



*State of the University*



**President's Club Luncheon**

Tuesday, September 15, 2009  
Augusta Country Club

# *The State of the University*

August 11, 2009

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Such speeches as this often follow a standard format based on the stages of a journey: where we came from, where we are, and where we're going. Sometimes the urgencies of the present and the opportunities of the future cause such speeches to give short shrift to the "where we came from" part. Today, however, I'd like to begin with some specific attention to the way we once were.

I do this, of course, to tap into sentimental memories of people who've been here for a long time—but I also do it for the sake of those who have no memory of how we used to be.

Doing this, I want to show you some pictures of the past, starting with one of your president taken shortly after his arrival here. I can guarantee you that this picture represents something to which your president would love to return.

But the place where he was then, well, that's another story.

The college that I found when I arrived here held 75 percent of its classes in six warehouses that had been built in 1941, renovated 30 years later, and mistakenly named "academic buildings."

Few faculty members had offices with windows—and the roofs over their heads were made partly of asbestos. When it rained, the roofs leaked.

The main entrance into campus was by a two-lane street guarded by a gatehouse that was originally designed to keep people out, not welcome them in.

There were roads across campus that allowed our neighbors, neither students nor staff themselves, to use our property as a shortcut on their drives to work—or the grocery

store, or the lawyer's office, or wherever.

In short, the campus at that time looked, for the most part, like a place you'd want to stay out of—certainly not a place where you'd want to spend some of the most important years of your life. It's amazing what a hundred million dollars or so can do to change such a place.

*W*hat you see now—including Science Hall, Allgood Hall, University Hall, our “new” Washington Hall, the JSAC, our gorgeous main entrance, our History Walk, our amphitheatre—are, in part, testaments to our success, and they are physical reminders of paths that we will not have to tread again.

There are days when I look at the before and after photographs of this campus and think we should erect a monument to honor those who studied and worked here before we became what we are now.

I want to say that they served with dignity on an undignified campus, but by doing what they did, they helped get us to the point where we are now—and all who follow are both honored by and required to serve well in this far more dignified place.

*A*s we have improved physically, we also have grown. It's amazing. You look like a place that's inviting—and people come. Enrollment may reach 7,000 this fall—which would be an increase of five percent over last fall. Our student apartments at University Village are all rented out—and are so for the very first time. Surely we don't have enough parking spaces.

This is good—because we do not work in an overeducated state. A recent report funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education identifies the six states in the nation with the greatest need for higher education: Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, New Mexico, Nevada, and Georgia. Our work is much needed.

And we are in a recession. Some of the human beings in our classes this semester will be students—perhaps students again, perhaps students for the first time—because they have lost their jobs.

A recession has a way of making people realize the need for a college degree, the need for knowledge and skills that will hold them in good stead, give them greater flexibility, and make it easier for them to roll with the punches of the economy in years to come.

So we have more students than ever before. Many are aspiring young people, some, perhaps, knowing only that this is the logical next step after high school. Many are older, wiser, perhaps even a little more desperate to earn the benefits of a college degree. But for all of them, we are their hope for the future. Their future is our present, our work, our obligation.

I've never met anyone who works here who doesn't care deeply about our students. You don't have to be in a classroom or in the admissions office or in student activities to sense this. You can talk to a custodian, talk to an electrician, talk to anyone working in any office. That's our tradition. That's us.

*S*o here we are, today, at the beginning of the 2009 fall semester. We have much going for us.

Look, for instance, at the cover of the Augusta phone book. That's more than free advertising. It means that we're known—that we're a source of community pride. It means that we have done—you have done—tremendous things.

We're a high-tech university where over 80 percent of our students log on to the campus network every month.

We provide services to our students that students ten years ago could only dream about—the JSAC, the new Jaguar Express shuttle (maybe not quite as good as a monorail but still very attractive), and four additional full-time advisors to help

our students do the right thing in their classes and for themselves.

We have an intercollegiate athletic program of national stature in NCAA Division II—and one in which one of our students, a softball player named Angie Verbeelen, was named the top female scholar-athlete in all of the Peach Belt Conference last year.

And this came from an athletic program at a university where its students pay the lowest athletic fee of any other Georgia school in the Conference.

Let's not forget a baseball player who signed with the Boston Red Sox, a basketball player on the cusp of playing in the NBA, and two alumni playing at the highest levels of professional golf.

We have one of the most accomplished Phi Kappa Phi chapters in the nation: one of only five—out of almost three hundred—to be named a Chapter of Excellence.

In recent years, we've had previously undreamed-of success in fundraising. Key names here are Marie Hulbert, Jim and Karen Hull, Boone and George-Ann Knox.

Part of that kind of philanthropy rises in response to what we give back: over \$150,000 in campus contributions in last year's *A Day* campaign.

So here we are. Fall of 2009. Lots of accomplishments. Plenty of students. A new president in Washington. A national economy in recession—and state tax revenues headed south.

You knew I would get to this.

We don't waste money here.

Our per capita spending in the category of “institutional

support” is among the lowest in the system. (For the record, that includes such activities as business operations, human resources, public relations, much of information technology, all of development and alumni relations, and the office of the president.)

Our spending in student services is also low, and it is by no means above average in plant operations.

What this means is that we’ve been successful at putting what funds we have into our most important functions: instruction and academic support.

Moreover, last year we had to send back almost twelve percent of our state appropriations. We did this without layoffs and without furloughs—and we did it well because everyone here pitched in to do well.

I wish I could say that we did such a good job with so little last year that no one felt any pain. I can’t say that. In many instances we simply did without. And we had understaffed offices, overcrowded classrooms, and more part-time instructors than ever before.

But under the circumstances we did well. We kept the implicit promise we make to students: come here, become our student, and we will give you our best—in teaching, in support, in service, and in challenges. Find me a student who hasn’t felt the challenge that we place before them—to do well, to do much, to become a very active learner, to become a lover of learning.

We will do it again this year—but we will do it with a difference. I fully expect the Board of Regents to approve a mandatory furlough policy at its meeting today and tomorrow—to account for, make up for, the first two percent cut in state appropriations this year.

I can’t say that I voted for furloughs. I can’t say that’s the best way for us to cut our state appropriations.

I certainly can’t say that I like the idea of reducing pay for

faculty and staff who aren't overpaid to begin with.

I can't say that Chancellor Davis is thrilled about this matter, either.

But if we must do it, we will do it in the most palatable manner possible—by shutting the university down on days or parts of days when classes are not scheduled—and by making sure that no one has to take more than one furlough day in a pay period.

We'll know more about this when the Board of Regents concludes its meeting tomorrow.

For now, let me just say that this is not the note on which this speech should end.

*This* is a marvelous institution with a bright future and a great deal of support. We're on the verge of beginning a process to plan the eventual acquisition and development of dozens of acres along Wrightsboro Road. The filling of University Village will mean more university housing in the years to come.

The success of our academic programs will mean additional programs and even better programs.

We'll be ever more successful in gaining external support from grants and contracts.

Undergraduate student research will grow—and, growing, will produce better graduates.

We'll produce new levels of graduates in math and science. We enrolled 30 engineering students this past year in the new GeorgiaTech-Augusta State program leading to careers in that field.

And we produced 49 certified teachers of math and science for high schools and middle schools this past year. That wasn't a fluke either, but a trend line moving up—70 percent more than the year before, almost 500 percent more than the year before that.

We've seen gains in student retention in recent years; we'll see more in the future.

And who knows? Maybe we'll even play basketball again in Massachusetts.

Many things will be new this year. Most obvious and most important will be our new students.

But we also have our new faculty members, a brand new team leading our College of Education (new dean, new assistant dean, and three new department chairs), and new department chairs also in Art, Communications and Professional Writing, and Psychology.

And we're always improving, constantly asking ourselves what we can learn about what we do so that we can do better.

And we do good things because you—our faculty and staff—are so good.

Last week I was in someone's office talking about what we had ahead of us this year, including the furlough thing. As I walked out of the office, what I heard was, "Well, good luck!"

I took about three steps down the hall, thought about what had just been said, stepped back into the office to say what I believe to be the gospel truth, which is that I really don't need luck because I, as president, am blessed with the kind of people who work here.

This is a good place: has been in the past, is now, and will continue to be in the future. And it's almost all your fault.

Go Jags.

