

# GAABESU's Alumni Scholarship Program: A 25-Year Journey of Cultivating Excellence in Engineering and Science

Swapam Saha, 1988EE, California, USA

## Introduction

Marking its Silver Jubilee, the GAABESU Alumni Scholarship Program has transcended its modest beginnings as a need-based initiative to become a comprehensive program dedicated to nurturing leadership, excellence, and academic prowess. In the 2022-23 academic year, the program distributed over INR 20 lakhs to students at the Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology (IIST), Shibpur showcasing substantial growth and impact. This article chronicles the program's origins, its transformative journey, and the success stories defining its enduring legacy.

## Origins and Evolution

The inception of the Alumni Scholarship Program dates back to 1998, originating in the San Francisco Bay Area. The program's historical roots were unveiled during the 2023 Bay Area Alumni Spring Event, shedding light on a fortuitous encounter in a library that triggered a transformative shift in alumni engagement.

In 1996, my initial involvement in alumni gatherings in the San Francisco Bay Area revealed a predominant presence of individuals from the 1950s and 1960s, with limited representation from other decades. Late Sripati-da (Bhattacharya '63EE) orchestrated get-together through formal postal invitations to local alumni, resulting in intimate and heartfelt gatherings.

A pivotal moment occurred during a routine perusal of Indian newspapers at the Sunnyvale Library in 1996, where I stumbled upon an advertisement for a Shibpur alumni event in the local community newspaper, India Post. Intrigued by this opportunity, I reached out to Satya-da (Sarkar '45 MET). Together with a few peers and our spouses, we embarked on a journey that not only reshaped my life but also altered the trajectories of many others.

Upon arriving at the event, we were warmly embraced. There, I encountered Subrata-da (Ghosh-'84ME) for the first time. Within a short time at the get-together, Sripati-da, Subrata-da and I found our commonality of sentiment towards our college and we bonded together immediately leading to a collective decision to contribute to our alma mater. Numerous meetings and gatherings at Sripati-da's Walnut Creek residence paved the way for a groundbreaking idea: the inception of a scholarship program sustained through our personal contributions from four co-founders (Sripati-da, Subrata-da, Tanmay-da and me) spanning two years of support. Our vision was to operate the program transparently and involve as many alumni as possible. Consequently, we pursued 501(c) non-profit status in the USA, established a website for donor and recipient tracking, and initiated the compilation of an alumni database.

The addition of Tanmay Das ('86CST), during his stay in the USA, bolstered our efforts. The scholarship program was officially launched in 1998-99, gaining global momentum with donations from alumni in the USA. A dedicated website facilitated expansion to donors in the Middle East and India, ultimately converging into the auspices of GAABESU in 2005-06. This evolution marked a significant chapter in the journey of the Alumni Scholarship Program, symbolizing the enduring spirit of alumni dedication and collaborative engagement.

Dr. S M Chatterjee, the Director of B E College (Deemed University), in collaboration with Mr. M.N. Sarkar, Finance Officer, Lt. Col. A.K. Ghosh from PICSA, and Mrs. B. Mitra, Controller of Exams, has been instrumental in offering crucial endorsement and support. This collaboration, facilitated by the regular visits of Tanmay Das and the other co-founders at the early days, have played a pivotal role in shaping the scholarship process, even predating the era of internet and mobile communication, and prior to the establishment of the GAABESU Office.

## Alumni Scholarship Program

The GAABESU Alumni Scholarship Program serves as the cornerstone of GAABESU's philanthropic initiatives, committed to fostering the development of emerging talents in engineering and science. Originating in the U.S., the program has witnessed remarkable growth, annually awarding scholarships to deserving students pursuing undergraduate programs at IEST Shibpur. Beyond providing financial assistance, the program places significant emphasis on recognizing merit and potential, ensuring that recipients not only receive financial support but also gain acknowledgment for their academic excellence.

Under GAABESU's guidance, each executive committee forms a scholarship sub-committee to oversee the transparent selection and distribution of awards. The details of this process are published on GAABESU's website, ensuring transparency and keeping all donors well-informed. Taking leadership roles in managing the program, Lt. Col Anjan Ghosh ('76ETC), Rajdeep Dutta ('88EE), and Prosenjit Chakraborty ('87EE) collaborate with dedicated alumni volunteers and GAABESU office staff.

This need-based program caters to students from financially challenged families, even if they receive tuition fee waivers from the government. The scholarship program extends support for hostel accommodations, meals, lodging, and study materials, making it accessible to eligible students.

The evolution of this program is noteworthy. Initially, individual alumni donors contributed by naming scholarships after their loved ones. Non-alumni also joined in, donating in honor of their parents who were alumni. Numerous chapters and batches contributed to embrace the Giving Back philosophy. The scholarship committee has demonstrated creativity in adapting to the changing landscape of education costs at IEST Shibpur by increasing scholarship amounts for those maintaining exceptionally high GPAs.

## Alumni Fellowship in Excellence

Complementing the scholarship initiative is the Alumni Fellowship in Excellence, a unique program designed to foster the development of future leaders in both industry and society. This fellowship is granted to current undergraduate students at IEST who demonstrate outstanding academic prowess and excel in extracurricular activities. It underscores GAABESU's dedication to comprehensive development, acknowledging that authentic leadership extends beyond mere academic accomplishments.

Eligibility for the fellowship requires the applicant to be a current IEST undergraduate student, with no restrictions based on family income. Additionally, applicants should not have faced disciplinary actions at IEST. The awards are conferred in recognition of excellence in various fields, encompassing community services, sports, performing arts, writing, and general leadership. The aim is to cultivate the next generation of leaders across diverse spheres of life.

## Alumni Research Award

The Alumni Research Award represents a pivotal facet of GAABESU's dedication to developing the next generation of academic leaders. This annual award recognizes current IEST undergraduate, or graduate students engaged in research alongside their academic studies. Esteemed alumni, such as Prof. Nihar Biswas ('70CE), Prof. Soumitro Banerjee ('81EE), Prof. Indranil Manna ('83MET), Prof. Partha P Chattopadhyay ('84MET), Dr. Goutam Chattopadhyay ('87ETC), and the late Prof Jyoti Majumdar ('72MET), played a crucial role in identifying and supporting exceptional talents among the student body. Their involvement highlights the commitment of GAABESU to fostering a culture of academic excellence and research within the IEST community.

The Research Award Program invites applications from students at IEST Shibpur, requiring a comprehensive submission that includes all pertinent research materials. This encompasses accepted or presented conference posters or papers, published journal papers, and any patents. The program places a significant emphasis on research experiences and achievements, accounting for 75% of the evaluation, with academic records contributing the remaining 25%. Notably, family financial information is not a consideration for this award.

Applicants, who must be current IEST Shibpur UG/PG students, are expected to conduct their research either within the institute or at an external institution while maintaining full-time student status at IEST. Formal application procedures must be followed, and submissions should include a poster or paper that has been presented or accepted at a national or international conference or published in a journal. Additionally, students who have applied for a patent based on their work at IEST Shibpur are also eligible to apply. Importantly, no points are assigned based on JEE rank or HS (or equivalent) grades. The focus of these awards is exclusively on recognizing and rewarding research accomplishments, and family income information is not required nor considered in the evaluation process.

## Research Awards - A Decade of Recognition

Over the span of the academic year 2014-15, the GAABESU Research Award program garnered 11 applications, leading to the identification and support of four exceptional individuals. The accomplishments of this cohort serve as a testament to the profound impact of the program:

- Amrita Roy Chowdhury: Successfully completed her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and presently serves as a Postdoctoral fellow at UC San Diego.
- Sagnik Nath: Joined UC Santa Cruz as an Assistant Professor in the Fall of 2022, following the completion of his Ph.D.
- Aritra Chatterjee: Attained the position of Assistant Professor at BITS Hyderabad after the successful completion of his Ph.D.
- Debendra Nath Sarkar: Continued his research journey alongside Prof. Gautam Biswas, '79ME, at IITG.

Beyond the individual success stories, the Alumni Research Award program has had a profound impact on the academic landscape. It has significantly contributed to the recognition of IEST Shibpur as a fertile ground for intellectual talent and a center for cutting-edge research. The accomplishments of alumni in prestigious institutions have heightened the institute's reputation, garnering attention and fostering collaborations with renowned academic and research organizations. This decade of recognition underscores the program's efficacy in not only nurturing individual talents but also elevating the overall academic standing of IEST Shibpur on a broader scale.

## A Recipient's Perspective

Avik Ghosh, 2019ME a recipient of the Alumni Research Awards, offers a compelling narrative that vividly portrays the profound impact of the program on his academic journey. In the fall of 2019, Ghosh embarked on his Ph.D. journey at the University of California, San Diego, marking a significant milestone in his pursuit of research excellence. The Sailendra Kumar Sen and Indira Sen Memorial Research Award in 2018-19, generously established by Dr. Subir Sen '64CE, and the Gouri and Jitendra Mazumder Memorial Research Award in 2017-18, graciously donated by the late Prof. Jyoti Mazumder '72MET, played pivotal roles in affirming his chosen path within the realm of research.

Reflecting on his journey, Avik highlights three key points: motivation in research, alumni connections, and the spirit of giving back. Engaged in research during his undergraduate years, Ghosh found profound encouragement in being recognized and rewarded for his extracurricular endeavors. This acknowledgment served as a powerful motivator, propelling him to directly apply to a Ph.D. program in the USA. According to Avik, the GAABESU Research Awards played a crucial role in affirming his trajectory in the dynamic world of research.

Avik's narrative also introduces a recurring and defining feature of GAABESU's Alumni Scholarship Program—the spirit of giving back. These awards, beyond providing financial assistance, initiate a virtuous cycle of motivation, encouragement, and community building. Through the Alumni Research Award program, the spirit of giving back is ingrained not only in the financial contributions of esteemed alumni but also in the mentorship and guidance they generously offer to aspiring scholars, fostering a culture of support and collaboration within the academic community.

## Fostering Success Through Transparent Philanthropy

The program's tremendous success can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, our alumni community maintains a robust connection with our Alma Mater, viewing this initiative as an opportunity to give back to the institution and society. Many of them received quality education for a minimal or no cost, enabling them to embark on fulfilling professional careers.

The dedicated volunteers overseeing the program have established a transparent process for fundraising, fund management, and fund distribution. This well-defined process has been publicly available on GAABESU's website since the program's inception. Funds in India are prudently invested in Fixed Deposits, complying with local regulations, while funds in the USA are invested in conservative mutual funds, with donors kept informed throughout.

GAABESU extends invitations to all donors or their families to attend and participate in award ceremonies, where they can personally hand over their donated awards to deserving students. This inclusive approach aims to make donors feel an integral part of the entire process.

Furthermore, the program has been adaptive, addressing evolving needs by covering a diverse range of areas, including need-based scholarships, academic excellence, extracurricular activities, and accomplishments in research. Donors have the flexibility to choose a cause they are passionate about and contribute accordingly, allowing for a personalized and impactful giving experience.

## The Future of GAABESU's Alumni Scholarship Program

As we celebrate the achievements of the Alumni Scholarship Program, it is imperative to acknowledge the escalating challenges in educational funding over the past 15 years. The demand for financial aid has grown exponentially, surpassing available resources and limiting the program's reach and its capacity to support a greater number of students. Addressing this challenge requires an ongoing commitment from alumni, donors, and institutional stakeholders to expand the program's scope and amplify its impact.

In October and November 2023, the momentum of these initiatives soared to impressive heights with the acquisition of an additional INR 20 Lakhs from two distinguished batches—1988 and 1998. The 1988 batch generously contributed INR 10 lakhs to establish two enduring research awards, while two alumni from the 1998 batch initiated two perpetual scholarships in memory of their late parents. These fresh funds arrived on the heels of a substantial contribution by the 1984 batch, both collectively and individually, detailed on our GAABESU website alongside a comprehensive list of donations and scholarships, which we omit here to conserve space.

As GAABESU's Alumni Scholarship Program marks its Silver Jubilee, it stands at a crucial juncture poised for further expansion and impact. The program's evolution from a need-based initiative to a multifaceted approach encompassing leadership, excellence, and research underscores its adaptability and responsiveness to the evolving needs of the academic community.

Many early recipients of these awards have achieved prominence in their professional careers. We aspire for them to become integral contributors to these programs, serving as generous donors and volunteers. Looking ahead, the success of the program hinges on sustained support from alumni, donors, and past recipients. By broadening its reach, the program can generate a more profound and far-reaching impact on the lives of students at IEST Shibpur. Additionally, exploring innovative funding models and establishing strategic partnerships will be crucial in ensuring the program's continuous growth and relevance.

## Conclusion

GAABESU's Alumni Scholarship Program has traversed a remarkable journey over the past 25 years, evolving into a comprehensive initiative that goes beyond financial assistance. From its origins as a need-based program, it has grown into a multifaceted endeavor fostering leadership, excellence, and academic prowess. The stories of success, the involvement of esteemed alumni, and the impact on academic leaders collectively highlight the program's transformative power.

As the program celebrates its Silver Jubilee, it is not just a retrospective but a call to action. The Alumni Scholarship Program stands as a testament to the collective impact that individuals and communities can have on shaping the future of education. By continuing to invest in the potential of students, fostering a spirit of giving back, and embracing opportunities for growth and collaboration, GAABESU's Alumni Scholarship Program will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of leaders in engineering and science.