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Georgia Southern convenes for 2016-17 with new leader

August 11, 2016



Georgia Southern should trumpet its status as a Carnegie doctoral research university loudly and proudly, Dr. Jaimie Hebert said in welcoming faculty and staff for the 2016-17 academic year, his first as GS president. He also predicted that the university's annual economic impact will soon hit \$1 billion.

The 825-seat Performing Arts Center filled to capacity so that dozens of people were left standing along the walls of the ground floor and balcony for Wednesday's fall convocation. Hebert spent most of a 23-minute speech praising Georgia Southern for its values and accomplishments before talking in general terms about the future.

"From its very existence, this university has fought to become a pre-eminent component of higher education in the state of Georgia, through the struggles, through the triumphs, through the failures and the generations, this institution has evolved into one of the finest institutions of higher education in the United States of America," Hebert said.

Many of those in the room had successfully carried the university through an economic downturn that left an impact on the state budget and "an ongoing aversion to the expansion of curriculum in higher education," among other recent challenges, he said.

"Let me describe for you what you have built on the shoulders of our founders," Hebert said. "Georgia Southern University is recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as a doctoral research university. That needs to be said loudly. That needs to be said often, it needs to be said proudly, and it needs to be said unapologetically, because it's not just a designation."

Now 124 degrees

Georgia Southern now offers nationally accredited degrees in 124 subject areas, including 52 master's degrees and six doctoral degrees, he noted.

"They're not run-of-the-mill programs," Hebert said. "We tout a highly reputable nursing program, a highly reputable education preparation program, the only manufacturing engineering program in the state, and one of the only colleges of public health."

Many of the university's approximately 20,500 students are arriving on campus this week for classes beginning Monday. They hail from 49 states and 86 nations. But Hebert pointed out that 93 percent of them are from Georgia, including 43 percent from the Atlanta metro area and the rest from around the state. GS students also closely resemble the state in ethnic diversity, he said.

"We are, in no uncertain terms, a high quality, doctoral research institution, with a significant enrollment that represents the face of Georgia, and we are meeting the educational and the workforce needs of this state," he said. "That is not something that you can say about every doctoral research institution."

GSU professors follow "the teacher-scholar model" by teaching but also doing research, creative work and community service and making these things available to students, he said.

"At Georgia Southern University, academics and student success are, and will always be, our primary mission," Hebert said. "Look at our success: 100 percent employment for engineering graduates, nearly that for nursing, education and accounting, again, just naming a few."

But the same faculty that prepares these students also brings in over \$13 million per year in external research funding, he said.

Hebert referred to research, the training of teachers, the sharing of art and cultural programs with the region and the Eagles' national prominence in athletics as ways the university broadens its annual economic impact, estimated at \$846 million.

Economic catalyst

Although he said he would state no specific goals because he is still spending his first 100 days "listening deeply to everyone associated with the university," Hebert named two general "areas of opportunities."

The first was institutional growth.

"When I talk about institutional growth, I mean growth in numbers because we are here to provide access to higher education, but it has to be a strategic and deliberate growth ...," he said, "but I also mean growth in the breadth of our curriculum."

Economic development was his second opportunity area.

"Yes, we're an \$846 million player now, but within a very short amount of time, Georgia Southern University will be a billion dollar catalyst in the economic explosion that's inevitable in the Savannah and surrounding areas," Hebert said.

On July 1, Hebert officially became Georgia Southern's 13th president. After previous President Dr. Brooks Keel's departure for Augusta University in July 2015, Dr. Jean Bartels served one year as interim GS president, the first woman president in the school's 110-year history.

Now returned to being provost and vice president for academic affairs, Bartels led the convocation. Introducing Hebert, she teased him about having taught at Appalachian State University and attained his degrees at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, both GS sports rivals.

Hebert was most recently provost and vice president for academic affairs at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, where he had arrived 21 years ago as an associate professor of statistics.

Closing his remarks, Hebert recounted what he called the most profound question he's ever been asked by a journalist. Interviewing him live on Georgia Southern's WVGS 91.1 radio in July, student journalist Mick Miller asked Hebert what advice he would give his 18-year-old self as a college undergraduate.

Hebert said he would tell "that young Jaimie Hebert" to have faith in himself, believe in his dreams, choose happiness every day, and read voraciously.

But finally, "I think the most important advice I could give him is this," Hebert said. "If at some point in your life you get the opportunity to get to Georgia Southern University, get there. ..."

The room erupted in applause, and the speech was over.

'A positive year'

Louise Fechter, who works in the university's Centers for Teaching and Technology, said she enjoyed Hebert's message and the way he personalized it.

"I think it will be a positive year," Fechter said. "I'm looking for some new changes and hopefully some new growth."

Dr. Joseph Telfair, a professor and department chair in the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health, said the speech pointed in the right direction but he would have liked to hear specifics, such as Hebert's ideas for areas where the university can grow.

"I really think that spirit-wise, his approach to talking about what our strengths are and what we can bring to the table would be really great in any negotiation in terms of where we need to go," Telfair said. "For example, if he had stood up at the Board of Regents and given that speech, that would be a great speech to give."

This article was retrieved from the Statesboro Herald on and written by Al Hackle. The original article can be found [here](#).