A Talk with Ravi Venkat Bellamkonda

In September, I asked Ravi Bellamkonda to respond to a series of questions to learn more about his passion and vision for diversity as he began his new role as the Vinik Dean of the Pratt School of Engineering at Duke University.

Prior to becoming Dean, Bellamkonda served as the Wallace H. Coulter Professor and Chair of the Department of Biomedical Engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology and Emory University. Bellamkonda served from 2014-2016 as president of the American Institute for Biological and Medical Engineering (AIMBE), the leading policy and advocacy organization for biomedical engineers with representation from industry, academia and government.

Dean Bellamkonda was an invited speaker at the Office for Institutional Equity’s Annual Retreat held on August 15, 2016. At that time, Dean Bellamkonda shared his background and interests prior to embarking on this new role at Duke. During the retreat, he further shared his vision for the Pratt School of Engineering which sparked our interest to delve further into learning more about his extensive work and fascinating background. The following reflect a series of questions and Dean Bellamkonda’s responses.

- Robert T. Crouch, Assistant Director, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Duke University Office for Institutional Equity

How long have you been devoted to diversity and inclusion in the workspace and why is this work important to you as the Vinik Dean of the Pratt School of Engineering?

For many years, I was under the impression that talent and hard work were the keys to overcoming the diversity and inclusion issues that underrepresented minority (URM) groups face. While these issues are present, I assumed they would become less important once one gets an opportunity to be at a fantastic place like Duke.

However, as I have spent more time with our URM, LGBTQ and women colleagues, and as I listened more, several things have become clearer to me. For example, places like Duke are not as accessible as we would like them to be. Even after we become members of a top-notch university, there is sometimes an information and expectation asymmetry that advantages some over others. We all form ‘intuitions’ about individuals in certain groups based on popular or historical (false) mores. And while this intuition normally serves us well, it creates an unconscious bias that can definitely lead us astray, resulting in an unfair playing field. This has been a profound and personal realization for me. This awareness alone has changed the way I approach matters and the conversations I have in my role as the Dean of the Pratt School of Engineering.

Please describe the connections between academic scholarship, research and diversity from an engineers’ point of view.

If we as Duke engineers are serious about taking on grand challenges in complex areas like health, intelligence and connectivity, and the environment (and we are!), we cannot do it without the best minds collaborating and working together. The best minds do not favor a race, gender or sexual orientation – on the contrary, I would like for Pratt to be a destination for people who are interested in changing the world, and who bring a wide range of perspectives and insights that are needed to do that. Our diversity mission
is the same as our mission for excellence; they are not two separate missions in my mind.

**Why is a deep appreciation for diversity and inclusion important for the Pratt School of Engineering?**

The research of Scott Page and others show that as problems become more complex, the diversity of the teams tackling them becomes a major factor in success. So to me the case for diversity is not solely a social justice argument. A diversity of opinions and backgrounds, broadly defined, is also a critical ingredient to our coming up with breakthroughs in research and in teaching.

**In your role as Dean, would you describe some of the diversity and inclusion initiatives that are on the horizon for the Pratt School of Engineering?**

My hope is to concentrate our efforts on two fronts. First, to develop mentorship, strong community and proactive transparency in information so that at Pratt we do ALL we can to enable each member of our family to succeed in whatever it is that she or he is passionate about. I would like each member of Pratt and Duke to feel like ALL of Pratt and Duke is behind their success—without question. As a result, we are looking at every aspect of our climate to include our hiring process, our mentorship processes, and our system of rewards and recognition. Focusing on these two fronts will ensure ALL members of Pratt, particularly those from underrepresented groups, feel welcomed, nurtured and free to pursue what they really came here to do, to make a difference in our research, learning and teaching missions. We have a fantastic Diversity Officer, Dr. Johnna Frierson, who helps initiate and facilitate these conversations. But I believe the main responsibility really rests with the entire leadership at Pratt, who are the folks who make hiring, promotion and resource allocation decisions. I am glad we have partnerships with her and your office as resources to help us make progress in this important journey. Let me also tell you two things—I am proud of Duke’s position on HB2 and the renaming of the Quad. I was honored to be present for Duke’s recognition of true excellence in naming our most important Quad as the Abele Quad. While we have a long way to go, I am hopeful that at Duke, we will continue to take this Journey together.

**Please offer one or two hobbies and/or interests (e.g., traveling, hiking, reading, etc.) outside of your role at Duke University.**

I love playing tennis, going on long walks with my wife, keeping up with politics in the U.S. and across the world, and reading young adult science fiction recommended by my two teenagers!

**BACKGROUND**

Ravi Venkat Bellamkonda is the Vinik Dean of the Pratt School of Engineering at Duke University. Prior to becoming dean, Bellamkonda served as the Wallace H. Coulter Professor and chair of the Department of Biomedical Engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology and Emory University. He is committed to fostering transformative research and pedagogical innovation as well as programs that create an entrepreneurial mindset amongst faculty and students.

A trained bioengineer and neuroscientist, Bellamkonda holds an undergraduate degree in biomedical engineering. His graduate training at Brown University was in biomaterials and medical science (with Patrick Aebischer), and his post-doctoral training at Massachusetts Institute of Technology focused on the molecular mechanisms of axon guidance and neural development (with Jerry Schneider and Sonal
Jhaveri). His current research explores the interplay of biomaterials and the nervous system for neural interfaces, nerve repair and brain tumor therapy.

From 2014 to 2016, Bellamkonda served as president of the American Institute for Biological and Medical Engineering (AIMBE), the leading policy and advocacy organization for biomedical engineers with representation from industry, academia and government. Bellamkonda’s numerous awards include the Clemson Award for Applied Research from the Society for Biomaterials, EUREKA award from National Cancer Institute (National Institutes of Health), CAREER award from the National Science Foundation and Best Professor Award from the Georgia Tech Biomedical Engineering student body.