



## **National Society of Black Engineers’ 50th Annual Convention Uplifted DEI, Shattered Attendance Record**

*‘NSBE50’ Drew 18,000-Plus Participants to Atlanta After Relocation Last Fall From Orlando*

Exceeding the attendance goal by more than 3,000 participants was only one of many causes for celebration by the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) at its 50th Annual Convention (#NSBE50), in March. More than 18,000 collegiate and K–12 students; STEM-educated professionals; corporate, government and nonprofit recruiters and executives; local and regional community leaders; local government officials, including Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, who is an engineer and a former member of NSBE; and others, gathered for the convention at the Georgia World Congress Center, in Atlanta, March 20–24, 2024 — making it the largest event by attendance in NSBE’s 49-year history, by a wide margin.

NSBE, today, is one of the largest student-governed organizations based in the United States, with 650 chapters and more than 22,000 members in the U.S. and abroad, committed to advancing the Society’s mission: *“to increase the number of culturally responsible Black engineers who excel academically, succeed professionally and positively impact the community.”*

### **Rooted in DEI**

Equity and inclusion are at NSBE’s root. The 134 engineering students from across the U.S. who gathered at Purdue University to establish the National Society of Black Engineers, in April 1975, were part of a generation of African Americans who were frustrated by the unmet goals of the Civil Rights Movement. Their objective was to create a national organization to address the very low enrollment and retention of Black engineering students in the country, but their goal was to achieve social justice by working toward equity in STEM education and STEM hiring; to empower Black communities with greater knowledge and proficiency in STEM.

The 50th Annual Convention — and its theme, “Engineering CommUNITY” — mirrored the vision of NSBE’s six founders and the diverse supporters who helped them actualize it. As the “anti-woke movement” surged in Florida and other states last fall, the Society’s leadership, after weeks of thoughtful deliberation and passionate debate, unified to announce the relocation of

the event to Atlanta from its long-slated original venue in Orlando. The decision was perilous in terms of logistics and planning, but it prioritized participant safety and the ability to offer a quality convention experience that reflected NSBE's commitment to DEI.

Speakers at the event's opening press conference on Thursday, March 21, beginning with NSBE Convention Planning Committee Chair Destinee Cartner, celebrated the historic turnout in Atlanta that resulted from that decision.

"The theme of this event is Engineering CommUNITY, a creative phrase that captures NSBE's purpose of Black community empowerment through STEM knowledge and proficiency, and also spotlights the importance of a unified effort to advance NSBE's mission, which is "to increase the number of culturally responsible Black Engineers who excel academically, succeed professionally and positively impact the community" said Carter, who is a bioengineering and biomedical engineering student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. "All of us in this room have a vital part to play in this CommUNITY."

"Orlando's loss is our gain," said Mayor Dickens during his remarks.

In his press conference remarks, NSBE's National Executive Board chair, Avery Layne, a Ph.D. student in mechanical engineering at the University of Maryland, spoke of the progress the Society has made and the continuing challenges it faces.

"Nine years ago, we set a goal to move the number of new Black Engineers produced in the U.S. to 10,000 annually by 2025. Only 3,500 Black candidates nationwide received engineering bachelor's degrees that year. Today, the number has grown to 6,100. But...those 6,100 Black graduates are only 4.7% of the total number of engineering bachelor's degree recipients," said Layne. "Our goal is parity with our percentage of the U.S. population, which is 13.6%. So, clearly, we have a long way to go."

Later that day, at the Thursday General Session, Layne announced one of the actions NSBE is taking to continue its mission in the face of increasing opposition. The Society's newly established is supporting NSBE members pursuing engineering or engineering-related degrees in states that have passed anti-DEI laws impacting higher education.

"Since 2023, 65 anti-DEI bills have been introduced in this country. Eight have become law. What we are witnessing is the systemic dismantling of programs, policies and practices that foster a sense of belonging on college campuses for students with minoritized identities," said

NSBE Chief Executive Officer Janeen Uzzell, at the press conference. “We believe these intentional efforts are being used to stifle the collective drive toward equity and justice in our educational system.

“Now, more than ever, organizations such as NSBE are needed to support students, from K–12 through college, in the areas where states like Florida, Texas, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, and Utah have severed resources,” Uzzell said.

### **Inspiration, Information, Career Development, Training**

The scores of events on the four-day Convention agenda catered to the interests and needs of aspiring and practicing STEM professionals from elementary school students to veteran technologists, managers and executives in the workplace. Among the many highlights were:

- A wide-ranging Q&A with NASA Astronaut Victor Glover that captivated NSBE pre-collegiate and collegiate members and others at the Saturday General Session. Glover, an African American, is scheduled to pilot NASA’s Orion spacecraft on the Artemis II mission to orbit the Moon as early as September 2025.
- Engagement of thousands of NSBE students and professionals with more than 400 top employers and higher education recruiters at the Annual Convention Career Fair.
- Appearances by the four remaining members of NSBE’s founding “Chicago Six,” who were together in the same rooms for the first time since their graduation from Purdue University nearly five decades earlier; and a “NSBE Origins” workshop, presented by the founders’ archival research team, that provided convention participants with firsthand accounts from the charter members of the organization, and a comprehensive first look, for many, at the diverse collaboration of students, industry executives and higher education faculty and administrators that made NSBE possible.

NSBE’s mission statement came later, in 1987–89, but NSBE founder Anthony Harris reported during Origins that the tagline he and his colleagues wrote for the organization was “Dedicated to a Better Tomorrow.”

- Technical and science competitions, such as a VEX Robotics Competition sponsored by Target Corporation and a FIRST LEGO League Challenge sponsored by Apple, for NSBE Jr. members.

- Multiple events hosted by Boeing, among them a Flight Competition for NSBE collegiate members; a Leadership Roundtable discussion with a panel of corporate managers and executives, for NSBE Professionals members; and an Explorer Technical Innovation Competition, where NSBE Jr. members presented projects that showed their boundless talent and brainpower. CleanO2, a carbon-capturing device for home use, “demonstrated an 83% reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> levels,” according to the report by the development team, NSBE Jr. members Ruby Ramirez and Ulysses Zavala.
- A high-energy Black STEM Experience event, sponsored by Amazon, on Friday evening, March 22, which used a game show format, music and other entertainment to enlighten attendees about the state of Black America in STEM and to show what a more inclusive STEM culture can look and feel like.
- A report by NSBE CEO Janeen Uzzell about NSBE’s leadership work with the 50k Coalition, a group formed by NSBE, the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) and the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) to reshape the engineering landscape. The coalition has met the “audacious” goal it set in 2015: to lead the U.S. to increase the number of Black, Brown and women engineering bachelor’s degree graduates produced annually in the nation from 30,000 to 50,000 by 2025 — five years ahead of schedule.
- The culminating NSBE Golden Torch Awards ceremony, on Saturday evening, March 23, emceed by famed actor and musician Malcolm-Jamal Warner. The ceremony included awards to individuals and organizations in 18 categories for their work that advanced NSBE’s mission, and a special NSBE Lifetime Membership presentation to Astronaut Glover. A full list of the NSBE Golden Torch Awards honorees is below.

Announcement of NSBE’s Chapters of the Year and 2024-25 national officers immediately followed the Golden Torch Awards onstage. Ronald Williford Jr. will lead the Convention Planning Committee for NSBE’s 51st Annual Convention, to be held in Chicago in March 2025, the culmination of NSBE Gold, the Society’s yearlong 50th anniversary celebration.

## **2024 NSBE Golden Torch Awards**

### **Honoree Listing**

Corporate Community Service

Target Corporation

Corporate Diversity Leadership

Merck & Co.

Corporate/Education Partnership

GE's Next Engineers

NSBE Partner of the Year

Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy

U.S. Department of Energy

Distinguished Engineer of the Year

David C. Williams

Assistant Vice President of Automation

AT&T Business Solutions

Early Career Achievement in Industry

Ifeanyi Okpala, Ph.D., PMP

Project Engineer and Project Manager of Execution

Exxon Mobil Corporation

Lifetime Achievement in Industry

Michele Wise Wright, Ph.D.

Director of Business Development and Outreach

Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers

Outstanding Woman in Technology

Kimberly M. Cross, Ph.D.

Director of Programs, Integrated Product Team for Manufacturing

Northrop Grumman Corporation – Aeronautics Systems Strike Division

Professional Member of the Year

Bobby Teachey II

Senior Project Manager – Construction Management  
Brownstone Construction Group

Lifetime Achievement in Academia  
Charles Isbell, Ph.D.  
Provost and Vice Chancellor, University Wisconsin–Madison

Rising Star in Academia  
Shakira Hobbs, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Samueli Faculty Development  
Endowed Chair  
University of California, Irvine

Mike Shinn NSBE Male Distinguished Member of the Year  
Devon Woodfine  
Mechanical Engineering Senior  
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Graduate Student of the Year  
Raphael Oladokun  
Ph.D. Student, Chemical Engineering  
West Virginia University

Collegiate Chapter Advocate of the Year  
Cheryl Olanga  
Computer Science Junior, Syracuse University  
Syracuse University NSBE Chapter

Pre-College Initiative Director of the Year  
Caia Brown  
Director  
Justice Code NSBE Jr. Chapter, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Pre-College Program of the Year  
The Gaskins Foundation

Pre-College Initiative Female Student of the Year  
Zion Walker

E-STEM Katherine Johnson NSBE Jr. Chapter, Columbus, Ohio

Pre-College Initiative Male Student of the Year

Gavin Goldring

CASH NSBE Jr. Chapter, Prince Frederick, Maryland