Emerities Newsletter, Winter 2020

Georgia State University Emeriti Association

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WE EMERITI ARE A VARYING lot who have relocated across the continental United States. As of Winter 2020, 363 of our total 458 emeriti reside in Georgia. This story suggests retiree organizations our emeriti might wish to join.

Those who are house-bound can find them a rich resource for “virtual socialization,” which many experts say can be nearly as valuable for us older folks as face-to-face socialization. All organizations noted here offer e-newsletters, reports, and educational reading lists for their members. GSRA in particular depends on virtual communication, stating on their website that it is “an all volunteer organization with a very small budget. We rely heavily on electronic communication methods, such as this website and e-mails.”

One solely for higher education faculty is the Association of Retiree Organizations in Higher Education (https://www.arohe.org/), the advisory parent association of university and college organizations for retirees in higher education across the country. Founded in 2002 on the West Coast in California, it now has 93 chapters throughout the country and in Canada. AROHE soon will announce a basic membership that will allow individuals to join. Watch for an e-announcement of those changes in Fall 2019 on their website.

The Georgia chapter of AROHE is the Georgia Association of Higher Education Retiree Organizations (GA-HERO) (https://ga-hero.org/). Our own Emeriti Association is a member of GA-HERO. At present, there are ten member institutions across the state. GA-HERO was founded in 2012 by Dave Ewert, Professor Emeritus of Finance at Georgia State, former GSU Emeriti Association Board chairman, and present GA-HERO President, and John Bugge, Professor Emeritus of English at Emory University, who died in 2018.

Membership now is restricted to organizations. However, non-members are encouraged to attend GA-HERO’s meetings twice each year, which alternate between the Atlanta and the mid-to-south Georgia areas. These feature presentations of interest to retirees and retiree organizations. Their website has complete notes on their meetings and conferences. This story continues to back page.
The Senior Financial Planning Brunch & Learn in the College of Law on May 22, 2019, gave a packed auditorium a lot to think about—including estate planning, taxes, tax shelters, and wills. My specific take-aways related to what you need to do as soon as possible.

1. Have an updated will,
2. Tell your family or executor where your will and other documents are located, including passwords,
3. Provide names and contact numbers for estate lawyers or others who have been advising you, and
4. “Get rid of your stuff. Nobody wants your stuff.”

The panel on June 13 included three GSU faculty—Lynn Comer-Jones (Accountancy), Samuel Donaldson (Law), and Lucia Smeal (Accountancy)—together with Financial Planner Andrew Wise and moderator Cathy Henson.

The Honors College accepted 290 first-year students to its ranks. This new group of students earned an average high school GPA of 3.88 and SAT score of 1420. We all should be exceptionally proud of the recruiting efforts of the Honors College in bringing these bright students to our university.

Our Emeriti Association has selected their Just-in-Time Fund as something we would like to support. We will continue to provide snapshots of students that have benefited from this outstanding program. I recently made my own contribution to it. I hope that you too will consider supporting these bright young students.
Before graduating in May 2019 with a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry, Honors College student Lucy Eum knew exactly what her next steps would be. Working in a lab at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, she’s part of a team testing drug treatments for thoracic cancers. “I’m planning to work here for a couple of more years and then apply to med school,” Eum said.

In 2018 she participated in a Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program at the Mayo Clinic, sponsored by the National Science Foundation. Eum then secured an undergraduate assistantship in Georgia State University Professor Ritu Aneja’s cancer research lab.

Thanks to the Just-in-Time Fund, Eum presented her undergraduate immunology research during Fall 2018 at two major national conferences for minority students in the sciences: the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students in Indianapolis and the Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science National Diversity in STEM Conference in Houston.

“Attending those conferences was so important to me. It allowed me to communicate with other scientists and to receive feedback about my research from fresh eyes and different perspectives,” she said. “It really helped me see things that I might have missed and to think of new questions that I could attack.”

This Fall, the Honors College inducted its largest ever incoming class, with 290 first-year students. Among the first-year Honors College students are seven Presidential Scholars, recipients of the university’s most prestigious academic award. Twenty-five students in the Honors College at Perimeter transitioned to the Honors College at Georgia State this fall. Their average incoming GPA was 3.82. Another 316 currently enrolled Georgia State students already on the Atlanta campus, with an average college GPA of 3.84, joined the Honors College this fall. The Honors College at Perimeter College has filled more than 1,000 seats at its five campuses across metro Atlanta.

Ninety percent of the 1,485 total students enrolled in the Honors College for fall 2019 are from Georgia. Many are first-generation college students, and 69 percent are on Pell Grants. The other students represent 25 different states and 28 different countries. Roughly 33 percent of the Honors College student body are majoring in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) field, and 27 percent are seeking business-related degrees. The Honors College also boasted a graduation rate for the 2018-19 academic year of 82 percent.
Update on Retirees’ HRA Funding

Emeriti have expressed concern about the rising cost of healthcare and the lack of an increase in their Health Reimbursement Account (HRA) funding. The Board of Regents approved the continuation of $2,736 as the funding level for HRAs in 2020 as in previous years, while retirees will see a 5.5 to 7.5% increase in their healthcare plan premiums. The HRA contribution amount is assessed each year.

Only about a third of the 18,000 retirees had used all of their funds. Retirees rolled over an average of $2,431 from 2018 to 2019, possibly against future large expenses. However, many think it would be best to use more of these funds now, lest the Regents think that retirees don’t need the funding and cut it. Perhaps emeriti should review the medical expenses covered by our HRAs that they are used to paying themselves, such as medical insurance premiums. See https://retiree.aon.com/ for the complete list.

A special fund is available for retirees whose prescription drugs costs significantly exceed the HRA amount, the Catastrophic Prescription Drug Benefit. Call 1-866-212-5052 for further information.

DECEMBER
Perimeter College Retiree Association Holiday Luncheon
Thursday, December 5, 2019 • 11:00 a.m.
Petite Violette Restaurant
2948 Clairmont Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30329

Emeriti Association Holiday Party
Sunday, December 8, 2019
SunTrust Room, Rialto Center for the Arts
80 Forsyth Street NW, Atlanta, GA 30303

FEBRUARY
Emeriti Association Valentine’s Luncheon
Friday, February 14, 2020
Rialto Center for the Arts
80 Forsyth Street NW, Atlanta, GA 30303
Time: TBA
Wendy Hensel, Interim Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs since July 1, has been appointed to the position permanently. Dean of the College of Law since 2017 until her appointment as Interim Provost, she is a nationally recognized expert on employment discrimination and special education.

She earned her Juris Doctor degree with honors at the Harvard Law School; and before coming to Georgia State in 1999 as Instructor, she was an attorney specializing in employment law with the prominent Atlanta law firm of Alston & Bird, litigating discrimination cases. This will serve her well in her first initiative, implementing the Report of the Commission for the Next Generation of Faculty released in August 2019. The goal of this 2017 Commission was to improve the racial diversity of our permanent faculty.

Georgia State University has long sought to make its faculty body more racially diverse, and many emeriti reading this now were hard-working, determined advocates in the struggle. Its “1992 Five-Year Action Plan for the Recruitment and Retention of African-American Faculty” was begun under President Emeritus Carl Patton, and expanded to all underrepresented faculty with the 2001 “University Policy on Recruiting and Retaining Ethnic Minority Tenure-Track Faculty.” The recent Report of the 2017 Commission has built upon these previous plans and policies, with additional data-driven strategies and programs.

Provost Hensel has long been an advocate for people with physical and mental disabilities, that has been termed the forgotten diversity group. While at Alston & Bird, she counseled Fortune 500 companies on compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Her 20 book-chapters and articles on the subject are listed here:
https://works.bepress.com/wendy_hensel/

As Provost, she will pursue two additional initiatives. She hopes to “create a strategic approach to online programming. We need to develop a strong approach at the university level both to improve the quality of [online-hybrid] courses and to identify strategically the graduate degrees that are in demand nationally and internationally.” She adds: “Over the last decade our growth and trajectory has been incredible. We now need to implement supportive infrastructure in human resources, sponsored programs, and technological services.”

Indeed, Provost Hensel is planning for Georgia State’s “Next Generation.”
Those emeriti still in Georgia may wish to contact those groups of retired educators that seek to influence our state legislators working on educational issues. Some emeriti are retired administrators whose experience could help two politically oriented local organizations of retired educators. These groups safeguard retiree pension and healthcare benefits: GREA (the Georgia Retired Educators Association) and GSRA (the Georgia State Retirees Association, whose members are retired state workers of Georgia, not Georgia State University retirees).

GREA [https://www.garetirededucators.org] is a group of 29,000+ retired educators from pre-K through higher education, founded in 1958. GSRA [https://www.mygsra.com], founded in 2006, is much smaller with two constituencies: educators and all other state employees. Georgia’s public school employees share membership in the Teachers Retirement System (TRS) with USG educators and staff (unless the USG ones opted for a private investment system), since state law requires public K-12 teachers and staff to belong to TRS.

Our state legislature monitors TRS regularly. Over the past few years, legislators have proposed changes to TRS’s traditional “defined benefits” pension plan that provides fixed benefits upon retirement after a set number of service years, usually provoking controversy. Last year the Georgia House (Bill 109) suggested changing this defined-benefits pension plan to make it more flexible. For details, see below [https://www.ajc.com/news/state-regional-govt-politics/lawmakers-try-again-change-the-state-teacher-retirement-system/lnNJI48LHnLYlGe5Lno04M/]

After considerable negative feedback from educators’ organizations in early 2019, House Bill 109 was withdrawn and sent back to the House Retirement Committee. A revised version will probably appear in the 2020 legislative session. If so, members of GREA and GSRA are likely to converge upon the Golden Dome. I remember one such session years ago, flooded with angry septuagenarian educators on canes and walkers.

This bill originally proposed that any changes would affect new faculty only, not current ones or retirees. So it may not concern emeriti if/when it reappears. But we might remember Benjamin Franklin’s words to the Continental Congress: “We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”