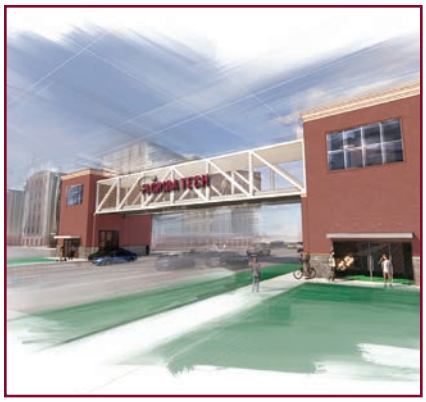
**What it is:** A new, six-story, 556-bed housing complex on the northeast corner of Babcock Street and University Boulevard

**The Benefit:** Student housing for increasing enrollment—projected to grow another 2% in 2026—is currently Florida Tech's No. 1 priority. The immediate focus is on meeting unmet demands (about 260 beds) and restoring the residential requirement for first- and second-year students, a proven high-impact practice.

### Highlights:

- One- to four-bed, apartment-style units
- Common spaces to facilitate study, programming and socializing on each wing
- 132 parking spaces, including accessible and electric vehicle stalls

**BONUS:** Creates enough capacity to enable renovation of existing housing, such as the Housing Quad and northern Southgate apartments, in later phases



## Pedestrian Bridge

**What it is:** A bridge over Babcock Street connecting Crimson Crossing to the academic core of campus

**The Benefit:** Once all three student housing phases are complete, roughly 1,700 students will live on the east side of Babcock. The bridge will provide a safe walkway to main campus over a busy street that many students cross multiple times daily.

### Highlights:

- Improves overall campus walkability, linking key parts of campus with ease and energy

**BONUS:** Acts as a bold visual statement near our entrance—creating a sense of arrival and reinforcing the university identity to the larger community that utilizes the major state road


## Athletics Gateway

**What it is:** An additional entrance on the southwest corner of campus to provide direct access to a new field sports complex and field house

**The Benefit:** The gateway will establish a more unified, spirited and accessible home for Florida Tech Athletics that will redefine how the campus experiences game day and align with the Athletics Master Plan, developed with S3Design in 2023.

### Highlights:

- A fan-centric facility with views of existing softball, baseball and soccer fields, along with dedicated locker rooms for Panthers, visiting teams and officials
- Athletic program offices
- Parking, an entry gate and protected lobbies, concessions and restroom facilities

**BONUS:** Relocating offices from the Charles and Ruth Clemente Center for Sports and Recreation leads to opportunities to enlarge and reconfigure existing fitness and weight-training facilities.

## TRANSFORMATIONAL PROJECT SPOTLIGHTS (TIER 1)

The next wave of projects will redefine the Florida Tech campus experience, transforming how the university welcomes and educates students, fosters and showcases innovation, and creates valuable links between people and programs.

> “Florida Tech’s ‘Forward Together’ is more than just an element in the strategic plan—it’s a promise to our community that every voice matters and plays a role in shaping the university’s future.”
>
> —Genevieve Spitaletto, construction management senior, SGA treasurer


## Welcome Complex

**What it is:** The university’s “front door” on the southwest corner of Babcock Street and University Boulevard, uniting admissions, financial aid and other vital campus services in one vibrant, student-centered space

**The Benefit:** Relocating the admissions and student service functions across Babcock Street defines an entry and allows Florida Tech to determine the type and amount of space, as well as how the welcome experience should take place, without current restrictions.

### Highlights:

- Approximately 50,000 square feet
- Includes staff offices, service points, comfortable small and large meeting rooms, a larger presentation room
- Home to: Office of Admission, Office of Financial Aid, Office of Career Services, Academic Support Services, Copy Center, new campus store
- Views toward the bustling core of campus

**BONUS:** Instead of loading onto the trolley to cross busy Babcock Street, visitors can exit the Welcome Complex onto a footbridge through a rain garden to start their campus tours.

## Student Design and Fabrication Space

**What it is:** A bold, visible hub for hands-on learning, creativity and collaboration with space for prototyping, fabrication and interdisciplinary teamwork that showcases Florida Tech’s signature maker culture and spirit of innovation

**The Benefit:** Hands-on learning is the cornerstone of a Florida Tech education. While the existing L3Harris Student Design Center and Machine Shop are exemplars of this, as enrollment grows, so will demand for these kinds of facilities.

### Highlights:

- Approximately 36,000 square feet
- Expansion, upgrade and/or relocation of existing labs, support spaces, project rooms, ideation spaces, CAD and computer labs, offices, testing facilities, assembly shop
- New computing space

**BONUS:** A new, updated makerspace supports the strategic plan’s emphasis on innovation, collaboration and solution-oriented talent development across programs.

## Research and Innovation Center

**What it is:** A new, interdisciplinary research facility that will bring cutting-edge labs, collaborative spaces and innovation into the spotlight, showcasing Florida Tech’s growing research enterprise and supporting discovery across science, engineering and beyond

**The Benefit:** A Research and Innovation Center of this magnitude will help recruit and retain students and faculty while further solidifying Florida Tech’s Carnegie Research 2 status, a key goal outlined in the university’s Forward Together, Boundless Potential Strategic Plan.

### Highlights:

- Approximately 80,000 square feet
- Replaces Academic Quad and Frueauff building functions
- Relocates some off-campus research functions to campus
- Potential deck overlooking Patterson Botanical Garden and footbridge to Gleason Performing Arts Center

**BONUS:** Building on the west side of Babcock Street accomplishes a number of goals: anchors one side of the main entrance; uses space already occupied by the Frueauff Building and parking rather than greenspace; and creates a dramatic presence on busy Babcock Street.

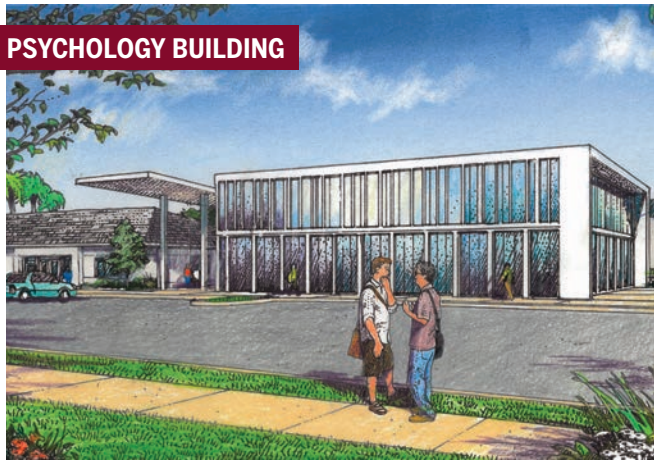
*continued on page 22*

*continued from page 21*

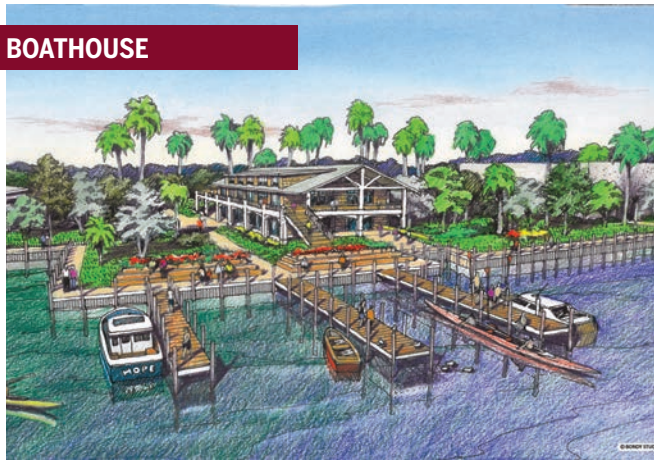
## ASPIRATIONAL AND LONG-TERM PROJECT SPOTLIGHTS (TIERS 2 AND 3)

With a focus on existing and emerging academic needs and opportunities, these long-term projects will enhance students' learning experience while strengthening campus cohesion and efficiency.

**PSYCHOLOGY BUILDING**



**BOATHOUSE**



### Psychology Building
A dedicated home for the School of Psychology will bring faculty, students and labs back under one roof.

### Boathouse
Set along the Indian River, a three-story, modern facility for marine research, training and water-related sports will enhance access to the waterfront and support Florida Tech's unique strengths in ocean engineering and marine science.

### Bisk College of Business Building
A new, two-story building where the Academic Quad currently sits will bring Bisk College of Business offices, classrooms, conference and collaboration spaces, and community collaboration centers to campus.

### Skurla Annex
An addition to Skurla Hall will accommodate consistently increasing College of Aeronautics enrollment, with features such as relocation of currently off-campus labs, additional research and simulator labs and two new 50-seat classrooms.

### Music Building
A facility adjoining and providing easy access to Gleason Performing Arts Center will include offices, studios, practice rooms, a multipurpose practice-recital-performance space and a music courtyard for outdoor practice, allowing sound to reach the entire Crawford Green.

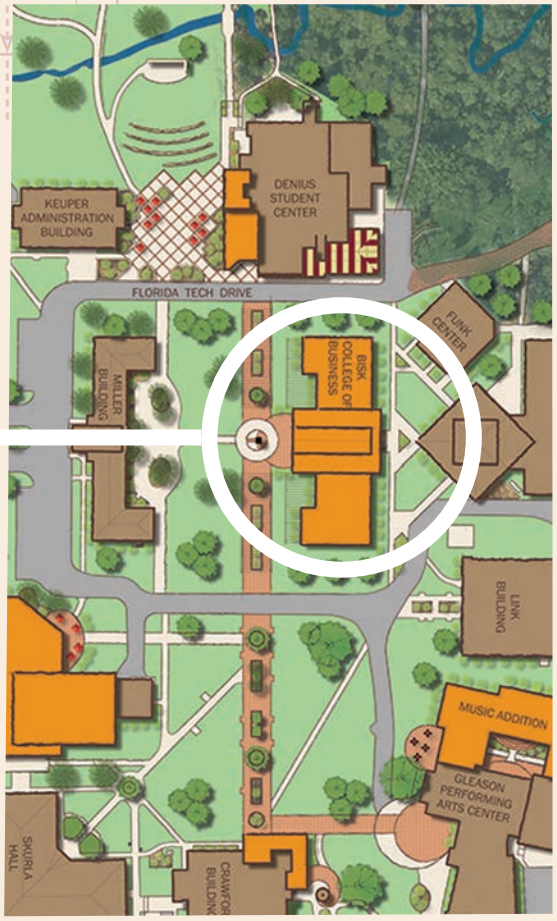
### Housing Expansion
Additional modern apartment-style living spaces will replace the remaining Southgate buildings north of Crimson Crossing, and older on-campus halls—such as those in the Housing Quad—will be renovated with a focus on first-year housing that is more home-like and inviting, as well as unique features that promote community, personal growth and shared experiences.

> "[The Campus Master Plan] is designed to align our physical environment with the university's vision to be recognized as a premier institution for improving the human condition and solving the challenges of tomorrow."
>
> —President John Nicklow

## A Student Spin

For their senior design project, Spitaletto and her team drew inspiration from the Campus Master Plan's COB building concept, adopting its location and overall layout suggestions. The senior design team's proposal then takes plans a step further, developing a more detailed design that includes floor plans, architectural schematics, AutoCAD and Revit Designs, and other specific requirements to bring the concept to life.

"There were many elements to consider while developing this proposal—it's a challenging project, and we understood that from the start," Spitaletto says. "We're all hardworking students who wanted a project that would not only challenge us but also inspire us to create something meaningful for the place we've called home for the past four years."




## FINISHING TOUCHES

Florida Tech's Campus Master Plan doesn't stop at buildings. It brings together everything in between: the walkways, greenspaces, gathering spots and landscapes that shape how campus feels, flows and functions. These connecting elements unify the student experience, tie together academic and residential zones and elevate Florida Tech's identity as a vibrant, welcoming place to learn and grow.

### Shaded Pathways and Outdoor "Rooms"

Offer relief from sun and rain while creating places to pause, connect and collaborate

### Pedestrian-First Zones and Traffic-Calming Features

Improve safety and accessibility throughout campus

### Thoughtful Landscaping, Stormwater Features and Botanical Garden Preservation

Reflect a deep respect for Florida's natural beauty and Florida Tech's commitment to sustainability

> "Florida Tech is more than a collection of buildings; it is a living and learning space that fosters bright futures."
>
> —President John Nicklow

# Homegrown Scholars

What Inspires Undergrad Alumni to Return for Another Degree

by Trey Avant

Graduation often marks the end of one story and the beginning of another. But for some Florida Tech students, the next chapter begins right where the last one ended.

By continuing from undergraduate study into a graduate program at Florida Tech, these students build on the momentum they have already established. The setting may stay the same, but the plot thickens: faculty relationships evolve into invaluable mentorships; coursework gives way to advanced research; and interests sharpen into research passions and professional focus.

Staying at Florida Tech for graduate school offers clear benefits for students pursuing multiple degrees, allowing them to move forward with confidence, supported by research continuity, trusted academic programs and a community invested in their success.

These are the stories of four students who chose to keep turning the pages—finding new purpose in familiar places and continuing their education at Florida Tech for the sequel.

## Continuity in Research

For **ANDY WALKER** '21, the pull to stay at Florida Tech for graduate school was the work itself and a mentor who knew how to guide without gripping too tightly.

After exploring several labs, Walker found his fit studying coral reef ecosystems and conservation in the lab of Robert van Woesik, professor and director of the Institute for Global Ecology.

"I became fascinated by the larger-scale analysis of coral reef ecosystems," Walker says. "I always imagined myself out in the field—scuba diving and working directly with marine life—but then, I realized this lab was the perfect fit for me. Getting my hands on that data, mapping it and uncovering those patterns was the moment I realized this is where I want to continue going."

> "I have no doubt that if I weren't at Florida Tech, I wouldn't have been able to achieve this much so quickly."
>
> —Andy Walker '21 earned an undergraduate degree in marine biology and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in biological sciences

What began as a student–mentor relationship became a genuine research partnership.

"As an undergraduate, I looked up to Dr. van Woesik as a mentor—and I still do. But now, it feels more like I'm walking alongside him rather than following him," Walker says. "He does a great job of grounding you, offering meaningful advice and gently guiding you forward."

When it comes to Walker's talent, van Woesik doesn't mince words.

"Andy quickly transitioned from being a star undergraduate student to a major league player, writing papers with me in high-caliber international journals," van Woesik says. "Andy is very creative but also scientifically rigorous, which are the perfect characteristics for success."

Now pursuing his Ph.D. in biological sciences, Walker says staying accelerated his development.

"I'm confident that staying at Florida Tech was the right decision," he says. "I have no doubt that if I weren't at Florida Tech, I wouldn't have been able to achieve this much so quickly."

He credits the people around him.

"The only reason I've been able to do so well in graduate school—and stay sane—is because of the people I work with," he says. "None of what I've accomplished so far would have been possible without them."

For Walker, staying at Florida Tech meant carrying forward the research he'd already invested in and giving himself the space to see how far he could progress.

*continued on page 26*

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## Tried-and-True Quality Education

For **RALPH ROCCO** '24, staying for graduate school wasn't a gamble—it was a continuation of an academic experience he already trusted.

As an undergraduate, Rocco experienced firsthand what set the College of Aeronautics (COA) apart: faculty with deep industry experience, aviation-specific coursework and an environment designed to prepare students for the realities of the field. By the time he graduated, he already trusted the college's quality—and that trust shaped his next step: pursuing his master's in applied aviation safety.

"I already knew the quality of the education here—it's a strong program, and I knew exactly what I was getting," Rocco says. "I already knew my professors were not only experts in aviation but also genuinely cared about their students' success and made sure we were equipped with the skills needed to make a positive impact in the aviation industry."

A major influence was **RIAN MEHTA** '13, '15 MSA, '17 Ph.D., COA associate dean, who helped Rocco understand how a master's degree would build directly on the foundation he already had built.

"Dr. Mehta took the time to discuss the opportunities and value of continuing into graduate school at Florida Tech," he says. "He really emphasized that continuing your education isn't just about earning another degree but about deepening your expertise and professional readiness. That conversation was a key moment in my decision to stay."

Mehta saw in Rocco the qualities needed to thrive.

"[Rocco] really stood out as an exceptional student and was always incredibly hardworking and inquisitive," Mehta says. "This is exactly the mindset needed to be successful in graduate school, and I have no doubt he will go on to do great things in his career."

Graduate school also brought Rocco closer to **DEBBIE CARSTENS** '96 MBA, COA professor and graduate program chair, whose course and guidance pushed him into deeper research and industry-level problem-solving.

"Dr. Carstens has been incredibly helpful in guiding me through the graduate program—from selecting classes to identifying which skills would be most beneficial to add to my portfolio," Rocco says.

His coursework reinforced that choice, connecting every lesson to the demands of the field.

"Staying at Florida Tech has prepared me not only by expanding my aviation knowledge, but also by allowing me to develop a well-rounded understanding of my field—deepening my understanding of safety—an area I now feel much more confident in."

Rocco knew exactly what he would get at Florida Tech: a rigorous, reliable education. For him, that assurance made staying at Florida Tech an easy choice that has proven to be the right one.

> "I already knew the quality of the education here—it's a strong program, and I knew exactly what I was getting."
>
> —Ralph Rocco '24 earned an undergradate degree in aviation management and is currently pursuing a master's in applied aviation safety

## Mentorship That Lasts

For **NATALIE SHAH** '18, '22 MBA, a biomedical engineering undergraduate alumna, the plan once involved a white coat, not a business suit. But a year working in a hospital changed how she imagined making an impact.

"Working in the hospital helped me see how clinical care and organizational strategy work hand in hand," Shah says.

> "I had already been enjoying my collaboration with Dr. Walton, and I thought, 'Imagine how much more we could accomplish if I stayed—more projects, more topics, more opportunities to grow.'"

Natalie Shah '18, '22 MBA, earned an undergraduate degree in biomedical engineering, as well as a master's degree in business administration. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in business administration.

"It was fascinating to see that the people making the biggest systemic impact weren't necessarily the physicians—it was the business side, analyzing the data, making strategic decisions and implementing organizational ideas, that shape how care is delivered."

She traded the medical track for an MBA—a shift that introduced her to the mentor who would ultimately define her graduate experience: Abram Walton, professor and Center for Innovation Management and Business Analytics (CIMBA) executive director.

As Shah's interests shifted, so did her work with Walton. She began working in CIMBA, becoming a research scientist, gaining hands-on experience in innovation, strategy, artificial intelligence, human–autonomous teams and leadership. She co-authored papers, worked with industry partners and presented at the HR Florida State Conference—the largest HR conference in the state.

When Shah began exploring doctoral programs, Walton assured her he would mentor and work with her wherever she went, going as far as connecting her with faculty at other universities

so she could hear directly about their programs and experiences.

Through those conversations, Shah said she learned a valuable piece of advice: Choosing a doctoral path isn't about the name of the institution—it's about the research you pursue, the purpose behind your work and the community that supports it.

"I had already been enjoying my collaboration with Dr. Walton, and I thought, 'Imagine how much more we could accomplish if I stayed—more projects, more topics, more opportunities to grow,'" she says.

Walton sees in Shah the same potential she sees in herself.

"Through her work with CIMBA, Natalie has built a portfolio that is on par with the nation's most accomplished graduate scholars—publishing original research, presenting at international conferences and leading major instructional design initiatives with confidence and skill," he says.

Now pursuing her DBA, Shah says the decision to stay for graduate school—twice—was the right one.

"Florida Tech's DBA program gave me the perfect balance—the ability to continue my research with Dr. Walton while also gaining pragmatic, industry-relevant experience," she says. "I don't think I would've found that balance anywhere else."

Mentorship plays a role in every student's story, but for Shah, it was the guiding force that made graduate school at Florida Tech the most impactful next step.

## A Community That Cares

For **LILLIANNA VITALE** '23, a clinical psychology doctoral student, returning to campus felt both familiar and new.

"It feels pretty surreal," she says. "I really enjoy seeing the same faces—it all feels pretty natural to me—but it's strange coming back and filling a different role."

That role—researcher, clinician-in-training, mentor—was shaped by two faculty members who helped define her path: Julie Costopoulos, professor and head of the School of Psychology, and Marshall Jones, assistant professor and director of the Center for Applied Criminal Case Analysis (CACCA).

She worked with Costopoulos on her Forensic Clinical Research team, writing analytical summaries on mental health courts and exaggerated psychiatric symptoms, and even assisting in a sanity evaluation, an experience that solidified her path.

"It was honestly the best experience," Vitale says. "Seeing it all firsthand gave me a glimpse of what my future will be like—everything just clicked."

Vitale says Costopoulos modeled the kind of clinician she hopes to become—compassionate, empathetic and ethical.

"Her approach to forensic work combines precision and humanity—and that's what you need when you go into the legal system," she says. "I want to be her in the future."

Costopoulos says Vitale's focus sets her apart.

"Lillianna has always been clear on her focus and what she wanted to accomplish," she says. "She is a go-getter. She takes advantage of all the opportunities in psychology—working with multiple faculty members on research, actively participating as an expert witness in mock trials, presenting at conferences and more."

Vitale's time in Jones' CACCA, where she analyzed juvenile recidivism, shaped her as a researcher and encouraged her to stay for her Psy.D.

"Dr. Jones fostered a sense of community within our research team that made it incredibly difficult to imagine leaving," she says.

Jones saw her curiosity from the start.

"Lillianna seized the opportunities to learn outside of the classroom," Jones says. "When students adopt a mindset of curiosity and engagement outside the classroom, they can do amazing things."

Now, Vitale serves as a graduate student assistant and project manager for CACCA, leading the same team on which she'd started.

"That full-circle moment has been incredibly meaningful for me," she says.

Presenting her research at the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences conference, she adds, "felt like the continuation of everything I'd been working toward, and seeing that work come to life in a professional setting was incredibly rewarding."

Vitale's message to undergrads:

"Florida Tech has been the place where passion turns into purpose—where I discovered not just what I love to do, but who I want to be," she says. "If you already feel at home here, then stay. You'll feel supported, cared for and encouraged by your mentors, who genuinely want to see you succeed."

Her community had become integral to her growth, and for Vitale, those relationships made staying at Florida Tech feel not just natural but right.

> "Florida Tech has been the place where passion turns into purpose—where I discovered not just what I love to do, but who I want to be."
>
> —Lillianna Vitale '23 earned her undergraduate degree in forensic psychology and is currently a clinical psychology doctoral student

## The Next Chapter Starts Here

Four students. Four disciplines. Four reasons for choosing Florida Tech—again.

With the foundation that shaped their success already built—research, programs, mentors, community—they now devote more time to progressing toward their futures.

For them, staying at Florida Tech wasn't about comfort; it was about growth. Their undergraduate years gave them roots; graduate school helped them bloom, as they embark on their next chapters—right where their stories began.

# THE BIG, FUN FLORIDA TECH ALUMNI SURVEY

Almost 600 of you participated in the third annual Big, Fun Florida Tech Alumni Survey.

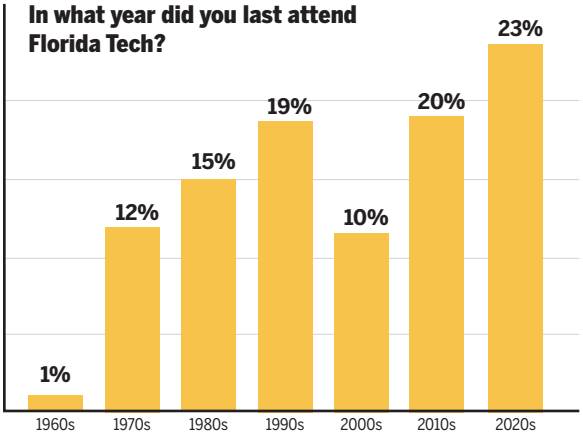
This year's tasty theme brought in responses from foodies ages 21 to 89 whose opinions vary as much as their pizza preferences.[1] Collectively, you're over the boba (77%) and matcha (78%) trends but can't get enough of charcuterie boards (74%) and bacon on everything (76%)—including that pizza[2] we talked about. You don't mind if friends steal a fry or two[3]—as long as they don't chew them too loudly[4]—but have less tolerance for cold food that is supposed to be hot.[5]

Many of your food-related memories involve holiday meals and cooking—specifically, with Grandma—but there were several unique recollections, as well: shout out to the watermelon-eating contest winner and Kennedy Space Center Space Dots enthusiasts! Your last-meal requests were as diverse as you'd expect from the Panther alumni base, including everything from Brazilian churrasco, curry, sushi and Turkish fried eggplant to surf and turf, chicken parmigiana and pancakes.

Here, we've combined a heaping helping of Panther participation, spiced it up with a pinch of analysis and a dash of design and cooked up something we think you're really going to like. **Dig in!**

[1]See page 29 for a breakdown | [2]One of the top write-in responses for single pizza topping you couldn't live without | [3]Only three of you consider it your greatest food-related annoyance | [4]Ranked the second-most annoying | [5]No. 1 most annoying

## SOME DEMOGRAPHICS



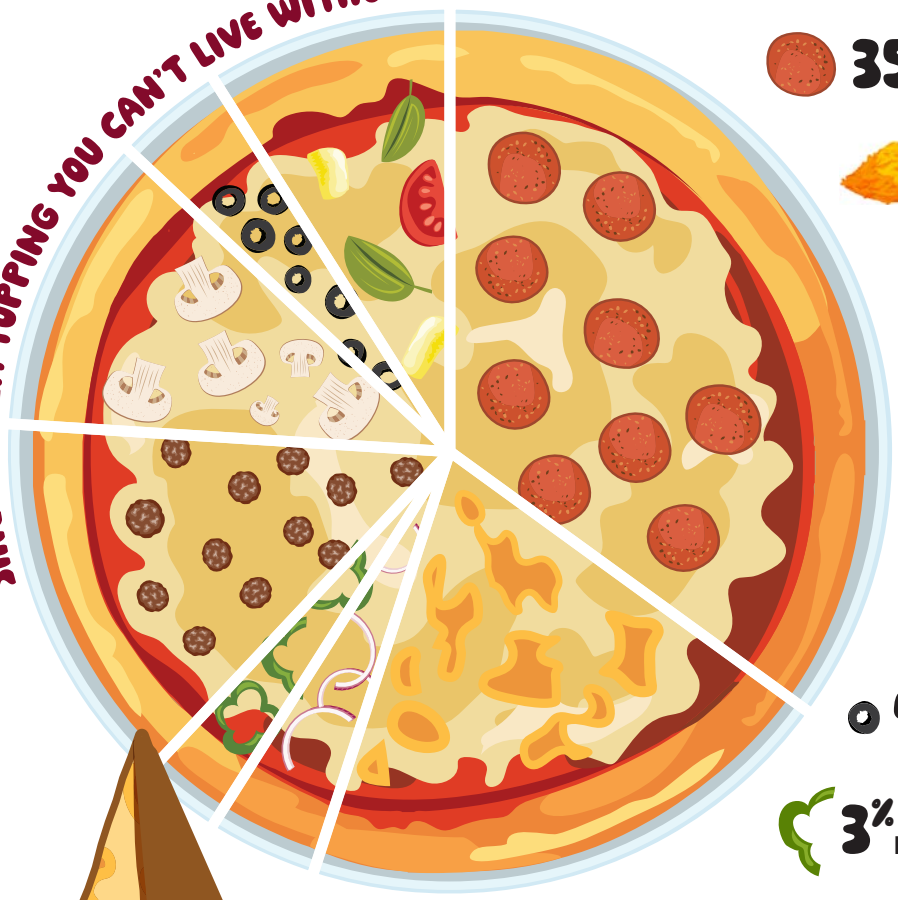

The majority of you



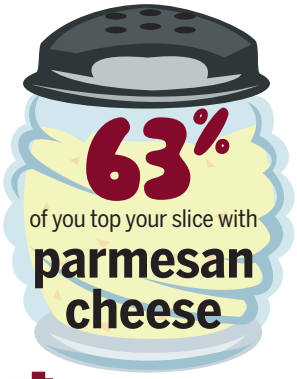
The SUB Cafe (back in the day) claimed the top spot as favorite campus eatery.

## PIZZA PICKS*

### SINGLE PIZZA TOPPING YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT?

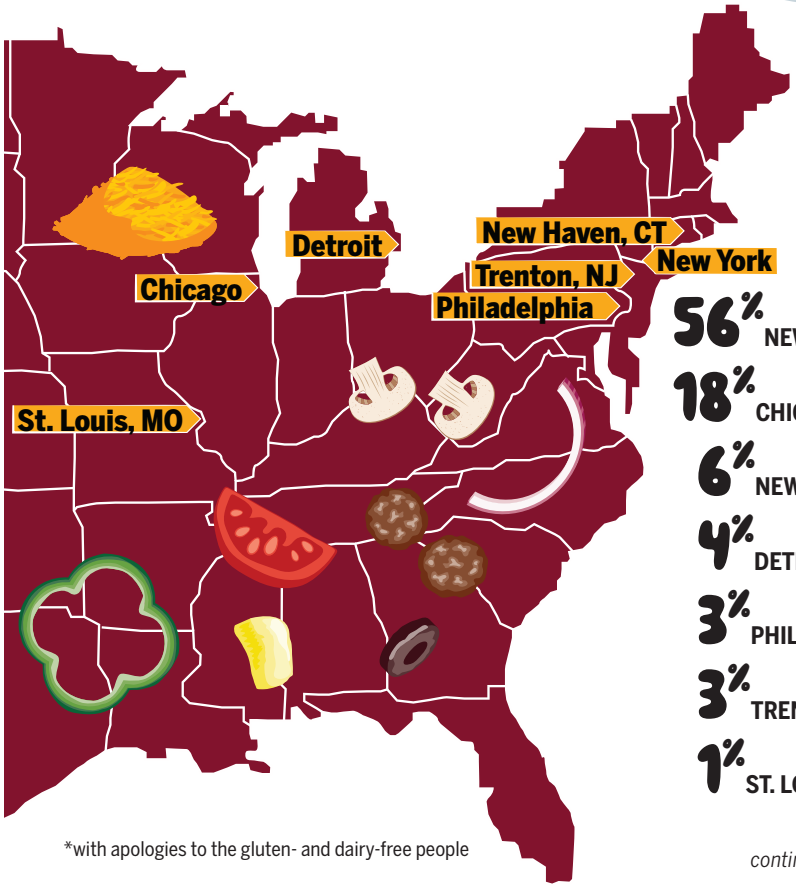


- 35% PEPPERONI
- 20% EXTRA CHEESE
- 14% SAUSAGE
- 11% MUSHROOMS
- 9% OTHER
- 4% ONIONS
- 4% OLIVES
- 3% PEPPERS



**63%** of you top your slice with **parmesan cheese**

**56%** of you prefer **hold & fold** as your pizza consumption method




- 56% NEW YORK STYLE
- 18% CHICAGO STYLE
- 6% NEW HAVEN STYLE
- 4% DETROIT STYLE
- 3% PHILADELPHIA STYLE
- 3% TRENTON STYLE
- 1% ST. LOUIS STYLE

*with apologies to the gluten- and dairy-free people

*continued on page 30*

*continued from page 29*

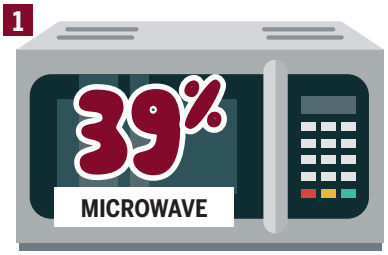
## THIS OR THAT?

- 61% Savory snacks or Sweet snacks?
- Fermented or Distilled? 62%
- 64% Stanley cup or Owala bottle?
- 81% "I'll try, sure" or "I'll pass, thanks"?
- Candy or Chocolate? 79%
- 60% Wings or Fingers?
- 63% Hot coffee or Iced coffee?
- 66% Takeout or Delivery?

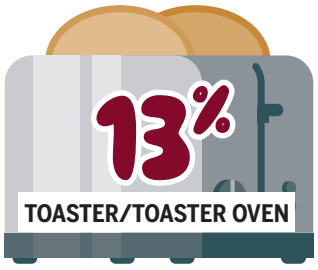
Several delicious debates were pretty much a toss-up:

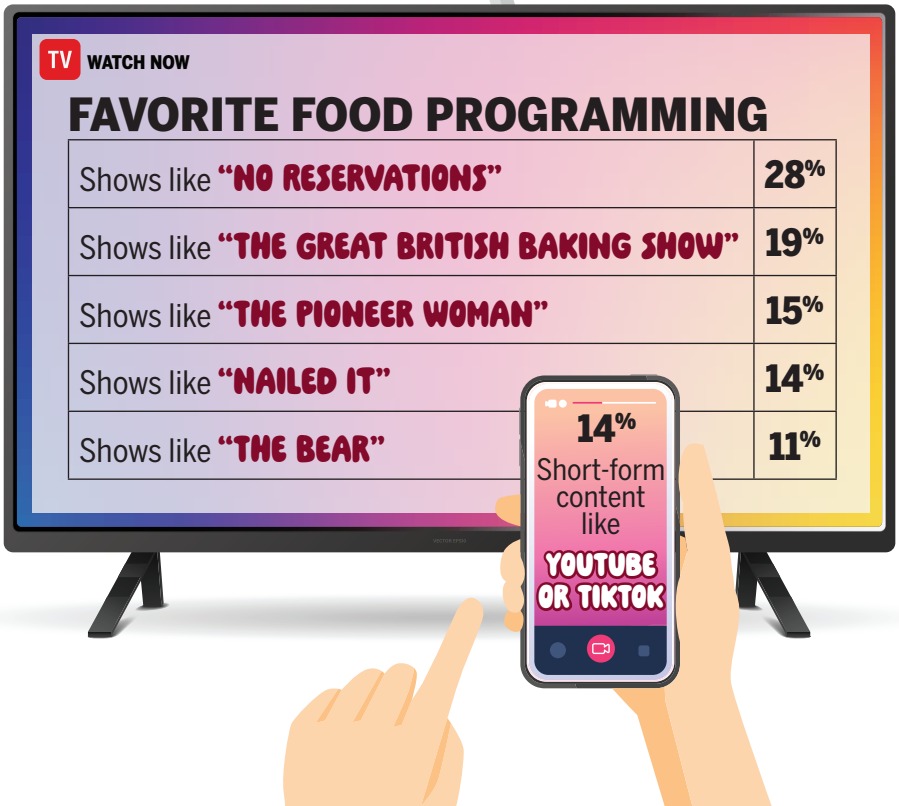
- Buffet or Plated?
- Traditional toaster or Toaster oven?
- Counting calories or Tracking macros?
- "Cook for me" or "I'll make dinner"?
- Pancakes or Waffles?
- Wrap or Bowl?

## TOP 3 KITCHEN APPLIANCES

1. 

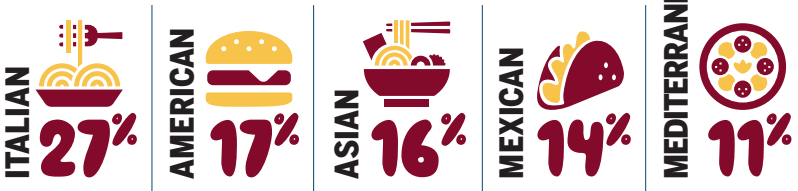

2. 


3. 

## PROFESSOR WITH WHOM YOU'D MOST LIKE TO DINE


## TOP 5 FAVORITE CULTURAL CUISINES




You have a lot of great food-related memories from your time on campus, many centered around togetherness, milkshakes and, oddly enough for college students, LOTS of food fights—tsk, tsk …

Scan to read all your fellow Panthers' campus and childhood munch-time memories:

## IN CONCLUSION

As is tradition, we also toast the outliers! To those who …

**Find cilantro to taste soapy and metallic (14%)**

**Can't get enough pickle-flavored fun (30%)**

**Double-stack (<1%) your Berkeley-style pizza (<1%)**

**Get the most use out of your stand mixer (1%)**

…you may be few, but YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Finally, congratulations to **ETHAN HALL** '96, who won the drawing for an awesome Florida Tech prize pack!

Thank you to everyone who participated in the third annual Big, Fun Florida Tech Alumni Survey. We hope you had fun, got a good laugh or two and learned a little something about your peers—and hey, maybe even about yourself. While no two Panthers are the same, Gen Z or Gen X, calorie counter or macro tracker, chefs, bakers and sideline taste-testers alike—**HERE, YOU BELONG**.

## A MESSAGE FROM THE FLORIDA TECH ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Hello Panthers,

I would like to wish everyone a happy (belated) holiday season! I hope it was filled with family, friends and much happiness.

As we celebrate and welcome a new year, I'd like to share with you a very special memory from 2025.

Our Alumni Awards Gala Friday, Oct. 17, in the Charles and Ruth Clemente Center for Sports and Recreation, was amazing!

There was great food, live music and lots of mingling over cocktails and dancing until the band stopped playing. If you haven't attended a gala yet, plan on it this year, as it is always a great time.

The event is dedicated to our alumni, and through a nomination process, each college honors one of its own. The Florida Tech Alumni Association also honors the Jerome P. Keuper Distinguished Alumni Award and GOLD (Graduates of the Last Decade) Ad Astra Alumni Award recipients.

New for the event this year, we also celebrated 10 alumni-owned-and-operated businesses!

The gala was extra special for me this year because several people I know personally—friends with whom I went to school, shared great memories or worked alongside as Alumni Association president—were recognized.

Bonus: I was able to stand on stage with President Nicklow and hand them their awards!

Recognizing our highly accomplished alumni is a huge honor for me, and being part of this event will always be special.

Florida Tech has amazing Panthers accomplishing things that are out of this world. But the only way we know about them is when you stay in touch with us and share what you're doing—or you are nominated for an award. Every year, it gets harder to choose the winners because the applications are truly breathtaking to review.

Share your accomplishments with us and get those nomination forms in because we want to celebrate you.

Never forget, you're a #Panther4Life!

Yours,

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

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

**Bryan Pommer** '85
Member-at-Large | Miami, FL
bryan@pommers.com

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

## Alumni-Owned Business Honorees

This year, 10 alumni-owned-and-operated businesses were honored at the Alumni Awards Gala—a new tradition celebrating Panther entrepreneurship and impact.

- 1000 WORDS PHOTO BOOTHS
  **Michael Arenella** '17, '19 MBA
- ALTR
  **Chris Struttmann**
- ARCADE MONSTERS
  **Adrian Ravelo** '08
- ARTEMIS IT
  **Travis Proctor** '98
- BJG GLOBAL CONSULTING
  **Beth Gitlin** '14 M.S., '19 Ph.D.
- CECALA CAREER CONSULTANTS
  **Paul Cecala** '85
- LONG DOGGERS
  **Tony Gebhardt** '88, **Albert Steiginga** '89, and **L.J. Burr**
- OPSIN
  **Oz Wasserman** '16
- RADIANCE TECHNOLOGIES
  **Bill Bailey** '21 MBA
- STRUCTURAL COMPOSITES
  **Scott Lewit** '82, '85 M.S.

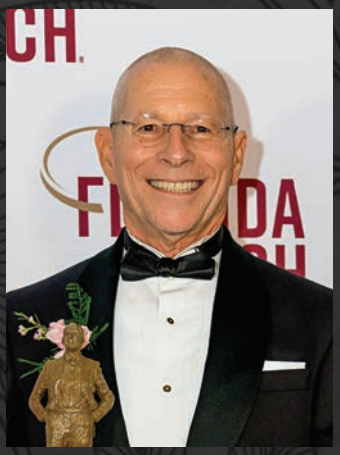
**EVENT PHOTOS**

## CONGRATULATIONS

# *Alumni Award Winners 2025*

**Graduates of the Last Decade (GOLD) Ad Astra Award**

**Warren Pittorie** ’15, ’18 M.S., ’22 Ph.D.



**Jerome P. Keuper (JPK) Distinguished Alumni Award**

**Duane E. De Freese** ’81 M.S., ’88 Ph.D.

**College of Aeronautics Skurla Outstanding Alumni Award**

**James “Jim” L. Blackford** ’85 A.S., ’85

**Bisk College of Business Outstanding Alumni Award**

**Joan Higginbotham** ’92 M.S., ’96 M.S.

**College of Engineering and Science Outstanding Alumni Award**

**Kristin Kopperud** ’17 Ph.D.

**College of Psychology and Liberal Arts Outstanding Alumni Award**

**Jordin T. Chandler** ’19


SPOTLIGHT ON

# Warren Pittorie

**FLORIDA TECH CONNECTION:** '15 B.S. aeronautical science, flight; '18 M.S. aviation human factors; '22 Ph.D. aviation sciences

**BEST CONCERT YOU'VE ATTENDED:** Luke Combs in Atlanta

**GUILTY PLEASURE SNACK:** Pizza—it's a snack, trust me!

**FAVORITE AIRPORT:** Nashville International Airport

**WALK-OUT SONG:** "Start Me Up" by The Rolling Stones

**SOMEONE YOU WOULD SWAP JOBS WITH:** One of my best friends, **LAUREN-ANN GRAHAM** '20, '23 M.S., who is an Orion mechanical test engineer with Lockheed Martin

**WARREN PITTORIE** '15, '18 M.S., '22 Ph.D., is the 2025 Graduates of the Last Decade (GOLD) Ad Astra Alumni Award winner.

The prestigious honor celebrates Florida Tech graduates from the past 10 years who are already making waves and who show incredible promise as the visionary leaders of tomorrow.

Pittorie, a former Florida Tech assistant professor and flight education chair, today serves as a Boeing 737 first officer with Avelo Airlines.

"The biggest reward with my current role so far has been being able to fly some of my former students, as well as Florida Tech faculty, staff and even fellow alumni."

Although he is no longer a full-time faculty member, Pittorie is a part-time flight instructor with Florida Tech Aviation, and he comes back to campus as often as possible to volunteer with current and former aviation students and as a guest lecturer, he says.

He is also a Florida Tech Alumni Association board of directors executive member and a College of Aeronautics Advisory Board member.

As a student, Pittorie held several campus leaderships positions, including president of the Student Government Association, Interfraternity Council and his fraternity, Alpha Tau Omega; an Office of Undergraduate Admission student ambassador; and a resident director for Roberts Hall and L3Harris Village.

"My long-term goal is to continue to gain valuable experience within the commercial aviation industry and to bring this experience back to Florida Tech in the form of time, talent and treasure," he says.

Pittorie accepted his GOLD Award at the Alumni Awards Gala during Homecoming Week 2025.

"I've been to several Alumni Awards Galas, and I love the energy in the room," he says. "Seeing faculty, staff, students and alumni mingling with each other under one roof, celebrating this big event, is awesome to witness."

But sharing this honor with several people in the room made this year's event particularly meaningful, he says.

"A lot of my current and former Florida Tech students attended, and they're the reason I'm still connected to Florida Tech and the reason I received this award. The award is just about as much for me as it is for them."

*—Erin Alvarado '16*

## 1970s

1 **MICHAEL RAY** '76 retired after 49 years working in pharmaceutical-related industries. Ray, pictured with his two grandsons at their family Independence Day event, continues to be involved in soccer as both a fan and coach of his local club on Amelia Island.

2 **SABRINA KIPP** '78 A.S. assisted in teaching Florida Tech student Dennis Coyne in the pursuit of his SIC type rating in North American B-25J Mitchell "Panchito" with the Delaware Aviation Museum Foundation, which he successfully earned.

3 **ROBERT "ANDREW" ABERNATHY** '79, '79, recently celebrated his third year of retirement in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, after 42 years of work in the aerospace field. His career highlights include STS-1 through 5 Launch Team at NASA-Kenndy Space Center (MMC ET Ops), Spacelab-1 through Astro-1 Payload Processing at KSC (MDTSCO), International Space Station proposal through Integration Testing (PMAs 1-3 and MT Test Director) at HB & KSC (MDC/Boeing), and supporting integration testing of a variety of satellites at El Segundo (Boeing).

## 1980s

4 **ANDREW MALEK** '86 joined Dewberry as a business unit manager in the firm's New York City office. In his new role, Malek provides strategic management across the community facilities, education, energy, federal, real estate and commercial development, transportation, water and risk, response and recovery market segments.

**SANDRA CHEUNG** '88 was included in Marquis Who's Who in September 2025. Notably, Cheung founded AImpowered, a nonprofit organization dedicated to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educating people on safe and effective AI use.

## 1990s

**5 PETER BARILE** '90, '93 M.S., '01 Ph.D., a senior scientist at Marine Research & Consulting Inc. in Melbourne, was featured in Jake Tapper's April CNN news story on the Indian River Lagoon. The news story featured Barile's work on the Indian River Lagoon as an expert witness in a U.S. District Court case on the lagoon's seagrass and manatee die off. As featured in the national news story, Barile's expert testimony resulted in a landmark Endangered Species Act federal court victory.

SUBMIT YOUR NEWS TO
**alumnotes@fit.edu**

## 2000s

**MELISSA MEISENBURG** '05 M.S., a senior environmental specialist in Indian River County's Natural Resources-Lagoon Division, received the Lagoon Champion Award from the Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County during a county commissioner meeting in September 2025.

**6 GAVIN FAHNESTOCK** '06 has joined McFarland Johnson as regional planning manager in its Aviation Division. Fahnestock will be based in Melbourne and will focus on MJ's growing airport and aviation consulting practice in the southeastern United States.

**7 KEVIN LUKE** '08 reunited with his fellow College of Aeronautics alumni and Tau Kappa Epsilon brothers in Boston in October 2025. Pictured left to right: **KEVIN LUKE** '08, **BEAU HAMBLETON** '11, **ALDEN PETROWSKI** '15, **HENRY "TED" JACOBS** '14 and **JACKSON SPIVAK** '17

## 2010s

**MARK GREENE** '11 M.S. recently co-authored *The Silence of Sapphire*, a 40-chapter thriller created through an unprecedented international collaboration with writers from Madagascar, Italy and Jamaica.

**GAEL LE BRIS** '11 MSA co-led a research project focused on enhancing airport access with emerging mobility, along with contributors and fellow Panthers **KARLA MEDINA** '22 and **JOSHUA SATTAN** '24 MSA. Their team was recognized by WSP, a leading engineering and professional services firm, with a Global Excellence Award in Technical Excellence for their work on aircraft innovation and airport compatibility.

**8 JACKIE GRIFFIN** '12, '13 MBA, broker-owner of Florida Lifestyle Realty in Cocoa Beach and the 2026 president of the Space Coast Association of Realtors, was recently recognized as one of only 44 realtors statewide to earn the Florida Realtors Board Certified Professional endorsement—placing her among the top 0.1% of real estate professionals in the state. This distinction

*continued on page 36*

SPOTLIGHT ON

# Whitney Ellis

**FLORIDA TECH CONNECTION:** '23 B.S. electrical engineering

**FAVORITE THEME PARK RIDE:** Hiccup's Wing Gliders at Universal Epic Universe

**DREAM TRAVEL DESTINATION:** Ireland

**GO-TO COFFEE ORDER:** Plain black coffee

**LAST BOOK YOU READ:** *Kingdom of Ash* by Sarah J. Maas

**BIGGEST INSPIRATION:** My mom

**WHITNEY ELLIS** '23 is an associate project engineer II for global attraction programs at Universal Orlando Resort.

"Whenever you go to a theme park, and you go to your favorite ride, and you see it's down and find yourself wondering why, it's because my team is in there," Ellis says. "We update the rides to the current codes and safety standards, both internationally and nationally, here, in the United States. We basically redo its brain!"

While she is housed out of Universal's Orlando offices, Ellis is currently overseeing a $45 million project in Universal Studios Japan, renovating the Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey attraction.

"I'm the person who manages all day-to-day tasks for the project," Ellis says. "So budget, schedule, scope, timeline, engineering decisions, project management decisions—all of it runs through me."

One of the biggest challenges Ellis faces in her role is the language barrier.

"I always have an interpreter with me when I am on-site. They are how I get my job done in Japan smoothly," she says. "The way that my team in Japan procedurally handles various tasks is not always the same as my team locally in Orlando. It was a challenge faced at the beginning of the project, but has since become something implicit among both teams."

Through the assistance of translators and immersing herself in the culture when she's on-site, Ellis has adapted and modified her communication methods to get results that make both groups and the project successful.

Ellis credits her time-management, problem-solving, team-building and organizational skills to her experience as a scholar-athlete on Florida Tech's women's softball team and working in the Office of Admission as a student ambassador.

"When I was looking at colleges, it was important for me to be able to find a university where I could get a very strong engineering education, as well as continue my ability to play softball collegiately," Ellis says. "That's definitely what I was able to get at Florida Tech."

Between her sophomore and junior years of college, Ellis received an internship with General Motors in Detroit, where she worked on a manufacturing line with FANUC robots.

The next summer, she received another internship, this time with Universal Orlando on the team on which she currently works. Ellis received a job offer from the company after graduation and has been there ever since.

"I loved being a part of the Florida Tech community," she says. "The classes were small, and I was never just another face in the crowd."

*—Erin Alvarado '16*

*continued from page 35*

acknowledges her exceptional expertise, ethical leadership and dedication to serving Florida's Space Coast community.

9 **JOHN ROBERTSON** '13 and his wife, Ellie, welcomed their daughter, Lucy Ann, Aug. 27, 2025. Robertson is Florida Tech Alumni Association executive board secretary and works for Boeing as a technical lead engineer focusing on solar array and battery design and analysis.

**KEVIN THOMPSON** '13 received the Florida Airports Council Aviation Leadership Award, a prestigious recognition of his outstanding contributions to the aviation industry.

**MELISSA CHAPMAN** '15 started a new role as the intellectual property manager for Emergent BioSolutions Inc., where she manages and enforces the patent and trademark portfolio for the company's commercial and medical countermeasure products.

10 **KATHERINE (HAUSRATH) ROOF** '17 and **MATTHEW ROOF** '17 were married March 14, 2025. Their ceremony was officiated by a fellow Florida Tech alumnus, and in attendance were eight alumni friends from their time on campus.

11 **CHAD SPENCER** '19 and **GREGORY DUNN** '22 flew together out of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport in August 2025. The two were roommates when they attended Florida Tech.

## 2020s

12 **KENNETH HAUSRATH** '20 works as a nanofabrication engineer in the semiconductor and photonics industries. He has spent time in the field at Los Alamos Center for Integrated Nanotechnologies, University of Pennsylvania's Singh Center for


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Nanotechnology, Meta Reality Labs and SkyWater Technology, supporting equipment used in advanced thin film technology development.

13 **ANNA HAMELIN** '21 graduated with her degree in meteorology after securing a job as a meteorologist and finished the remainder of her coursework online. A few years into Hamelin's television meteorology job, she realized her communication skills and attention to detail could better serve her community as a police officer. With her first year on patrol completed, she's thankful that life didn't go the way she had originally expected.

14 **ANDREA CHAVEZ** '22 and **ZACHARY PAUL** '19 were married in July 2025. The couple met in fall 2018 on Florida Tech's Street Dance Club. What was first a very close friendship slowly developed into unconditional love. Their wedding was filled with love, family and fellow Panthers.

**ELIJAH RINES** '22 returned to Florida Tech as a full-time staff member in spring 2024 and started living on campus as a staff-in-residence coordinator for the first-year living learning communities in Roberts Hall.

15 **KRISTEN BECKER** '24 Ph.D. was promoted to environmental manager within the Coastal Engineering and Geology Group in the Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection in April 2025. Previously, she worked at the Florida Department of Environmental Protection as an engineering specialist III, reviewing permits, site plans, surveys and applications for all beach projects around the state for the Beaches, Inlets and Ports Program.

**JOCK BOTOS** '24 graduated from Florida Tech in May 2024 and started working as a surveyor for the American Bureau of Shipping. Through this opportunity, he has moved to Accra in West Africa, where he will reside for the next three years.

16 **DEZTYNEE BRYAN** '25 was awarded the 2025 American Meteorological Society Graduate Fellowship.


## Welcomed a Panther Cub?

Contact us for a free infant T-shirt, bib 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**

**JOHN T. OAKES** '70 passed away peacefully Jan. 21, 2025, in Pennsylvania at age 86. Oakes proudly served in the U.S. Navy during the early years of the Vietnam War. Following his military service, he built a distinguished career as a software engineer at Northrop Grumman Corp. until retiring in 2002.

**DAVID SIAS** '70, '72 M.S., passed away peacefully Sept. 9, 2025. Born in Erie, Pennsylvania, Sias studied physics, oceanography and engineering at Florida Tech and UCF, leading to a distinguished career at NASA-Kennedy Space Center, where he contributed to major space programs. After retiring, he continued to support aerospace innovation through his consulting firm.

**WILLIAM "SANDY" HILL III** '73 passed away Aug. 19, 2025, at age 75. After earning a marine biology degree from Florida Tech, he returned to New England and graduated from Lyndon State College. He spent 39 years teaching math and science at Concord School, later serving as the school's computer tech.

**ALFRED YEE LITT** '73, '74 M.S., passed away peacefully in Fridley, Minnesota, June 24, 2025. Litt earned his Florida Tech degrees in computer science, which led to a successful career with top technology companies.

**COL. JAMES LARRY RANK** '75 passed away Oct. 23, 2025, at age 82. Rank served in the U.S. Army and retired after 27 years of dedicated service. Following his retirement, Rank went on to work for H&R Block as an office manager, tax preparer and instructor for 20 years.

**JOHN CHARLES ALMASI** '02, '10 M.S., a kind and dedicated problem-solver in Florida Tech's Office of the Registrar for over a decade, passed away Oct. 1, 2025. Almasi also taught as an adjunct professor in the School of Arts and Communication. He had deep family ties to the university, as well— his wife, **KARIN ALMASI** '72, associate registrar, and his sons, **JAMES ALMASI** '03, '07 M.S., director of financial aid, and **JOHN ALMASI JR.** '95, are all proud alumni.

**GLENN "DOC" MCKEWEN** passed away peacefully July 25, 2025. Gifted with a natural talent for music, he became an accomplished trumpeter known as "Doc," a nickname honoring his skill. Music remained a lifelong passion, and his intelligence and dedication also led him to earn a master's in business, which he applied thoughtfully throughout his career.

**CAROL ANN TILLEMA**, a kind and engaged instructor, passed away Nov. 3, 2025. Tillema started as an aviation management student at Florida Tech in the early 1990s. She later joined the Student Success and Support Center as instructor and Writers' Den supervisor.

FACES OF GREATNESS

# Duane E. De Freese

By Erin Alvarado '16

**FLORIDA TECH CONNECTION:** '81 M.S. biological sciences, marine; '88 Ph.D. biological sciences

**LAST BOOK READ:** *Forces of Nature. A History of Florida Land Conservation* by Clay Henderson

**ANIMAL YOU WOULD BE:** Leatherback sea turtle

**FAVORITE HOBBY:** Surfing

**FAVORITE QUOTE:** "Florida's water is Florida's soul."—Chris Peterson, president, Hells Bay Boatworks in Titusville, Florida, and St. Johns River Water Management District governing board member

**DUANE E. DE FREESE** '81 M.S., '88 Ph.D., has been recognized a lot for his dedication to preserving Florida's shores and waterways throughout the years.

He has received the Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County's Lagoon Champion Award, the Environmental Advocacy "Eagle" Award presented by former U.S. Rep. Bill Posey, the Lead Brevard Rodney S. Ketcham Leadership Icon Award and the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast Volunteer of the Year Award. He was also named a Junior Achievement of the Space Coast Business Hall of Fame Laureate.

But his most recent accolade, De Freese says, is particularly significant.

"When President Nicklow called me, I was both surprised and, to be honest, a little shocked, as well as humbled," he says.

At the Alumni Awards Gala Oct. 17, 2025, De Freese received Florida Tech's highest honor, the Jerome P. Keuper Distinguished Alumni Award recognizing an alumnus whose career accomplishments reflect the university's legacy of excellence.

"I'm aware of the significance of the award because I was president of the Florida Tech Alumni Association board when it was first created," he says. "It's one of those recognitions that I've had so far during my career that's going to stick with me for the rest of my life."

De Freese is executive director of the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) Council, an independent special district of Florida created in 2015 to serve as the governing body for the Indian River Lagoon National Estuary Program (IRLNEP), one of just 28 such programs designated by the U.S. Congress in North America and Puerto Rico.

"As executive director, my primary responsibility is to lead our program and staff in fulfilling the mission of a comprehensive conservation management plan, a vision for lagoon restoration that we established back in 2019," De Freese says.

De Freese has led the IRLNEP's reorganization, including convening and expanding the IRLNEP Management Conference to over 100 volunteer scientists, resource managers, community leaders, industry representatives and citizens.

The group's mission, "One lagoon. One community. One voice," encourages federal, state and local partners to work together to restore and protect the IRL system, one of the nation's most treasured and threatened estuaries.

With rapid population growth and constant change, educating the public about the many stressors affecting Florida's coastal systems and how they impact both quality of life and local economies is an ongoing and vital challenge for De Freese and his team, he says.

"In Brevard, we deeply understand the value of space and aerospace; it's part of our identity and a cornerstone of Florida Tech," he says. "But ocean and coastal awareness hasn't reached that same level of recognition."

Before joining the IRL Council, De Freese served in several leadership positions, including senior vice president of science and business development at AquaFiber Technologies Corp., University of Central Florida (UCF) College of Sciences dean-appointed faculty in conjunction with the UCF coastal and sea turtle research center, the first vice president of Florida research for Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute and the first program director for the Brevard County Environmentally Endangered Lands Program.

"Success isn't as much about what you know, but the relationships you've built along the way," he says.

**Office of Marketing and Communications**

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# Campus Beautification

Florida Tech's Campus Beautification Project is well underway, with many varieties of foliage and colorful flowers already planted across campus. The project is designed to brighten the community with enhanced landscaping, welcoming building and campus entries and year-round color. Pictured here: freshly planted neoregelia bromeliad; vinca, or "periwinkle"; pentas; and salvia "mystic spires" in bloom on Panther Plaza.