



The State of the University Address

by President Jere W. Morehead
University of Georgia
January 21, 2015

Good afternoon, and thank you for joining me today. David, I appreciate that very kind introduction, and I am grateful for your continued service as Chair of the Executive Committee of University Council.

This gathering represents one of the many great traditions at the University of Georgia. In January of each year, the President has the privilege to provide the campus community with a report on the state of the University. I am honored to continue that tradition today.

Let me begin with a simple but compelling truth: the state of the University of Georgia is stronger now than at any point in our 230-year history. The evidence for this statement can be found in the world-class learning environment created by our outstanding faculty, staff, and students, as well as in our expanding research enterprise in areas of local, national, and global significance.

It can be seen in the numerous ways we are extending our vast intellectual resources to promote prosperity in communities across Georgia and beyond. And, the evidence lies in the important steps we are taking as a community to secure the long-term success of America's first state-chartered University.

These four broad areas—building a world-class learning environment, expanding the research enterprise, promoting prosperity, and securing our long-term success—will serve as the framework for my address this afternoon.

They also will paint a picture of a University—propelled by its land-grant mission—that is pursuing a strategic course to reach new heights of excellence as a leader among the nation's best public research universities.

Building a World-Class Learning Environment

This fall, the University of Georgia enrolled the most academically qualified class of first-year students in its history. You might feel as if you have heard that statement before, and you have. I made this very same statement during the State of the University address one year ago.

The demand for a UGA degree continues to rise among our state and nation's most exceptional students. They are attracted to the world-class learning environment we are building together at the University of Georgia.

The foundation of the rich educational experience we offer is our outstanding faculty, who are firmly committed to student learning: faculty such as Dr. John Knox, who was named Georgia Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation; Dr. Marshall Shepherd, who received the Protector of the Earth award from the Captain Planet Foundation; Drs. William Finlay and Paula Lemons, who received awards for excellence in teaching from the Board of Regents this year; and Drs. James Hamilton, Audrey Haynes, and David Mustard, who are our most recent recipients of the Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professorship, the University's highest recognition for teaching excellence.

Of course, we have hundreds of other faculty members who are creating student-centered classrooms and laboratories and using today's most innovative instructional methods to facilitate learning at the highest levels possible.

Our many dedicated staff members also contribute in significant ways—seen and unseen—to the lives of our students and to the life of this University. There is no better illustration of this point, perhaps, than the ongoing implementation of Athena, our new student information system and the product of hundreds of staff members working together, tirelessly, for more than four years, to advance information technology for the benefit of the entire campus.

With this example and many others in mind, I am excited to announce today that in May of this year the President's Office will host a campus-wide Staff Appreciation Day. This event will be the culmination of a weeklong initiative designed to thank our outstanding staff members for their many contributions to the University of Georgia.

I am grateful to the team of staff leaders—representing departments across campus and the University Staff Council—that is planning this celebration. My thanks to each of you for your work on this important project.

With an eye toward the future, we are constructing state-of-the-art facilities to support the academic work of our faculty and students. In August, the

result of this commitment. We can expect 94 percent of this year's incoming freshman class to return next fall for their sophomore year.

Another result is our climbing six-year graduation rate, which has reached a record high at roughly 85 percent. It is worth noting that almost all of these students—around 83 percent—will graduate in five years or less. Our high retention and graduation rates are part of the reason we were ranked again among the top 20 public universities by *U.S. News & World Report*.

We learned in the fall that the overall graduation rate among student-athletes reached a record high at 84 percent—on par with non-athletes—and nine sports teams achieved a rate of 90 percent or above. Additionally, the more than 550 student-athletes enrolled at the University of Georgia earned an average GPA of 3.0 last semester.

Chris Conley was named SEC Scholar-Athlete of the Year in football, and—just last week—Olympic gold medalist Shannon Vreeland received the NCAA Top Ten Award as one of the very best student-athletes in the country.

As you can see, the University of Georgia is building a world-class learning environment where our students flourish academically. Just as important, these students will graduate with little debt relative to the national average for similar institutions. The University of Georgia is among the nation's leaders in providing an exceptional education at an affordable cost. Being consistently ranked in the top 10 of *Kiplinger's* "100 Best Values in Public Colleges" is one indication of our strong commitment to keep costs low and quality high for students and families.

This commitment must continue, and, toward that end, I am pleased to announce that the University will extend the freeze on food services and parking rates for our students through the 2015-2016 academic year. In addition, with the exception of the fee that supports Athena, the University did not propose an increase to any mandatory student fees for next year.

I am grateful to the many individuals across campus whose conscientious financial planning is allowing the University to hold these costs steady for another year.

These are all excellent accomplishments in keeping with our commitment to put students first. However, we should not rest on the accomplishments of today. We must continue our pursuit of excellence well into the future.

And, it is in this spirit of bold institutional progress that I want to share with you an innovative new initiative being developed to further enhance the learning environment for our students.

Currently, the Provost is working with the deans and our faculty on a proposal that would provide all undergraduate students at the University of Georgia with an experiential learning opportunity prior to graduation.

In order to enhance our position as a premier research university, however, we must continue to expand our research enterprise. Nothing is more important in this endeavor than recruiting and retaining outstanding research faculty.

Two Georgia Research Alliance Eminent Scholars will join the University later this year, adding to this growing group of distinguished scientists on campus. Dr. Robert Haltiwanger, one of the world's leading glycobiochemists, will join UGA's Complex Carbohydrate Research Center, and Dr. Ted Ross, a pre-eminent infectious disease researcher, will join the College of Veterinary Medicine.

The Provost and I announced in the fall a hiring initiative to recruit grant-active, tenured faculty, whose research is literally changing the world. This hiring initiative follows one launched in the fall of 2013, which focused on recruiting faculty who conduct research across traditional disciplinary boundaries, where many of the world's most complex challenges now reside.

Through several faculty hiring initiatives in recent years, the University has been able to add more than 100 new faculty positions to replenish many of those lost during the Great Recession.

I am pleased that this year we were able to offer merit-based raises for faculty and staff for the first time since Fiscal Year 2009. We also increased the graduate assistantship rate to improve our ability to attract the most academically talented graduate students.

A pool for salary increases was my top legislative priority last year. I remain grateful to the Board of Regents, the General Assembly, and the Governor for supporting it. However, the University of Georgia still lags behind regional and national peers in this regard. That is why improving salaries for faculty and staff will remain a top priority for the foreseeable future.

Governor Deal and Chancellor Huckaby have proposed another salary increase for the upcoming fiscal year, and I intend to articulate to members of the General Assembly the importance of closing the salary gap between the University and its peer institutions.

Of course, our efforts to recruit and retain outstanding faculty will have limited impact on our goal to increase research productivity without an efficient infrastructure in place to support grant applications and management. It has become clear that the University needs to make improvements in this area, and a campus-wide initiative is now underway with this goal in mind.

Better integration between pre- and post-award services was a recommendation made by our Deans and leading research faculty. This semester, the Office for Sponsored Programs, which provides pre-award services, and the Contracts and Grants Division, which provides post-award services, will

be moved into the same building. Close proximity should promote greater collaboration. A shadowing program between the two units is being introduced this semester to provide valuable cross-training to staff in both areas.

Improving customer service in grants administration is another area of focus under the initiative. To facilitate this enhancement, a new training program was rolled out in the fall, feedback buttons were added to email signatures, and key websites are being redesigned to provide a more user-friendly interface. Staff involved with grants administration across campus are now working in teams to identify additional process improvements.

The University also employed an external consulting group to conduct an independent review of the administrative operations supporting research and other sponsored activities at UGA. The group completed its review in December and provided recommendations that have been incorporated into an implementation plan to further improve our research infrastructure.

The Provost, working closely with the Vice Presidents in charge of Finance and Administration and Research, will be moving that plan forward in the coming weeks.

The end result of these steps will be increased productivity, as our faculty spend more time on their critical research and scholarship and less time on administrative activities.

Promoting Prosperity in Communities across Georgia and Beyond

Now that we have reviewed the University's world-class learning environment and its expanding research enterprise, I would like to discuss the many significant ways the University of Georgia is fulfilling its land-grant mission to promote prosperity in communities across Georgia and beyond.

We are called by this mission to train the state's leaders; to solve pressing challenges; to boost the economy. In essence, we have an obligation to extend our vast intellectual resources to improve lives and to improve communities, and now—more than ever before—we are answering that call with a far-reaching nexus of service and outreach activities.

When public officials across the state need resources to plan for a better Georgia, they turn to the Carl Vinson Institute of Government, which trained more than 22,000 elected officials and public employees last year alone. Just last month, we hosted the 29th Biennial Institute for Georgia Legislators, which has become a national model for state legislative training.