

April 2, 2025

Dean's Address

Good evening, I am Kimberly Jacob Arriola, and it is a privilege to welcome those of you who are here in person, and our colleagues joining us virtually, to tonight's 2025 Dean's Address – a moment where we can reflect on the past, celebrate the present, and prepare for the future of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies.

Part of the reason we are here tonight is because the faculty governance bylaws dictate that the LGS dean convene a general meeting of the graduate faculty once a year, in late spring to report on the state of the graduate school.

But tonight is different. The future of graduate education is under attack, and we are facing enormous pressure to maintain the quality of our programs and our robust student support while multiple threats to higher education loom large.

For that reason, it is even more important for me to stand before you and share how we are responding to these pressures and why the future of the Laney Graduate School remains bright.

As we convene this evening, I want to recognize that despite the uncertain times in which we live, I am filled with both hope and optimism.

Before I begin my address, I want to thank President Greg Fenves, Interim Provost Lanny Liebeskind, the six deans of our collaborating schools, and the LGS Executive Council.

In many different ways, their support has been essential to the success of graduate education at Emory, and their leadership has enabled us to achieve the remarkable progress that I will share this evening.

I would like to specifically thank Walter Rucker for his time and effort as Chair of the Executive Council over this past year.

Walter, your contributions have been essential to advancing the LGS mission, your presence on the council will be missed.

I am also excited to announce and welcome our incoming executive council chair Jessica Wells.

Jessica, I look forward to working together in this new role to advance graduate education. Thank you for your interest in this important work.

In addition, I want to extend my sincere thanks to outgoing council members Tamara Caspary and Cari Jo Clark.

I want to pause to reflect on the legacy of President Jimmy Carter, who passed away before the end of 2024.

A tireless champion of social justice and humanitarian efforts, President Carter's remarkable contributions left an indelible mark on Emory and the world.

The legacies of President Carter and the Laney Graduate School will be forever intertwined.

Carter's connection to Emory was forged through the visionary leadership of James T. Laney, former Emory president and the namesake of our graduate school.

It was Laney who convinced President Carter to bring his expertise to Emory as a University Distinguished Professor in 1982.

This significant appointment not only elevated Emory's international reputation but it also deepened the university's ties to the Carter Presidential Library and Center.

Presidents Carter and Laney have shown us that true leadership is rooted in service, compassion, and an unwavering belief in the potential of others.

Their example calls us to lead not just with intellect, but with heart. That same spirit guides the mission of Emory and shapes the vision we hold for the Laney Graduate School.

Our North Star is the Emory Mission - To create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity.

In keeping with the broader mission of the university, our vision for Laney is to be a nationally and internationally recognized leader in advancing academic excellence through innovative scholarship, research, teaching, and programming that prepares a diverse and inclusive graduate student body for success as leaders and in service to the global good.

As James T Laney once said –

...our institutions are made up of intricate congeries of relationships and networks that sustain them like the capillaries do the body, and there must be a flow among them, a reciprocity and a willingness to share the burdens, as well as the success...”

His words are a reminder that the strength of any institution lies not only in its structure or reputation, but in the shared commitment and collaboration among its people

That commitment – to one another, to our mission, and to the future of graduate education - is what sustains the Laney Graduate School.

Maintaining this alignment empowers us to navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and make meaningful contributions to our society, no matter how much the graduate education environment changes.

2025 started with dramatic shifts in higher education in general, and graduate education, in particular.

Federal directives and modifications to funding priorities have introduced confusion and real uncertainty, posing challenges not just for the research enterprise at Emory but for the foundation of graduate education nationwide.

Since World War II, the U.S. federal government has played a pivotal role in funding research conducted in academic settings.

This investment, formalized through legislation like the Science and Technology Policy Act of 1945 and the establishment of agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, have driven innovation across multiple disciplines.

While much of this support has advanced biological and biomedical sciences—leading to breakthroughs in medicine, vaccines, and public health—it has also been instrumental in the social sciences, engineering, physical sciences, computing, and more.

Federal research funding has facilitated transformative discoveries that continue to shape communities globally.

From life-saving medical treatments to technological advancements, this long-standing collaboration between the government and academic institutions has in the past underscored a shared commitment to scientific progress.

Despite the highly competitive nature of this funding, Emory faculty and students have been tremendously successful at securing federal grants across a range of funders.

In the current academic year about 682 doctoral students are being supported on sponsored grants—those earned by faculty and students alike.

Of that number, 75 doctoral students are supported on their own F30/F31 and F99 grants of the National Institutes of Health.

36 doctoral students have active National Science Foundation – Graduate Research Fellowship Program awards

And about 94 doctoral students are supported by T32 institutional training grants. So Emory faculty and students are highly successful in the grant arena.

While you can't put a price on the experience of brilliant graduate students and world-class faculty coming together to tackle the toughest challenges of our time, that work depends on continued support.

In many ways, graduate education is at an inflection point. However, in the face of financial constraints and structural challenges, our commitment has not wavered.

In fact, it has been sharpened.

We choose to move forward with intentionality.

So, let me be clear.

The Laney Graduate School remains wholly committed to advancing high-quality, student-centered graduate education, and this commitment has never been stronger.

We will maintain financial commitments made to our students. We will exercise prudence in the admissions process so that we don't exceed our training or financial capacity to ensure that incoming students have the support they need to be successful.

We will continue to cultivate an inclusive, respectful, and intellectually vibrant environment—one where all students, from every background, can thrive.

We will protect the academic freedom that our graduate faculty has already earned and the decades-long work that has gone into elevating the stature and reputation of our graduate programs.

We are building a graduate community grounded in shared responsibility, mutual respect, and open dialogue. These values are not peripheral—they are essential. They fuel the innovation, collaboration, and scholarship that defines Laney.

Undoubtedly, the landscape of higher education is being redefined in other ways, both internally and externally.

One of the most significant shifts we've seen—both nationally and here at Emory—is the evolving role of graduate students in shaping their role as student workers.

A clear example of this shift is the emergence of collective bargaining among our doctoral students.

As you are aware, following the fall 2023 election, our doctoral students are now represented by SEIU Workers United in matters related to wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment.

This development marks a transformative change, reflecting a growing emphasis on the dual role of doctoral students as both students and employees.

The process of negotiating a collective bargaining agreement is inherently complex and requires careful, deliberate dialogue.

I am pleased to report that the conversations have been productive and respectful, with both sides committed to reaching a fair and sustainable agreement that honors the interests of student workers and the university.

To date, discussions have focused on key areas including compensation structures, health benefits, workload expectations, leave policies, and grievance procedures. We will continue to bargain in good faith and keep our community informed as progress continues toward a final contract.

Despite pressures on graduate education, the reputation of our programs remains strong.

The increasing number of applications we receive each year is a testament to the exceptional faculty, programs, and academic environment we have cultivated.

Much of this increase can be attributed to the remarkable surge in applications in Computer Science & Informatics, Health Services Research & Health Policy, and Nursing compared to their average number of applications over the past 5 years.

Notably, this year Psychology received over 600 applications, and both Biomedical Engineering and Computer Science & Informatics received over 700 applications.

Additionally, our incoming class is likely to be increasingly international, with 59% of our accepted students thus far coming from outside the U.S., compared to 48% who came to Laney this past fall.

We have also invested more time and resources to recruiting top students into our master's programs and ensuring that they have a high-quality educational experience.

I'll talk more about this later, but we have seen a 106% increase in master's student's applications as compared to the average of the previous 5 years.

As we plan to welcome a new cohort of outstanding students this upcoming fall, we are also expanding our academic opportunities.

I shared at last year's address that we would be launching a pioneering Ph.D. program in Environmental Science and Society—an innovative program that aims to cultivate a new generation of interdisciplinary scholars equipped to tackle the pressing environmental and sustainability challenges of our time.

In an era where it may seem easiest to reinforce disciplinary silos, this program seeks to integrate the social and natural sciences, and in doing so, empower students with the knowledge, skills, and community-engaged research experiences necessary to drive positive transformation in the world in which we live.

Indeed, we launched recruitment this past fall.

Notably, this new program received 224 applications with a cohort goal of 4, making it among our most competitive programs. We congratulate the relevant faculty in advance on what we know will be a highly successful doctoral program.

Another major step forward towards supporting the graduate student experience at Emory is the expansion of graduate and professional student housing...

Last year we announced the opening of new graduate and professional student housing just off North Decatur Road. Conveniently located within walking distance of most academic programs, this new housing option directly addresses a long-standing need and represents a significant investment in supporting graduate education at Emory.

Phase I of the development is already at 98% capacity, demonstrating the strong demand and enthusiasm from our graduate and professional students across campus for fully furnished and all-inclusive apartments.

Notably, LGS students make up 19% of the total leases, which is the 2nd largest proportion of leases among the 7 graduate and professional schools.

This new space not only provides convenient and accessible housing but also serves as a hub for community-building, with dedicated programming designed to foster connection and engagement among students across disciplines.

Looking ahead, plans for Phase II are already underway, with an estimated opening as soon as 2027. Phase II is envisioned to have approximately 400 additional beds and is being built adjacent to Phase I, wrapping around the parking structure.

When both phases are complete, we anticipate having nearly 1,000 beds of housing for Emory graduate and professional students.

This progress marks a significant effort to create a campus environment where graduate students feel supported, included, and equipped to thrive.

Let us now turn to our strategic framework.

When I first accepted my position, it was important to me to have a framework to guide the prioritization of initiatives that we would pursue over the next 5 years.

So, in 2022, we embarked on an important journey of collaboration and reflection, engaging in a series of listening sessions that brought together the voices of students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

The outcome of these sessions is a strategic framework that guides our actions and aligns with our shared vision and goals.

There are three broad priorities that establish our purpose stemming directly from the vision and mission that I shared earlier.

Our three key priorities are to:

Promote Interdisciplinary Academic Opportunities

Enable Inclusive Environments

Facilitate impactful scholarship

I would like to highlight one specific initiative within each of these three broad priorities:

One highlight of this priority is the expansion and renewed focus on master's programs and students.

We are actively collaborating with the Emory College of Arts and Sciences to expand and strengthen master's education at Emory. This partnership is creating new opportunities to build innovative programs that meet emerging academic and professional needs.

To build on this momentum, Ariel Edwards, our shared Director of Programs with Emory College, is playing a key role in this work.

Since joining us last year, Ariel has supported the growth of existing programs and is now expanding her focus to provide enrollment support across master's offerings, helping us lay the groundwork for sustainable growth and an enhanced student experience.

From this slide you can see the areas in which we are seeking to grow the number of master's students. I also want to note that in addition to the 4+1 MS in Economics that was launched 2 years ago, we now have a new standalone 1-year MS in Economics degree (in collaboration with Emory College). Our first students will enroll in this newest program this summer.

We also have a Master's of Science in Economics and AI that is currently undergoing an extensive review and approval process, which I am quite excited about.

A cornerstone of our commitment to students is creating inclusive environments where they can thrive.

That's where Dean Amanda Marie James comes in. Her work is deeply rooted in fostering belonging, connection, and empowerment across our graduate community.

Through our EDGE initiative, she leads year-round programming that supports student engagement at every stage of the academic journey and helps cultivate communities grounded in diverse excellence.

But supporting students also means supporting the people who guide them.

That's why, with guidance from Dean Jeff Staton, we've expanded this commitment to faculty through the Mentor Fellows Program—an initiative launched last spring under the direction of Dr. Dawn Comeau of the Rollins School of Public Health.

More than a skill-building opportunity, this program serves as a platform for institutional innovation around mentorship.

The first cohort included 14 faculty members from the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences.

We're currently seeking volunteers to join the second cohort, who will participate in guided activities designed to deepen their knowledge of evidence-based strategies for graduate student mentorship.

The deadline is April 15, 2025, for those who may be interested in applying to participate in this program starting this upcoming fall.

There has never been a more crucial time for graduate students to master the skill of grant writing – for both federal and non-federal funders.

As competition for research funding intensifies, grant writing support at the program and school levels is essential.

This past year, we took a close look at the grant writing resources available within each division, thanks to an assessment led by Emily Neutens, associate director of student affairs.

Her findings highlight the significant variation of support structures, with some programs offering formal workshops and mentorship, while others lack resources altogether.

This insight provides a valuable roadmap for the year ahead. Under the leadership of Tamara Caspary, who recently joined LGS as the associate dean for strategic projects, we will begin to build a more cohesive and comprehensive grant writing support framework.

Our goal is clear: we will equip our students with the skills, confidence and support they need to secure funding and advance impactful scholarship. Despite the tremendous grant success that I described earlier among our students, we can do more.

Whether they are applying for NIH fellowships, NSF grants or foundational support, we want our students to be prepared to compete for the funding that will push their research forward.

I am grateful to Dean Caspary for the progress that she is already making in this area.

I look forward to being able to share the outcome of this work in the future.

In addition to the three strategic priorities I discussed, we've established five guiding approaches that reflect how we carry out this work.

These approaches help ensure that our efforts are impactful.

I'd like to share updates with you in each of these areas – beginning with incorporating student voices.

We continue to have a strong working relationship with the Laney Graduate Student Council, our student governance body, under the leadership of President Uriel Rufen-Blanchette, a 2nd year student in the neuroscience program.

We meet regularly to solicit student input and share information across a wide range of topics.

This year we supported LGSC's major priorities which are to enhance engagement with LGS alumni, strengthen the sense of community among LGS students and improve transparency in their processes.

I also host regular lunches with student affinity groups to better understand diverse experiences within LGS—insights that directly inform our administrative decisions.

Behind every student success story is a team of dedicated professionals who make that success possible.

From communications, finance, and academic operations, the contributions of our staff are the backbone of LGS.

As one example of operational excellence, in Fall 2024, our Business & Finance team, led by Dean Surabhi Vittal, implemented an automated process for recovering sponsor tuition, enabling more timely and accurate charges to grants while significantly improving operational efficiency.

Additionally, we are leveraging Robotic Process Automation to streamline several previously manual tasks in student financial aid and program finance reporting, allowing for faster, more reliable outcomes.

These are just two examples of advancements in business and finance that reflect our ongoing commitment to building a more agile and responsive infrastructure that supports our academic mission.

That same commitment extends to our academic operations, led by Dean Ulf Nilsson.

By investing in tools and systems like our new Customer Relationship Management System (SLATE), we are enhancing our admissions process and student progress management, enabling a one-stop platform for applications, reviews, student records and forms, and more, with significant gains in coordination, efficiency, and transparency.

I am also pleased to share that our communications director, Jazmyn Burton, led the development of a strategic communications plan. One of the major initiatives within this plan is the creation of a comprehensive messaging platform—a tool designed to help us speak with one clear, consistent, and compelling voice.

The work of these 3 offices taken together lays a strong foundation for our ability to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Another key approach is creating a culture of collaboration.

Our student-facing teams—Student Affairs, Professional Development and Career Planning, English Language Support, and the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement, which I discussed earlier—have made intentional efforts to align their work in ways that center student needs and experiences.

These efforts are not happening in silos; they are the result of deep collaboration across teams.

I'd like to highlight just a few of the initiatives that have emerged from this spirit of cooperation

As I mentioned earlier in my address, we have a growing international student population. Our English Language Support Program, led by Heather Bolt, has been reimagined to allow for a more tailored approach to student needs for English Language Support.

At the same time, we recognize that academic success must be paired with strong preparation for life beyond graduate school.

In today's competitive employment landscape, professional development and career planning support are more critical than ever.

Through student coaching, career workshops, and leadership training, Dean Katy Leonard and her team work to equip our students with practical tools for career advancement, networking, and professional growth.

These programs are tailored to address the evolving job market, ensuring that our graduates are not only experts in their fields but also well-prepared to transition into a range of different sectors.

A strong foundation in professional development is just one piece of the broader support system we provide for our graduate students.

Beyond career readiness, fostering a sense of belonging, well-being, and holistic success is essential to ensuring that students thrive throughout their academic journey. This is where Student Affairs plays a crucial role, providing the resources and support structures that enable students to navigate both the challenges and opportunities of graduate education.

From wellness and student flourishing initiatives to community-building events, the team, led by Dean Jennifer Cason, works to advocate for student needs, strengthen support systems, and create an environment where all students can flourish.

I look forward to the continued innovation and leadership the entire student-facing team will bring as we move into the future.

Under the leadership of Twyla Moore, our Director of Human Resources, we developed and implemented an HR strategic plan focused on fostering a supportive, inclusive workplace that supports high performance.

From professional development to recognition and retention, this plan reflects our commitment to creating an environment where staff are able to realize professional success in ways they find meaningful.

Another important part of that foundation is the extended Laney community—our alumni and donors—whose generosity and involvement play a vital role in advancing our mission.

Under Monica Polisetty's leadership, our Advancement and Alumni Engagement team is leading work that underpins many of the initiatives outlined in the strategic framework. Their efforts focus on building philanthropic support for graduate students and programs through meaningful donor cultivation and alumni engagement.

Through Campaign 2036, the Laney AAE team is working toward an ambitious goal of raising \$30 million by August 31, 2025. This work includes securing major gifts from LGS alumni, corporate partners, and foundations committed to the future of graduate education.

The AAE team also facilitates meaningful connections with LGS alumni who wish to volunteer their time, serve as mentors, and participate in student-alumni networking opportunities or alumni panels sharing their career pathways beyond the professoriate. The team also serves LGS through broad-based giving efforts and stewards' donors who have supported LGS by demonstrating the impact of their gift through various recognition touchpoints.

I am grateful to have Monica as a partner and thought leader in this important area of philanthropy.

Speaking of alumni, I would like to highlight a few whose impact extends far beyond the Emory campus.

This year, five Laney Graduate School alumni were named to Emory's prestigious 40 Under Forty list. You can view their names, programs, and current titles on the slide.

Notably, three of the five honorees are alumni of our Master's in Development Practice program—a testament to the program's academic rigor and the ways in which they cultivate student success.

These alumni and all others are an essential part of our broader community—living proof of the excellence, resilience, and leadership that begins here and continues to grow across the world.

While strategy sets our direction, it's the people who bring our mission to life each day.

The strength of Laney lies not only in our vision, but in the commitment of the staff, faculty, and students who work together every day to make that vision real.

I want to take a moment to recognize two outstanding members of our team for their extraordinary service.

First, congratulations to Geri Thomas, senior accountant for the Laney Graduate School, on 30 years of service. Geri's unwavering commitment, diligence, and passion have left a lasting mark on our school and community. We are deeply grateful for all she has done in the realm of Business & Finance.

And congratulations to Tamika Hairston, director of enrollment and record processes, who reached an impressive milestone of her own—25 years of service to Emory University. Tamika's wisdom, reliability, and care make her an invaluable part of our Academic Operations team.

Please join me in celebrating Geri and Tamika for their remarkable achievements and continued contributions to LGS.

It is the dedication of the LGS staff that powers our progress and makes our pursuit of academic eminence possible.

To all our staff—thank you. Your work is seen, valued, and deeply appreciated. You are integral to our success, and we are grateful for your partnership in this important work.

As we look to the future, I am excited to continue building on the foundation you help sustain every day.

Slide 22: Community Spotlight – Our New Muslim Chaplain, A Laney Alum

Among our distinguished alumni, we are also proud to welcome back Rahimjon Abdugafurov

A 2020 graduate of the Islamic Civilizations PhD program and Emory's first Muslim chaplain his return to campus underscores the enduring influence of a Laney education.

His work in fostering interfaith dialogue and supporting our diverse student body enriches our university community, demonstrating that our graduates are not only shaping their fields but also strengthening the cultural and spiritual fabric of our institution.

Our students continue to achieve at the highest levels, earning national and international recognition.

Hayley Roy, a Ph.D. candidate in history, received a Fulbright research grant to conduct archival research in Germany. Her work explores the intersections of nationalism, colonialism, and gender in the development of modern nursing.

Emory has been named a top producer of U.S. Fulbright Students for the ninth consecutive year, —an honor that speaks to the academic excellence and global engagement of our scholars.

Yemko Pryor, a graduating Ph.D., student in genetics and molecular biology is the recipient of the Laney-EDGE annual **Kharen Fulton Award**, which honors outstanding commitment to academic achievement, leadership, and community engagement.

And **Alex Soltoff**, a third-year PhD candidate in Health Services Research and Health Policy published a paper in the esteemed Journal of the American Medical Association, on hospice and end-of-life care. This is a highly notable accomplishment for a graduate student.

As we reflect on these successes, we also turn our attention to the road ahead.

The future of graduate education is full of promise, and we are eager to build on our momentum.

Whether through interdisciplinary collaborations, pioneering research initiatives, or new programs that respond to the needs of our evolving world, our goal remains clear: to create an environment where every member of our community can thrive, innovate, and lead.

The strength of our vision lies not just in what we have already accomplished but in what we are prepared to achieve together.

Before we close, I want to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude to each one of you listening this evening.

Our world-class, field-defining, graduate faculty advance excellence and innovation through their work with our graduate students from around the globe.

Thank you for spending long nights reading theses and dissertations, for sacrificing family time to interview prospectives, for the numerous letters of recommendation written for our students, and more.

Without you, there would be no graduate education at Emory.

To everyone in this room—and those of you joining us virtually - thank you for being part of this journey.

You are here today out of dedication to graduate education, and it is this dedication that makes Laney Graduate School a place of excellence.

I look forward to what we will accomplish together in the year ahead. Thank you.

(pause for applause)

And lastly...

One of the most exciting opportunities to witness and celebrate the impact of graduate education is during the annual LGS Awards reception, which will be held this year from 4:30 – 6 p.m., Thursday, April 10 in Convocation Hall.

I invite you all to come and celebrate the outstanding achievements of our alumni, students, faculty and staff who will be recognized with awards in a range of categories including excellence in research and teaching.