

March 4, 2025

Dean's Address

- Good evening, and welcome to all.
- Before we begin, I want to acknowledge the Muscogee (Creek) people who lived, worked, produced knowledge on, and nurtured the land where Emory's Oxford and Atlanta campuses are now located.
- We recognize the sustained oppression, land dispossession, and involuntary removals of indigenous communities from Georgia and the Southeast and honor their enduring presence, resilience and ongoing contributions to the history and culture of our shared community.
- 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 2026 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.
- As we begin, I want to recognize that the work of graduate education is fundamentally collective. Progress at the Laney Graduate School is only made possible through the leadership and collaboration of faculty, staff, students, and partners across the university.
- I want to thank **Interim President Leah Ward Sears, Provost Badia Ahad, the six Deans** of our collaborating schools, and the **LGS Executive Council**.
- The Executive Council's 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 **Dr. Jessica Wells, associate professor, at the Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing**, for her time and effort as Chair of the Executive Council over this past year.
- Thank you for your dedication to graduate education, Jessica. Your contributions have been essential to advancing the LGS mission, and I look forward to continuing to work with you throughout your remaining term.
- I am also excited to announce and welcome our incoming executive council chair, **Dr. Danielle Jung, professor of political science**. I very much look forward to working with you in this new role.
- And I want to extend my sincere thanks to outgoing executive council members – Drs. Dorian Arnold, Lynne Huffer, and Tom Rogers for their insightful contributions to very robust discussions over the past three years.
- Our North Star is the Mission of Emory University - 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 you are well aware, the graduate school is named for James T. Laney, a transformative leader and former president of the university, whose influence on Emory and higher education will be felt for generations to come.
- Dr. Laney believed that education was a moral and civic endeavor, and that university leaders should engage the world beyond our campus.
- In 1990, while addressing the Emory University Board of Visitors—Dr. Laney offered a reflection that still resonates today

- *The point of having a multicultural university right here in Atlanta, Georgia, is that—just like the Coca-Cola company—we're going to reach out around the world. We're going to be at the forefront of forming a new multicultural society, and we're not going to be ashamed of it.*
- I find this quote to be truly profound because of the analogy it makes. While Coca-Cola may be globally recognized, Dr. Laney envisioned that Emory would become something far more meaningful: a university with a purposeful global orientation—one that prepares students not merely to operate in the world, but to shape it with integrity, understanding, and courage.
- With that said, graduate education at Emory continues to attract strong interest from prospective students.
- This year, we saw a 24% increase in doctoral applications in comparison to our 5-year average. You will soon hear about our recent efforts to grow master's education at Emory, so it is notable that we also see a dramatic increase in applications for several master's programs in which we have heavily invested in recruiting.
- Importantly, all of our master's programs are still actively receiving applications, and we expect these numbers to grow.
- These patterns reflect both the strength of Emory's academic reputation and the intentional work of our faculty and staff efforts to recruit students who are prepared to thrive in rigorous, research-driven, and professionally oriented graduate programs.
- Despite this increase in applications, those of you in attendance tonight are acutely aware that this is an extraordinarily challenging time in higher education.
- Across the country, higher education is facing heightened scrutiny and declining public confidence. Rising costs, questions about value, and the growing uncertainty

facing international students—whose presence strengthens our intellectual and cultural life—test the very conditions that allow universities to serve as spaces of groundbreaking discovery and fruitful dialogue.

- Graduate education carries its own distinct challenges. Financial pressures risk diverting resources away from doctoral education, while changes to federal loan programs, including the elimination of the Grad PLUS loans and the introduction of borrowing caps, affect who can pursue advanced study. And of course, federal policy changes impact whether international students can study and thrive here in this country.
- In many ways, graduate education stands at a point of inflection. And yet, our commitment has not wavered.
- In fact, it has sharpened.
- We choose to move forward with intentionality.
- That intentionality is reflected not only in our vision, but in the systems and structures that support our students.
- Fall 2025 marked an important moment for our PhD community with the ratification of the first collective bargaining agreement between Emory and the Service Employees International Union.
- Over the course of the past year, under **Senior Associate Dean, Dr. Jeff Staton's leadership**, we worked to implement the agreement thoughtfully and responsibly. We have stood up new processes for appointments, tracking leave, distributing funds, and supporting compliance across all relevant schools and units. We have also developed training and guidance for our 1400 graduate faculty and over 100 staff across the campus to ensure clarity and consistency in implementing the CBA.
- I am also pleased to share that we now have a well-functioning Labor Management Committee that serves as a space for student workers and Emory leaders to engage

in information sharing, respectful dialogue and a genuine interest in understanding different perspectives, which will be essential to our success as we move forward together.

- As part of the growing infrastructure to support labor management, the university recently appointed Brian Green, vice president of labor and employee relations, where part of his charge involves building and maintaining constructive labor-management relationships.
- As we think about the structures that support graduate student success, it's important to recognize that thriving in graduate school depends not only on academic and professional support, but also on the conditions of daily life.
- One of the most meaningful investments the university has made in that regard is **The Ridge, Emory's graduate housing community**. I am pleased to share that Phase II is officially underway.
- This new structure will have approximately 400 additional beds and is being built adjacent to Phase I.
- Access to reliable housing allows students to direct their energy toward scholarship, teaching and research. The Ridge is one example of how we translate our values into action.
- When I first accepted my position, it was important to me to have a framework to guide how we prioritize initiatives of the graduate school.
- Four years ago, we developed the strategic framework, which includes three priority areas:
 1. **Promoting Interdisciplinary academic opportunities**
 2. **Enabling Inclusive Environments**
 3. **And Facilitating Impactful Scholarship**

- I will now present a few examples of initiatives we are pursuing separately by priority area.
- I have shared before that one of my key priorities is to be intentional about investing in master's education at Emory. This includes recruiting bright students to our programs, while also ensuring that the student experience considers their unique needs and supports their ability to pursue the careers that they find most meaningful.
- I am proud to say that we continue to make progress on both fronts.
- As part of this initiative, we are providing a stronger and more cohesive infrastructure to support a seamless application and review process for those who apply to our master's programs as well as a coordinated marketing strategy that crosses multiple programs.
- Finally, we are engaging in a range of professional development activities that help Master's students secure meaningful jobs upon graduation. This includes leveraging alumni to serve as bridges to jobs and helping students secure internships, refine their application materials, build a strong and visible digital presence, and be well-prepared for interviews.
- We believe that these efforts, taken together with critical investments that the college is making, will result in increased recruitment, retention, and job placement for master's students here at Emory.
- Enabling inclusive environments remains central to our mission. We are intentional about creating spaces where students across programs, identities, and disciplines can connect and cultivate their wellbeing.
- One way we advance this commitment is through the Flourishing at Laney initiative. Flourishing recognizes that graduate students thrive when academic rigor is paired

with wellbeing, high-quality mentoring, layered offerings of professional development, and a strong sense of community.

- Under the leadership of **Dr. Jennifer Cason, assistant dean of student affairs**, the student experience team developed the Flourishing initiative, organized around the three pillars you see here to ensure that students have the support they need to sustain themselves over the course of their graduate careers and beyond.
- For example, the Pathways to Success pillar is expressed through several career readiness opportunities like our forthcoming **Laney Professional and Academic Communication Support (Laney-PACS)** writing studio. This new initiative, led by **Heather Boldt**, was created to offer writing and public speaking support for all students-both domestic and international.
- One example of how we express the Community and Belonging pillar is through our intentional creation of cross-disciplinary connection. More than 600 students from different backgrounds attended the 10 student mixers that Associate Dean **Dr. Amanda Marie James' office** hosted during the 2024-2025 academic year. These events bring together a range of students and their allies for food, fun and fellowship.
- It's during these events that a microbiology and molecular genetics student may come to more deeply understand and appreciate the work of a history student and vice versa.
- For this last pillar I share just a few examples of initiatives that we have launched. First, 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.
- Under the leadership of **Dr. Tamara Caspary, associate dean, strategic projects**, we built a more cohesive and comprehensive grant writing support framework to ensure that all of our students have the skills, confidence and support they need to secure funding and advance impactful scholarship.

- Second, in an increasingly complex funding and academic landscape, excellence in research must be matched by excellence in teaching
- Through the new Teaching Triad Faculty Fellowship, led by **Dr. Kevin Bonney, assistant dean of teaching innovation**, LGS faculty are invited to come together in cross-disciplinary triads to apply evidence-based, learner centered teaching practices.
- This initiative matters because the quality of our teaching directly shapes how our students evolve into scholars and practitioners.
- Finally, experiential learning is no longer supplemental; it is essential. In a rapidly evolving employment landscape, students must enter the workforce with not only intellectual depth, but with demonstrated experience, professional fluency, and the confidence that they can apply their skills to a range of sectors.
- As part of our broader commitment to facilitate impactful scholarship and experiential learning, **Dr. Katy Leonard, assistant dean for professional development and career planning**, is leading efforts to expand and better coordinate experiential learning opportunities for students in the graduate school.
- In addition to the three strategic priorities I discussed, we've established five guiding approaches that reflect how we carry out this work.
- Those guiding approaches consist of incorporating student voices, achieving operational excellence, creating a culture of collaboration, engaging and developing staff, and fostering alumni and donor engagement.
- 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.

- A priority for me as dean is staying connected to students and hearing directly from them. I continue to hold regular office hours that create space for conversation, questions, and honest dialogue about their graduate student experience. Those conversations inform how I think about our priorities and how we move forward as a school.
- I am grateful for my working relationship with **Enoch Ayamga**, a **Biochemistry, Cell and Developmental Biology** doctoral student and president of the Laney Graduate Student Council as well as the entire LGSC Executive Board.
- Listening to students must be coupled with operational excellence in order to have the greatest impact as a Graduate School.
- Over the past year, our **Business and Finance team, led by associate dean, finance and operations Surabhi Vittal**, moved quickly to stand up the systems and processes needed to disburse the four funds that were established by the collective bargaining agreement—ensuring compliance, consistency, and clarity during a period of rapid transition.
- Our **Academic Operations team, led by associate dean and director of admissions and recruitment, Dr. Ulf Nilsson**, developed and launched the Research and Teaching Appointment process in Slate, creating a more transparent and efficient system for managing the appointment of student workers across programs and schools.
- At the same time, our **Communications team, led by chief communications officer, Jazmyn Burton**, advanced a comprehensive rebranding effort, launched a new Laney website, and strengthened how we tell the story of graduate education at Emory both internally and externally.
- Together, these efforts reflect a shared commitment to operational excellence in service of our students, faculty, and programs.

- At the Laney Graduate School, collaboration is not an abstract value; it is a deliberate strategy in service of our students.
- Many of you have heard me often say that because of how we are structured, LGS is the connective tissue between academic units across campus. We exist so that students and faculty have increased opportunities for what some call “constructive collisions.” But how do we do this?
- One way we do this is by working closely with the 6 dean’s offices. This may sound mundane, but in a large complex organization like Emory, this is meaningful.
- I am deeply grateful that my 6 colleagues value graduate education and what we contribute as a school.
- Under the leadership of Twyla Moore, our director of human resources, we continued to watch LGS grow with talent. Over the past year we successfully welcomed seven new team members including the new MDP Director, **Dr. Claire Bolton**.
- HR continues to strive to be intentional about strengthening the LGS community and culture through service and community engagement projects.
- The final but exceedingly important part of our foundation is the extended Laney community—our alumni and donors—whose generosity and involvement play a vital role in advancing our mission.
- Our Advancement and Alumni Engagement team is leading work that underpins many of the initiatives outlined in the strategic framework. Under the leadership of **Monica Polisetty**, our chief development officer, their efforts focus on building philanthropic support for graduate students and programs through meaningful donor cultivation and alumni engagement.
- As part of the 2036 fundraising campaign, LGS had an ambitious goal of raising \$30M by 8.31.25. We met 68% of our goal by raising roughly \$20.5M, which is

something I am quite proud of, given the challenges of fundraising in graduate education.

- With the conclusion of the 2036 campaign, we are recommitting our fundraising efforts to the strategic priorities that I discussed earlier.
- Speaking of alumni, I would like to highlight a few whose impact extends far beyond the Emory campus.
- This year, **seven** Laney Graduate School alumni were named to Emory's prestigious 40 Under Forty list. You can view their names on the slide.
- Notably, two of the seven honorees are alumni of our Master's in Development Practice program—one of our smallest master's programs—this is a true testament to the strength of a program that embodies Laney's global orientation and interdisciplinary commitment.
- Speaking of MDP, I would like to take a moment to recognize **Dr. Carla Roncoli**, long time director of the Master's in Development Practice program, who retired earlier this year; her leadership was foundational to the program's development and strength.
- This spring will also mark the retirement of **Dr. Ulf Nilsson**, who has served Emory University for almost twenty years in various roles.
- Ulf's steady presence, deep institutional knowledge, and dedication to accurate and timely data have made an indelible mark on Laney and on the many colleagues who have relied on his expertise over the years.
- As we honor the contributions of those whose careers have shaped Laney's foundation, we are reminded that their legacy lives on in the accomplishments of our students.

- Students like John Anthony Fuller. John was the recipient of the 2025 Kharen Fulton Award, an honor that reflects not only academic achievement, but leadership, service, and a deep commitment to an inclusive graduate community.
- And students like Anya Fredsell, a doctoral student in the Graduate Division of Religion, who has been awarded a prestigious Fulbright fellowship to support her ethnographic research in India.
- These achievements remind us that when we invest in strong programs, thoughtful mentorship, and collaborative support, our students rise to meet—and exceed—the moment.
- These are only two examples of LGS excellence. We have almost 10 students who are soon to be inducted into the Edward A. Bouchet National Honor Society and many others who will be recognized at our upcoming LGS awards ceremony next month.
- I couldn't be prouder of the perseverance, brilliance, and creativity that our students demonstrate each and every day here at Emory.
- I am soon to complete my fifth year as dean.
- I am often reminded that I am the longest serving dean at Emory, to which I reply, don't jinx me! This has indeed been a wild ride!
- I'm told that the fifth anniversary is symbolized by wood, which seems appropriate. Wood represents durability and growth, and perhaps most importantly the ability to withstand a few storms. These five years have included their challenges no doubt, but they have also included meaningful personal growth.
- If the past five years have taught me anything, it is that strong institutions, like wood, are resilient.

- But truly, I deeply enjoy my work and consider it an honor and a privilege to be able to lead the delivery of the highest-quality, student-centered graduate education at Emory.
- As I close, I want to recognize that I am continually impressed by the depth of scholarship and creativity across our campus. Emory faculty do more than teach and conduct research—they shape the ways in which we understand ourselves and the world in which we live.
- It is in that spirit that I would like to close with the words of a colleague whose work I have always admired; Emory faculty member, **Dr. Jericho Brown**.

In his poem *The Tradition*, the title poem of the collection that earned him the Pulitzer Prize Jericho writes:

Aster. Nasturtium (Na-ster-shum). Delphinium. We thought
 Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning
 Names in heat, in elements classical
 Philosophers said could change us. *Star Gazer.*
Foxglove. Summer seemed to bloom against the will
 Of the sun, which news reports claimed flamed hotter
 On this planet than when our dead fathers
 Wiped sweat from their necks. *Cosmos. Baby's Breath.*
 Men like me and my brothers filmed what we
 Planted for proof we existed before
 Too late, sped the video to see blossoms
 Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems
 Where the world ends, everything cut down.
John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.

- The challenges facing graduate education today —eroding trust, rising costs, pressures on academic freedom—often feel unsettling.

- Right now, we do see injustice. We see inequities and unnecessary pain and suffering.
- But we cannot speed the video to see blossoms. Blossoms of the careers that are being planted. Blossoms of how society will be changed by the dedication of our faculty, staff, students, and alumni. Blossoms of what the future of graduate education holds.
- So please accept my deepest appreciation to each of you for standing with me in this important work.
- Thank you. At this point I am happy to take questions.