Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the Chapel. It is great to be here with all of you in this beautiful setting. My thanks to you, Roya, for that kind introduction. I appreciate all that you are doing to represent the University of Georgia, and I count myself among the many on this campus who are excited to watch your bright future unfold after graduation this spring.

In preparing for my remarks today, I spent some time reviewing the first State of the University Address I delivered. It is hard to believe that I have been in office for more than five and half years now.

Time flies, I suppose, when you are doing what you love, at a place you love, alongside talented people who are among the best at what they do. That has certainly been the case for me.

Standing on this stage today, I can honestly say that I am more optimistic about the future of our great University than I have ever been. By the end of my speech, I think you will know why.

In my first address, I said that for the University of Georgia to reach new heights of excellence, we must first ask—and answer—two important questions:
• What is the current state of the University of Georgia?
• What do we want the University of Georgia to become in the future?

I answered the first question in unwavering terms: the state of the University of Georgia is strong. The answer to the second question about the future was also straightforward: we want to become one of America’s best universities—that is our ambition, our aspiration. Let us return to those questions today. They can help us evaluate our progress and assess our current trajectory:
• Have we grown stronger as a university?
• Have we made headway toward becoming one of the nation’s best institutions of higher learning?
• If so, has the time come to identify new aspirations for the future and a roadmap to get us there?

Let us take a look together, and let us begin, where our mission begins, with our students.

“We are proving that the future of public higher education in America is being molded right here, where it began, at the University of Georgia.”
When I took office, we imagined a university where students learn and succeed at the highest levels—where course content meets real-world problems and passion and drive to make a difference find guidance and opportunity. We imagined a university with a superior learning environment.

That university, my friends, is a reality today. Sixty-eight percent of our students now finish in four years, an all-time high for this institution. Eighty-six percent finish in six years or less—also a record high. These metrics, however, tell only part of the story. Not only are our students finishing in record time, they also are landing jobs and positions in graduate school like never before. In fact, a staggering 96 percent of our students are employed or enrolled in graduate school within six months after graduation—another record high, I might add.

The value of a UGA education is greater than ever, and it will only continue to rise. Make no mistake—these results did not occur by chance. Such progress took strategy. It took hard work and dedication. It took a community—this community—embracing a commitment to put students first.

Consider for a moment the many programs and initiatives we have launched together to enhance the learning environment for students, including:

- hiring efforts to reduce class sizes and strengthen academic advising;
- measures to expand active learning by transforming courses and classrooms;
- a pioneering experiential learning requirement to give students more opportunities to connect coursework to the world around us;
- the Double Dawgs program to provide pathways for our students to earn a bachelor’s and master’s degree in five years or less;
- a campus-wide entrepreneurship program to help our students turn their bright ideas into successful business and nonprofit ventures; and
- Delta Hall in Washington, DC and the new Science Learning Center and Business Learning Community in Athens.

Of course, we cannot forget the Georgia Commitment Scholarship Program, which has created 350 need-based scholarships since its inception two years ago. That is approximately 14 new scholarships created each month—what an incredible display of generosity by our alumni and friends. These are endowed scholarships, and they will provide grants every year—for the life of the institution—and support thousands upon thousands of students for generations to come.

The list of new initiatives could go on, but I will pause. I hope my point is clear, and that is: working together, we are transforming the learning environment. We are changing the lives of our students. We are proving that the future of public higher education in America is being molded right here, where it began, at the University of Georgia.

It should be no wonder that our national ranking among public universities, whether on quality or value, is climbing and that applications to the University are surging—reaching 29,300 this year—another all-time high and a 40 percent increase over five years. These applications are from the best and brightest students in this state and across the nation.

Each of the last five years, the University has enrolled an increasingly more talented class of first-year students. The most recent class enrolled with an average high school GPA of 4.0 and an average ACT score of 30.

We have made all of this progress, for our students, in just five years. Imagine what we might be able to achieve over the next five. I will share more on that point later, but first I want to talk about our growing impact on the state and the world.
GROWING OUR IMPACT ON THE STATE AND THE WORLD

Consider the magnitude of that number. That is a big impact on individuals, families, and communities, and it does not include the countless hours of service by our dedicated faculty and staff every year.

With a tradition of service dating back more than two centuries, society should expect no less from the University of Georgia. Our research enterprise is flourishing as well. Total research and development expenditures rose to $453 million last year, an increase of nearly 30 percent over five years.

For the fifth consecutive year, we ranked in the top five among American universities for driving new products into the marketplace. We landed in the number one spot this year, with more than 50 products based on faculty research hitting the market, many of which support the state’s all-important agricultural industry. These are clear signs of our expanding impact and our growing presence on the world stage, but these achievements, like those mentioned earlier, did not happen by chance.

They happened because outstanding faculty, staff, and students have committed countless hours of tireless work to make them happen and because the University has invested its resources strategically.

We have launched, for example, numerous hiring initiatives to grow the ranks of leading scientists and scholars, adding six Georgia Research Alliance Eminent Scholars along the way. We have renovated labs across campus to support expanding research programs and activate new areas of inquiry. Our investment in this important area was particularly strong over the past year.

We also have built world-class facilities to advance research in veterinary medicine, infectious diseases, and agricultural science, among other areas of vital importance to Georgia and the world. The new home for the Center for Molecular Medicine is an excellent example of our efforts.

Construction of a nearly 100,000 square foot interdisciplinary STEM research building is now moving forward, made possible by $39 million in funding from the state. This new facility is scheduled to open in 2021.

We also have put in place many new programs to connect the University’s academic resources with the needs of our society. CyberArch and the Georgia Certified Economic Developer program are great examples of state-level initiatives.

The Interdisciplinary Seed Grant Program, more global in scope, is another case in point. The roughly $1.3 million in seed grants awarded through this program led to nearly $13 million in new external funding for faculty research—a remarkable 10 to 1 return on investment. Because of that success, today I am renewing the program with another investment of central funds. The goals of the program remain the same: to encourage new interdisciplinary partnerships around the grand challenges of our time and to generate new external funding to support our growing research productivity.

Application and award information will be provided in the coming days.

I also want to recognize the critical role of alumni and friends in boosting our research enterprise. As part of the Commit to Georgia fundraising campaign, they have helped to establish 71 endowed chairs and professorships to advance the research of some of our most creative and prolific faculty members. The total number of endowed positions now sits at a record 298, an increase of more than 30 percent.

Alumni and friends have responded to our campaign priorities with unprecedented enthusiasm—setting five fundraising records in five years, including last year’s historic total of $242 million—and because of their generosity and commitment, we are on our way to surpassing the $1.2 billion campaign goal set for June 2020.

When I became President, we envisioned a university that would be more and do more for the citizens of Georgia and beyond—a place where research and scholarship flow freely into society, improving quality of life and expanding the boundaries of human understanding; a place known for training leaders, for creating jobs, for helping to solve the problems that matter most to our communities.

We envisioned a university whose land-grant tradition was not just a talking point but a catalyst for action. I believe we have become that university. Our annual economic impact on the state is now estimated at $6.3 billion—yes, another record high. What is more, each year our students complete over 500,000 hours of service, supporting causes ranging from pediatric health care to food insecurity.

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I am sure you have noticed throughout this speech my repetitive use of phrases like “record high” and “all-time high.” When you look across the key performance indicators, a compelling narrative emerges of unprecedented growth and achievement. But there is another storyline sitting just below the surface, and that is a story about the power of community—about all that can be accomplished when a diverse group of people, united by place and vision, join together to raise an organization to new heights of excellence, to improve lives, and to change the world.

Behind every record high, behind every jump in the rankings, you will see an interconnected family of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends who love the University of Georgia.

The success of our institution is testament—above all else—to the strength of our community, the Bulldog Nation, including faculty who are inspired to create, innovate, and discover; staff, mission-centered and devoted to the highest standards of excellence; students who are passionate to learn, lead, and serve; and alumni and friends, ever loyal and deeply generous.

All of you are the University of Georgia, and our achievements are your achievements. Our progress is your progress.

As President, I could not be more honored to work alongside you and to watch you fashion a new era of greatness for this institution and expand our impact around the globe.

Without a doubt: you are—and always will be—the University’s most valuable resource. So let me express my deepest appreciation to the faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends who make the University of Georgia the very special place that it is. Thank you.

I also want to take a moment to recognize one of the University’s finest administrators: our Interim Provost, Dr. Libby Morris. Libby has made tremendous sacrifices to return to the interim role for a second time.

She is once again demonstrating exemplary leadership, effectively balancing the demands of the Provost’s Office with many other ongoing responsibilities. She is a leader among leaders on this campus, and I ask everyone to join me in thanking Dr. Morris for her selfless and dedicated service to this institution.

I also want to acknowledge the hundreds of staff members across the University who are contributing to the OneSource project. This project is a massive undertaking, spanning multiple years and affecting everyone on our campus.

I am grateful to each and every person who is a part of this major overhaul of our business processes and administrative systems. Your efforts exemplify the outstanding quality and dedication of our staff, whose work—often behind the scenes—is so vital to the success of this institution, and it gives me great pleasure to announce today an exciting new initiative for our staff.

I have asked Vice President for Finance and Administration Ryan Nesbit to lead a presidential task force to create new, robust professional development opportunities to support the growth and development of our staff.

The task force, including representatives from units across campus, will begin its work soon with the goal of announcing in the fall an array of new programs available to staff University-wide. This is an important initiative for our staff, and I am eager to see it take shape.

I want to continue for just a moment longer on the topic of community. We were pleased to learn in the fall that the University received the national HEED award for the fifth consecutive year in recognition of our ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusion.

We should be proud of the steps we have taken over the past five years to make this institution a welcoming and supportive place for all, steps such as creating the Rise Scholars initiative, a yearlong leadership development program geared toward underrepresented first-year students.

The All Georgia Program, which provides tailored resources and support to our students from rural parts of the state, is another great example. The Benham Scholars Program, housed in the Law School, also comes to mind, with its focus on increasing diversity in the legal profession. These are just a few examples of the efforts we have made.

Are we where we want to be? No, not yet, but I believe we are making steady progress. This progress must continue if we want to realize our full potential as a public land-grant university.

That is why today I am announcing phase two of the New Approaches to Diversity grant program. This program was introduced in fall 2017 to spur new initiatives that promote the recruitment, retention, and success of underserved students. The response to the program was overwhelmingly positive. Grants were awarded to launch more than 20 projects across campus.

Phase two of the program will award grants in two categories. A portion of the funds will be designated for the continuation of projects from the first phase that have demonstrated the greatest promise for impact as well as a sustainable funding model.

The remaining funds will be allocated for the development of new initiatives to enhance the academic experience of underrepresented, first-generation, rural, and other underserved students. Application instructions will be made available next month, and I hope to see another round of strong proposals.
Let us come full circle to two questions I posed at the beginning of my address:

- Are we stronger today, as a university, than we were five years ago?
- Have we become one of the nation’s best institutions of higher education?

From my vantage point, the answers are resoundingly clear. Yes, we are stronger. Yes, we have become one of the nation’s best. So where do we go from here? One of my favorite quotes comes from the great 19th century American thinker and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was speaking to the Harvard chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837 when he said: “This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.”

Clearly it is a very good time at the University of Georgia, but what do we do with it?

In late November, I charged a 30-person committee to answer that very question. The committee, which is being led by six deans and coordinated jointly by the Office of the President and the Office of the Provost, is developing a new strategic plan for the University.

The plan will guide us from 2020, when the current plan expires, to 2025. It will ensure that the great momentum I have ensured that the great momentum I have described today continues into the future—during last year’s address, I announced the formation of a task force to solicit broad input from our University community. The plan will consist of measurable goals related to three mission-centered strategic directions:

- promoting excellence in teaching and learning;
- growing research, innovation, and entrepreneurship; and
- strengthening partnerships with communities in Georgia and around the world.

The goals developed in these areas will direct efforts and resources across campus to maintain our upward trajectory. As part of my charge, I have instructed the committee to solicit broad input from our University community.

I encourage our faculty, staff, and students to visit the Office of the President website to learn more about the process and provide input to the committee. The final plan will be introduced as part of my 2020 State of the University Address, a year from now.

I want to share that vision with you today. Staying with the future for just a moment—during last year’s address, I announced the formation of a task force to develop long-term plans for an innovation district at the University of Georgia.

The task force delivered its final report to me in July, and it laid out an exciting vision. I want to share that vision with you today. The task force imagined a vibrant innovation district at the interface of historic North Campus and Downtown Athens. We might call it the University’s campus of the future, including an integrated set of facilities offering a broad range of spaces and amenities to inspire collaboration, discovery, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

The district would be a hub for University startups and research commercialization, a place where bright ideas become new products, businesses, and nonprofits that benefit communities here in Georgia and around the world.

The district would invite more of our industry partners to campus to collaborate with our talented faculty and students on commercial projects, and it would create unique internship and research opportunities for our students, ensuring they remain competitive in our knowledge-based economy.

Thinking beyond convention would be the hallmark of the district, generating breakthrough ideas and novel solutions. This is a vision that would bring our land-grant tradition more fully into the Innovation Age, and I believe the time has come to pursue it.

I mentioned earlier that research funding is up nearly 30 percent over five years and that we have become a national leader in sending new products into the marketplace. It is also true that our faculty startup incubator has a surging pipeline of companies in varying stages of development and that our student entrepreneurship program is flourishing, with hundreds enrolled and many of those pursuing startup ventures.

Partnerships with industry have increased seven-fold over the last several years, with new partnerships forming all across campus to engage our students and faculty in commercial research and business development.

You see, our innovation ecosystem is booming. A movement is already underway. This is our moment to accelerate, and we must seize it.

That is why I assembled a launch team in September to drive the innovation district initiative forward in earnest. The team is working to develop a long-term masterplan for the district to encompass multiple parcels of University land on or around Broad and Oconee Streets. That process is underway and should be completed this fall.

The team is also studying the renovation of the Business Services Annex Building—located at the corner of Spring and South Streets—to launch new programs in the near term. If approved for renovation, this facility would be transformed into a uniquely creative space featuring a startup incubator for faculty and alumni; offices for industry partners who want deeper collaboration with faculty and students; and space for entrepreneurship training, coworking, and big-sky thinking.

The renovated facility would be an ideal complement to the student entrepreneurship building currently under renovation on West Broad.

To fuel all of these efforts, today I am announcing a multi-pronged innovation initiative.

First, I am establishing a semester-long Innovation Fellows program to help faculty commercialize their ideas and inventions and build strong partnerships around their research. The program will award funding for these activities and include structured training and support.

Second, I am launching a Startup-Mentor-in-Residence program to bring talented industry executives with startup experience to our campus. Mentors will be appointed for a full academic year to advise and collaborate with faculty and students pursuing commercial ventures.

Third, I am introducing a new version of Dawg Camp, the University’s nationally renowned extended orientation program for incoming students. This new version, called Dawg Camp Innovate, will blend student success and leadership programs with entrepreneurship education to create an exciting transition to college life. It will launch this summer.

You can expect to see updates on these programs and the broader innovation district initiative in the months ahead. Stay tuned.

“You see, our innovation ecosystem is booming. A movement is already underway. This is our moment to accelerate, and we must seize it.”
I want to leave you today with a quote from the 32nd President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt. FDR was born on this very day, January 30, 1882. He was fond of Georgia. He spent much time in Warm Springs, an hour south of Atlanta, where he maintained a residence throughout his presidency. He passed away there on April 12, 1945.

The day after his death, the President had been scheduled to deliver a speech. He never delivered it, of course, but a transcript was preserved and eventually made public.

The speech ended with two inspiring lines, and I will repeat them for you now: “The only limit to our realization of tomorrow, will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith.”

I have always liked that passage because it captures the great power of the human will. It suggests that the path to progress is not paved with strategy alone but also with commitment, determination, and belief—or “faith” as FDR put it—in a unifying vision.

We have embraced a vision for the University of Georgia. We want to elevate teaching, research, and service to heights never before imagined. We want to expand our impact across every county in this great state and well beyond. We want to do even more to improve, to lift up, the world around us.

A new strategic plan may show us the way forward, but ultimately commitment and determination will lead us to success. We have demonstrated great capacity for both.

If the last five years have shown us anything, it is that when we commit—when we unite around a common purpose—there is no goal, no aspiration, beyond our reach.

As we start a new year, let me assure you that the state of the University of Georgia has never been stronger, our future never brighter. The credit goes to you: our outstanding faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends. You are the heartbeat of the University of Georgia, and I thank you.

I am grateful for your support, and I look forward to all that we will accomplish together in the year ahead.
2025 STRATEGIC PLAN
The University is developing a new five-year strategic plan to expand its impact throughout the state of Georgia, across the nation, and around the world. The plan will range from 2020 to 2025 and include goals in three mission-centered strategic directions:
• promoting excellence in teaching and learning;
• growing research, innovation, and entrepreneurship; and
• strengthening partnerships with communities across Georgia and around the world.

INNOVATION DISTRICT
Plans are moving forward to create a vibrant Innovation District at the interface of historic North Campus and Downtown Athens. The District, UGA’s campus of the future, will:
• foster industry engagement, technology commercialization, and startup formation;
• inspire collaboration, creativity, and entrepreneurship; and
• align UGA’s academic strengths with the city’s technology-based economy and creative culture.

NEW INITIATIVES FOR 2019
A number of exciting new initiatives will be implemented in the year ahead, including:
• phase two of the Interdisciplinary Seed Grant Program;
• phase two of the New Approaches to Diversity Grant Program;
• a presidential task force to create new professional development opportunities for staff;
• Innovation Fellows Program to help faculty commercialize their ideas and inventions;
• Startup-Mentor-in-Residence Program to bring talented industry executives to campus; and
• Dawg Camp Innovate to blend student success programming with entrepreneurship education.