Emerities Newsletter, Winter 2021

Georgia State University Emeriti Association

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WE ARE NOW MONTHS INTO THE COVID-19 pandemic, missing our friends and families, and wondering how long our lives will continue to be disrupted. Pandemics are a familiar topic for me since my academic specialty for the past thirty-five years has been emergency management. In 1984 I attended the National Emergency Training Center, and was a consultant on planning and management to FEMA and other agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). I also served for sixteen years on the national Emergency Management Accreditation Commission. For over twenty-five years in my classes, I have included pandemic planning for large-scale disasters: what happens when there is a major disaster, help is slow in coming, and services essential to daily life are interrupted?

Epidemiologists generally expect that the current pandemic will continue, even if vaccines are developed. Herd immunity will take a long time to develop and the human costs will rise significantly before that happens. Public health measures were the expectation when the epidemic began and certainly after it was declared a pandemic. But the plan maintained by the CDC was not activated, and the infection spread widely and fast.

Public health officials agree that physical distancing, masks, hand washing, and not touching one’s face are essential to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Contact tracing is also important. So is an official program of testing to identify those who may be infectious and should be quarantined, with results publicized. Downplaying the risk and withholding information create uncertainty, increase stress, and can cause panic.

What does all that mean for us? My wife and I consider ourselves vulnerable, therefore we minimize contact with other people. We have several kinds of face masks – some almost medical quality for doctor visits and high contact activities such as going to the grocery store, and some disposable and inexpensive ones which we can leave in the car and next to the front door. The point is simply to be sensitive to potentially risky contacts and to be prepared for whatever might happen.

To lessen stress levels, find one or two primary sources for COVID-19 information to avoid having to sift through disinformation, misinformation, and redundant information. Johns Hopkins University has a COVID-19 website that provides accurate data and helpful information to limit exposure: https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/.

My wife and I have postponed three international trips until the summer of 2021, at the very earliest. We hope to be able to travel by then, but expect that it will not be entirely safe. Even if we can travel, we expect to be wearing masks and trying to avoid crowds. Public health officials warn that we may expect the COVID-19 threat to stay with us for some time. Masks, physical distancing, handwashing, and restrictions on mass gatherings may be our new way of life.
WE’RE LIVING THROUGH GREAT CHANGE
in a short period of time: not only the pandemic and resulting recession, but also the revival of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement with the nationwide protest demonstrations this Spring. Georgia State is engaging in this last area with its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative, seeking to create a better campus climate for nonwhite faculty — both to attract more diverse faculty and to keep those we have.

This search for greater faculty diversity has been a continuing concern since President Emeritus Carl Patton came in 1992. By 2001, University Task Forces had created the policy to recruit and retain underrepresented faculty that was approved by the University Senate. But the problem remains today: a richly diverse student body taught by a faculty that is not. This Fall, Georgia State enrolled 54,000 students. While about 75 percent of its students are nonwhite (with 40 percent of those African American), only about 32 percent of its faculty are nonwhite.

New directions to increase faculty diversity seem needed. In 2017, President Becker and then-Provost Risa Palm established the Commission for the Next Generation of Faculty with the goal of “develop[ing] programs and strategies to . . . diversify Georgia State University’s faculty.” Several recommendations of the Commission’s 2019 report are being implemented: a Center for Studies on Africa and Its Diaspora located in the College of Arts and Sciences, and a central database of University DEI programs and initiatives.

In July, the Office of Institutional DEI was formed, whose Vice President will report directly to our University president. A national search for this new Vice President is now underway. In connection with this office, the new DEI website was launched, serving as Georgia State’s first-ever central information hub for DEI activities, programs and resources across the university’s colleges and schools.

See: https://dei.gsu.edu.

In September, Provost Hensel formed the Task Force for Racial Equality in response to the national incidents of police violence and racial unrest, with a charge that includes students and staff as well as an Action Plan for Fall and Spring terms.

All of this should significantly improve Georgia State’s general social climate for diverse faculty, especially the administrative addition of the Office of IDEI with a direct avenue to the President. This climate should certainly assist in their recruitment.

However, as an emerita who participated in many past efforts to increase our numbers of diverse faculty, I would remind present-day warriors of this hard-won lesson that we learned: the retention of these faculty is just as important . . . and perhaps more difficult.

GSU’S DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION INITIATIVE

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EDITOR’S NOTE
EmeriTies: By Emeriti and For Emeriti

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It seems that Georgia State, like the rest of us, is going to be “Coping with COVID” for much longer than initially expected, and it’s my intent as editor to chronicle some of the resulting changes.

First, last March our teaching changed as everything came to a halt because of the pandemic. Then this Fall our own President Becker, who saw us through the Great Recession and had begun to see us through the global pandemic, announced he’s taking a hiatus. More positively, there’s a renewed drive for our inclusion of diversity (whether of race, gender, or sexual orientation) to match the diversity of our students more closely. Thus the new Office of Institutional DEI has been created, reporting to the President. And our construction projects continue apace.

These are remarkable times, when the common parting salutation is, “Take care.” And so, all you emeriti who are reading this across the country—take care, stay well, and look up.
President Mark Becker came to Georgia State in 2009 during the Great Recession and he will leave its presidency during the pandemic of 2020. He plans to take an educational leave to conduct research and write, adding that he wished to announce this in mid-September so that the Georgia Board of Regents would have ample time to conduct a search for his replacement. A national search will be conducted for his successor, who will start in July.

In an interview on WABE radio on September 20, 2020, President Becker stated that he is not leaving for another position nor is he a candidate for one elsewhere. He intends to remain in the Atlanta area for a few years. When asked about the pandemic, he replied: “This year of pandemic is challenging. By next summer when there are vaccines, there should be a higher degree of normalcy. But COVID-19 will always be with us to some degree.” His background in Biostatistics and Public Health sciences gives authoritative weight to this evaluation.

He was Professor of Biostatistics and Associate Dean of the School of Public Health from 1996–2000 at the University of Michigan; and Dean of the School of Public Health from 2001-4 at the University of Minnesota. From 2003-4 he also was Assistant Vice-President for Public Health Preparedness and Emergency Response there. He then served as Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of South Carolina until he came to Georgia State.

President Becker arrived here during the difficult early days of the Great Recession. Under his leadership, Georgia State has become widely recognized for its introduction of successful innovative programs and initiatives to foster student success. The University set records for enrollment, graduation rates and total graduates. He placed high priority on ensuring financial support for students. The university has also set fundraising records.

He leaves his successor the largest university in the state with an enrollment of 54,000, thanks to our consolidation with Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) in 2016. This consolidation was mandated by the University System of Georgia (USG), which predicted that Georgia State’s “Student Success” initiatives could only benefit GPC. This proved true, for GPC’s graduation rates have dramatically increased.

In addition, President Becker helped to acquire Turner Field, former home of the Atlanta Braves. The University added football to its athletic program in 2010, and President Becker led the University as it converted the venue to a football field in 2017.

If President Becker’s future does include “research[ing] and writ[ing],” he is eminently qualified to write a book about shepherding a major state university through the perils of a national economic recession into a solid recovery, only to encounter a sudden global pandemic. Given the state of higher education at this time, he would be assured of a widespread audience.
Our Fall 2020 issue closed with many unsettling questions about the results of the pandemic for Georgia State, a rapidly evolving situation. Would students enroll for Fall term if their classes are primarily or even partially online? Would we still attract highly qualified freshmen?

This Fall, we set records for the largest enrollment in our history: it topped 54,000. More than 5,200 freshmen entered the Atlanta campus as the largest and most qualified freshman class in the institution’s history. More than 2,500 freshmen started at our Perimeter College campuses. Incoming freshmen at our Atlanta campus had an average high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.54, also a record.

However, by the October 30 withdrawal deadline, almost 9,000 students had withdrawn from courses.

Would Fall term see an outbreak of COVID-19 cases at Georgia State or a surge in Georgia cases generally? Would the University pivot from its planned blend of online and hybrid classes to solely online learning?

The USG has no statewide system for tracking and reporting COVID-19 cases on its campuses. Some of the state universities make these numbers public, but Georgia State does not. In any case, the decision to move classes online can only be made by the USG, not the institution.

In August, President Becker stated that the university would follow public health guidance. He noted that the overall density of our campus had been reduced so that only 10% of the students would be on campus in a classroom at any given time.

At the Regents’ September 15 meeting, USG Chancellor Steven Wrigley announced that the system’s 26 campuses would offer in-person classes through Spring term 2021. On October 13, the Regents passed a resolution that “each campus is to maximize the safe in-person instruction” and “ensure hybrid instruction includes a vast majority of in-person interactive instruction.”

So Georgia State decided that in Spring 2021, instructors of hybrid classes would either use a cohort model in which students are divided into groups that can attend class safely with social distancing on specific days or ensure that each student receives at least 25% in-person instruction. Spring registration was delayed to identify the larger classrooms and times needed for such instruction.

And what would be the fate of Georgia State’s ambitious construction projects?

Ramesh Vakamudi, Facilities Management Vice President, reports that since March Facilities has been primarily occupied with creating social distancing on the six campuses and modifying 600 labs. Meanwhile, work on the Greenway, Library North Addition, and the Convocation Center has continued. The Convocation Center is scheduled for completion in August 2022.
The Regents met and approved an extension of the HRA for 2021. In trying times for the state and university system, they continue to support our health benefits.

**EMERITI ASSOCIATION**
The traditional **Holiday Party** is **cancelled this year**. Our **Valentine Luncheon** in February is **TBD**. Let us hope.

**RIALTO CENTER FOR THE ARTS**
The remaining 2020 Rialto Series programs are **cancelled**, including the Holiday Concert in December, alas. Director Lee Foster notes: “We are continuing our ‘Feed Your Senses’ for the year . . . the Lunch and Learn program every third Wednesday at noon. On December 16, 12 pm-1pm, we are hosting trumpet Joe Gransden, who has already performed worldwide and released 14 CDs under his own name. See: [https://www.facebook.com/RialtoCenter/](https://www.facebook.com/RialtoCenter/).

Check our performance archives for other exciting artistic events: [https://rialto.gsu.edu/performance-archives/](https://rialto.gsu.edu/performance-archives/)
REQUEST FOR JIT FUND DONORS...

Donations to the Just-In-Time Fund for Honors College students still are needed in this time of COVID-19. Whether or not future academic meetings and conferences are virtual, there still will be registration fees and the need for financial support for presentation supplies and materials. Future meetings and conferences may combine virtual and face-to-face audiences. Gifts to support this fund can be made online at https://netcommunity.gsu.edu/make-a-gift or by check. For checks, make payable to Georgia State University Foundation; add to the memo line Emeriti Just-In-Time Fund; and mail your donation to: Georgia State University Foundation • P.O. Box 2668 • Atlanta, GA 30312-2668. You may specify the student’s originating department.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Welcome to our 460+ emeriti now settled across the continental United States. Some of you living during these precarious times may have stories to tell or wisdom to share for EmeriTies. Please send any such notes or articles, 100-400 words long, to the editor at cwallant@gsu.edu.

• What has been your own experience with the pandemic where you are?