

Inspiring Future Technologists

TISP takes the magic of engineering to K-12 classrooms / BY LOUISE KENNEDY

Vanessa Feliberti (ENG'93) was in middle school in El Paso, Tex., when she heard a high schooler say that “computers were the future.” At that moment, she says, she knew that they were the future for her.

And they were. After receiving a bachelor's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Feliberti earned a master's in systems engineering from the BU College of Engineering—and was immediately recruited by Microsoft.

She's been at Microsoft ever since, at first working on the then little-known email program called Exchange, and rising steadily through the ranks. Today, she's a partner general engineering manager, overseeing the Exchange calendar team. And she's passionate about making sure that others like her can follow a similarly rewarding path.

“As a lead inside Microsoft, I am the first woman of many things, like the first Latina engineer on the Microsoft campus, and the first female engineering partner,” Feliberti says. “So I feel fortunate to be able to help open the doors for inclusion in our society.”

She does that in multiple ways: by championing diversity at Microsoft; by teaching a high school class twice a week as part of a program the company founded to increase access to computer science education;



Bryan Chiakpo (ENG'17), an Inspiration Ambassador in ENG's Technology Innovation Scholars Program, takes a measurement for the Marshmallow Design Challenge at Josiah Quincy Upper School in Boston.

and by supporting ENG's Technology Innovation Scholars Program (TISP).

TISP trains ENG undergraduates as Inspiration Ambassadors, who visit K-12 classrooms to share their love of engineering and guide students in hands-on activities: learning to code, designing robots, and developing all kinds of prototypes, from wind turbines to fuel cells. Feliberti sees the program as an important part of the effort to expand the pipeline of future engineers, particularly by increasing outreach to women and underrepresented students.

And the program does attract a diverse cohort. Half of the ENG students who apply to serve as ambassadors are women, and a quarter are members of underrepresented minorities.

Feliberti believes so strongly in TISP that she recently made a six-figure gift to create an endowed fund for the program. The fund will provide stipends, training, and materials to help the Inspiration Ambassadors spread the word about engineering, both in Boston-area schools and at their own schools back home during breaks. TISP programs have reached more than 20,000 students nationwide—and Feliberti's transformative gift will help them reach even more.

“We are so grateful to Vanessa for her gift, which will provide continued financial support of the TISP program,” says Stacey Freeman, ENG's assistant dean of outreach and diversity, who oversees TISP. “And her own commitment to helping women and traditionally underrepresented students enter technology fields aligns so well with the TISP program and the college's commitment to diversity and inclusion.”

For Feliberti, the program reminds her of her own reasons for choosing to do graduate work at BU, which she considered an important “hands-on” complement to the theoretical education she received at MIT.

“This focus on combining deep technical skills with truly challenging students to think about having a positive effect on society really resonates with me, because that is what my life and career are about,” Feliberti says. And knowing that BU wants its graduates to use their technological expertise to help others, she says, “inspires me to stay involved, to help foster that growth and create more opportunities for students.”