

Center for the Study of Women, Science, and Technology Celebrates 20 Years at Georgia Tech

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Moutoushi Majid, left, and Natalia Arango Geraldino, residents of the WST Learning Community sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women, Science and Technology, discuss Michelle Obama's book "Becoming" during book club at Stein House on March 5, 2019. The Learning Community is but one program designed to advance the role of women at Georgia Tech sponsored by the WST Center, a unit of the Office of Institute Diversity which celebrates 20 years on the Georgia Tech campus in 2019. Majid is a master's student in urban design from Bangladesh. Geraldino is an aerospace engineering student.

By Michael Pearson

When Moutoushi Majid first arrived at Georgia Tech in 2018, she felt isolated. She was struggling. Then she learned about a residential learning community sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women, Science, and Technology (WST Center).

It was a turning point for Majid, one that has allowed the master's student in urban design who originally came from Bangladesh to successfully make the transition to life on the Georgia Institute of Technology campus.

"Because of these people, I feel like I will never be alone," Majid said of her fellow residents in the Women, Science, and Technology Learning Community.

20 Years of Progress and Impact

Such successes are but one of the legacies of the WST Center, which turns 20 years old this year. WST and its faculty organizers played key roles in inspiring Georgia Tech's learning communities, the Institute's first undergraduate student-faculty research program, the WST Distinguished Lecture, and in Georgia Tech's participation in the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE Institutional Transformation program.

The Center funds research partnerships and offers opportunities for volunteer service through the Girls Excelling in Math and Science (GEMS) program. Through the WST Learning Community, it also provides students with faculty mentors and monthly dinners where they join in conversation with successful professionals who provide advice and encouragement.

"The values of diversity have become more integral to the Institution and the experience of students, and WST has been part of that, in partnership with campus leaders who see the way forward," said Mary Frank Fox, WST co-director and ADVANCE professor in Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts School of Public Policy.

The center's other co-directors are Carol Colatrella, a professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication, also a unit of the Ivan Allen College, and Mary Lynn Realff, an associate professor in the School of Materials Science and Engineering.

Center Founded as Inter-College Initiative

The Center was established in 1999 as an initiative of the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts, the College of Sciences, and College of Engineering. Funding from the Georgia Tech Foundation and the Focused Research Program, Office of the Vice Provost for Research, supported the launch.

It was the latest in a series of initiatives involving women and gender at Georgia Tech. Earlier, Fox, Colatrella, Anne Balsamo, a former professor in what is now the School of Literature, Media, and Communication, and Steve Vallas, now at Northeastern University, collaborated on the creation of a

curricular minor in women, science, and technology. The WST minor was among the first such programs in the country.

Center Allows Faculty and Students to Grow Together

Colatrella was instrumental in setting up the learning community, which was the first at Georgia Tech.

"It grew out of a desire to provide a community, especially for women who were in technical fields where they were a distinct minority, but also where women who weren't in sororities could find a comfortable community."

It has done that through, among other things, 20 years of monthly dinners, often featuring successful women in technology and other fields, book clubs, and other social events.

Amanda Miller, a business student from Marietta, is a resident assistant in the learning community.

"It's kind of overwhelming, the focus on academics," she said. "And so being able to have a community that's centered around something that we all have in common, besides academics, is what's really unique here. Having that support base of women who are all pursuing the same things, this allows us to come alongside one another, and there's so many extra resources provided for us through this community, it really allows us to grow together as women."

The Center's initiatives also provide growth opportunities for Georgia Tech students to work with middle school students in the Atlanta Public Schools through the GEMS program.

Emma Pettit first got involved with GEMS as a middle school student at Inman Middle School in Atlanta. Now she is a fourth-year Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering student at Georgia Tech.

"GEMS gave me the opportunity to work with other like-minded girls and to learn from women already working in STEM fields," she said. "Interacting with these women helped me develop my passion for STEM and ultimately helped lead to me pursue a degree in Chemical Engineering at Georgia Tech."

ADVANCE Grant

The Center also played a role in securing the 2001 grant that led to Georgia Tech's involvement in the NSF's ADVANCE program. The initiative sought to increase the participation and advancement of women and minorities in academic STEM careers.

In its first years, the ADVANCE program was responsible for the creation of new networking opportunities for women faculty members, new processes to assist faculty members in balancing work and family responsibilities, a research program identifying and analyzing issues involving faculty members' advancement, and an assessment of promotion and tenure issues and processes.

"ADVANCE is key to Georgia Tech in its focus on systemic, institutional approaches that support the advancement and success of women and underrepresented minorities in academic careers," Fox said. "This contributes to the vitality of the workforce, locally and nationally."

What is Next for WST

After 20 years, the Center is far from done with its work.

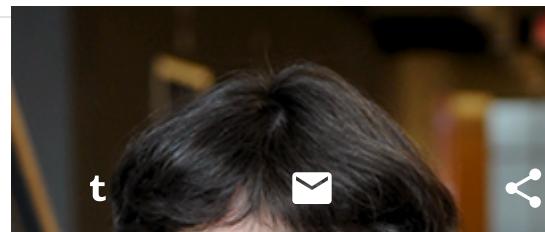
Next up is a new learning community for first-year students focusing on social justice. WST is partnering with the Office of Institute Diversity to set up Impact through Science, Technology, and Social Good. The community is open to first-year students who want to explore issues related to diversity, community engagement, and sustainability.

Members of the learning community, which is sponsored by Institute Diversity and is scheduled to launch in August 2019, will live in Field Residence Hall.

With initiatives such as these, Fox said she is proud of the legacy WST has had, and for what the future will bring.

"WST has always been about responding to needs, but also anticipating needs, and I look forward to it continuing to do that for many years to come," she said.

Additional Photos





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