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Ga. Tech embraces 'new face of computing'

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SAN JOSE, Calif. — Silicon Valley is a long way from Atlanta. But Rich DeMillo, dean of Georgia Tech's College of Computing, is as much at home here as he is at the school's Midtown campus.

DeMillo was chief technology officer at Palo Alto-based Hewlett-Packard Co. before leaving in 2002 to take the top job at the school where he once taught and later earned his doctorate.

But he still has strong connections to Silicon Valley. In the face of an ever-changing technology landscape, DeMillo is now approaching academia with the same sort of blow-it-up-and-start-over entrepreneurial spirit that made this region famous.

For starters, DeMillo recently completely overhauled the computer college's curriculum.

Instead of emphasizing basic programming — what Georgia Tech was traditionally known for — the school now is focusing on what DeMillo and his supporters call "the new face of computing."

Instead of training workers for the types of jobs that are increasingly being outsourced to India, China and elsewhere, the school now emphasizes entrepreneurship, global awareness and training for more advanced jobs such as digital multimedia distribution, robotics, computer security and supercomputing.

Not all of Georgia Tech's old school computer scientists appreciate De-

Millo's plan for the College of Computing, Version 2.0.

But in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, the changes are getting noticed and attracting some big-time talent.

In January, former White House computer security czar Howard Schmidt joined the school as an adjunct professor. Earlier this month, Georgia Tech announced a major agreement with the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee to work on new supercomputing technology, and signed on as a professor Thomas Zacharia, one of the leaders in the field. Last week, DeMillo said, he persuaded Google Inc. to open a small research office in Atlanta that will work closely with the school.

Meanwhile, enrollment is growing at a time when interest in computer science is declining elsewhere. Last year, research sponsorship at the school by outside tech firms grew by 40 percent.

DeMillo, 59, still visits Silicon Valley regularly to drum up research funding and keep his finger on the pulse of new technology. Last week, in between attending a computer security conference and visiting companies such as Google, IBM and Microsoft, he stopped to talk about his vision for the school. Here's some of what he had to say, edited for brevity:

Q: It seems Georgia Tech is getting a lot more recognition in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. Why's that happening?

A: Well, I don't know if we're getting visibility in Silicon Valley. But we're certainly being intentional about things we want to do. And I think a lot of those things we're doing tend to resonate with people out here and elsewhere.

Q: What do you mean?

A: When I got to Georgia Tech after having spent a number of years in industry, I kept asking people, 'Why aren't we producing people who are more relevant to industry, who can add value even as the technology changes?' People [at Georgia Tech] started to step back and said, 'You know, computer science is basically being taught today in 2003 like it was being taught in 1983.'

Q: So that led to the changes?

A: Once we started that conversation, sort of all the shackles came off. People [realized] we don't really need to have a core of 40 courses that [students] need to concentrate on for their entire academic career if what they want to do is be a successful game designer or a successful entrepreneur.

The idea that people want to do something with information technology never managed to make it into the computer science curriculum. So we kind of tore apart our curriculum and put it back together with that as a focus.

Q: I'm sure a lot of that resulted from your Silicon Valley perspective.

A: Having lived in it ... I realized [technology] is constantly changing, it's constantly dynamic. You can't freeze it for academic purposes and tell [students] this is the way technology works, because technology is constantly changing. The second part was the entrepreneurial piece ... 'Let's just do something that's bold.'

Q: Talk a little more about the offshoring issue. It sounds like it was a big part of why you reshuffled the undergraduate program, right?

A: Georgia Tech has a reputation of producing bench engineers. That's what computer science is. [But] if it's really the case that anything that can be automated or done cheaper or is easily commoditized is going to be at risk from a job standpoint, what do you do to educate people in information technology? You have to educate them in areas that are going to continue to add value, even as the low-level jobs go offshore or get automated away.

Q: So it gets back to applying computer science to more real-world applications.

A: Yes. It gets back to: What are they going to do with the technology?

Q: What do you want this school to be known for?

A: I want it to be known for redefining what it means to be a U.S.-educated engineer. We're doing that with our redefinition of the computer science curriculum. And the response we're getting nationwide is really, really awesome.

Q. What do you miss most about Silicon Valley and private industry?

A: I miss the pace. I miss doing things on Internet time. But I'm spending a lot of time and effort trying to duplicate that pace in Atlanta.

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