“Working together, we will expand our positive impact on people and communities throughout Georgia, our nation, and our world—because that is what we do. That is what we care about. That is who we are.”
I have always liked a particular quote from Dennis Gabor, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. He stated that, “The future cannot be predicted, but futures can be invented.”

He suggests in this passage that we can shape our own destiny—that what we can imagine together, we can make possible. That is a powerful notion, and it holds meaning for us as an academic community.

In fact, this quote invites some fundamental questions: What future do we imagine for the University of Georgia? How do we work together to achieve our shared vision? These are important questions, to be sure, and we are already working together to address them.

I know everyone is aware that the University just wrapped up a successful 10-year strategic plan. A number of major academic initiatives that we have launched in recent years are maturing. The Commit to Georgia campaign—the most ambitious fundraising effort in our history—is coming to a successful close in just a few months.

We have turned the corner into a new decade, with a growing list of challenges and opportunities awaiting us. The time is right for us to embrace our new goals and aspirations, to celebrate how far we have come, and to imagine how much farther we can go.

Let us do that together today, and we can start by highlighting some of our major achievements over the past year. From there, we will examine our new strategic plan as a roadmap to even greater impact in the years ahead.
I think we can agree that 2019 was another outstanding year for us. Once again we enrolled a stellar class of first-year students with record-setting credentials—82 percent of whom are Georgia residents. This class was selected from our largest pool of applicants ever.

In addition, our completion rates increased again. Now 87 percent of our students finish their degrees in six years, and 69 percent finish their degrees in four years. These figures are well above our peers, I might add.

A staggering 96 percent of our students are either employed or in graduate school within six months of completion. Clearly, we have built a vibrant, world-class learning environment. We are attracting the very best students from across the state and nation and around the world, and they are flourishing here. And we are not done yet—not even close.

We recently launched a new program to connect students with alumni mentors. We also created the Student Tour of Georgia to help students engage with communities across our great state. We finalized plans to name our College of Education in honor of Mary Frances Early, a pioneering educator and the first African American graduate of the University of Georgia. I know everyone is excited to celebrate this significant honor with Ms. Early next month.

We also expanded the New Approaches to Diversity program to promote the recruitment, retention, and academic success of underrepresented, first-generation, rural, and other underserved students. To increase affordability, we eliminated all lab and course material fees, and we tripled private financial support for graduate students who encounter unexpected hardships.

We also completed the final phase of the Business Learning Community and the first phase of the Driftmier Engineering Center renovation. We advanced several facility projects to support our athletic programs as well. Our women’s tennis team took the indoor national championship in 2019, and our football team finished in the top four, capping its season with a Sugar Bowl victory.

Turning to our research enterprise, we saw another year of growth and expansion in 2019. Sponsored research expenditures climbed five percent last year, marking an increase of 37 percent over five years. Sponsored research awards also rose again—up eight percent over the previous year, marking an increase of 44 percent over five years. Make no mistake: these are big, big gains in productivity.

Moreover, we have become one of the very best universities in the nation for sending new research-based products to market. Last year alone, more than 50 products reached the market thanks to discoveries made at UGA. But research commercialization is just one way the University fosters economic and community development in Georgia.

We also offer a wide range of public service and outreach programs that touch every corner of our state. For example, our Small Business Development Center, with 17 offices spread throughout Georgia, helped to create more than 450 businesses and nearly 3,000 jobs in the last year alone. Indeed, we are helping Georgia remain the number one state for doing business.

In addition, last year our Carl Vinson Institute of Government provided training to over 30,000 government officials, reaching every city and county in Georgia. We are invested in the prosperity of our communities, and it is no wonder our annual economic impact on the state has now risen to an estimated $6.5 billion.

I have said it before, and it bears repeating: “The University of Georgia is—and forever will be—Georgia’s university.” At the same time, while firmly rooted at home, the impact of our mission continues to expand on a global scale.

The work of Georgia Research Alliance Eminent Scholar Dr. Ted Ross is a case in point. Dr. Ross and a team of distinguished collaborators were recently awarded up to $130 million by the National Institutes of Health to develop a more robust vaccine for influenza. Our world needs better vaccines to fight this deadly virus, and our faculty are leading the charge.

A number of facility projects are moving forward to create greater capacity for this
type of life-changing research. We are completing a major initiative to upgrade labs across campus, for instance. We also are building a new interdisciplinary STEM research facility near Science Hill.

We remain grateful to Governor Kemp for supporting this critical project and for including funds in his FY21 budget proposal to construct a second STEM facility at the same site. The Governor’s proposal also includes design and planning funds for a major poultry science research building, among other projects.

Without a doubt: we are witnessing an extraordinary period of expansion in our research enterprise, and I am confident that our progress will only continue under the leadership of our new Provost, Dr. Jack Hu.

Dr. Hu joined us in July from the University of Michigan, where he served as Vice President for Research and led one of the largest and most vibrant research enterprises in higher education. Through initiatives such as his task force on academic excellence, the Provost is already beginning to make an impact at our University.
I have covered a long list of accomplishments from the past year—a list, frankly, that could go on and on. What is behind all of these achievements—behind our rise in stature? I see a common origin: our team of outstanding faculty, administrators, staff, and students.

You are the life force of this special place. You possess an unrelenting drive to lift up communities near and far; to improve the quality of life around the world; and to create a brighter future. Because of your hard work and dedication, the University of Georgia is reaching new heights of excellence across our missions.

So to our faculty, administrators, staff, and students—you should be proud of all that you have accomplished, of the many lives you have touched. Thank you for all that you are doing to make this University the very best it can be.

During my State of the University Address last year, I announced that a presidential task force had been formed to expand staff professional development. This fall, the task force submitted its final report to me, including 12 recommendations. I have accepted them all.

I am pleased to announce today a new, comprehensive initiative to enhance staff professional development at every stage of the employment cycle. This initiative will be implemented in phases over time and will include:

- a staff mentoring program;
- an annual professional development conference; and
- an online professional education platform, among other new measures.

These steps make a clear statement about the vital importance of our staff to the success of this University.

I want to thank the members of the task force for their dedicated service, including co-chairs Brett Jackson, who serves as Assistant Vice President for Finance and Administration and CFO of the UGA Foundation, and Marie Mize, who serves as the Law School’s circulation manager and current Staff Council President. I am also grateful to Vice President Ryan Nesbit and his team for their leadership of this effort. Congratulations to all on a job well done.

Before we turn to our new strategic plan, I want to say a word about the Commit to Georgia campaign. When we launched this campaign, we asked our alumni and friends to join us in our effort to remove financial barriers for our students, to enhance our learning environment, and to tackle the grand challenges of our time.

They have responded with unprecedented support, creating over 500 endowed scholarships, totaling a commitment of more than $77 million to help students from low-income backgrounds earn a degree, and supporting capital projects like our Veterinary Teaching Hospital, the West End Zone project, and the Business Learning Community.

They have also helped us to develop new academic programs like our Experiential Learning Initiative and our Master of Fine Arts in Film, Television, and Digital Media, while establishing 90 endowed chairs and professorships to strengthen research and innovation. Last year—16 months ahead of schedule—we surpassed our $1.2 billion campaign goal.

We now have our sights set even higher. That is a testament to the loyalty and generosity of our alumni and friends and the hard work of Vice President Kelly Kerner, the UGA Foundation, and our development team.

I want to take a moment to publicly thank each and every person who has contributed to the Commit to Georgia campaign. Know that your support is making an enormous impact. It is changing lives. It is elevating our University above its peers, and we are deeply grateful.
Now let us look to the future. I started today with two important questions: What future do we imagine for the University of Georgia? How do we work together to achieve our shared vision? Our new five-year strategic plan answers these questions.

The plan was developed over the course of a year by a large committee with broad input from many stakeholders. It includes goals to advance three mission-centered strategic directions:

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

Each of these areas is critical to our future growth and success. Each is a declaration of priority and aspiration, and taken together, with their corresponding goals, they set a course to build on our great momentum. Let us take a closer look at each strategic direction, and we can start with teaching and learning.

Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Learning

We know that today the University of Georgia boasts one of the most vibrant educational environments in the world. So where do we go from here?

First, we must continue to strengthen our groundbreaking Experiential Learning Initiative.

The decade ahead will require our students to work effectively in diverse teams; see problems from multiple angles; think critically and creatively; and manage complex projects.

Experiential learning remains one of the best ways to develop these skills. Today we are a national leader in this area. But we must continue to stay at the forefront, for the sake of our students and their futures. I know we can, and we will.

We also must enhance support for those who provide instruction. An array of talented people serve our teaching mission—from professors to lecturers to graduate students. All of these individuals are vital to our learning environment, and we must continue to invest in their success. Our strategic plan imagines new professional development and mentoring programs, new grants and honors, all to encourage and reward teaching excellence at every level of our University.

Next, we must continue to modernize our classrooms and laboratories. We have made great strides in this area in recent years, but we still have work to do. Our strategic plan identifies a need for more active learning spaces across campus and for new technology to help faculty enhance classroom instruction and maximize learning outcomes. We must ensure that as the teaching methods of our faculty evolve, so do the spaces and technologies that support them.

Finally, over the next five years, we must deepen our commitment to access and success for underrepresented and other underserved students. Our New Approaches to Diversity Program, mentioned earlier, and our All Georgia Program, which targets students from rural parts of the state, are great examples of recent efforts.

These initiatives are crucial building blocks for the diverse and inclusive educational environment we are striving to create. Progress will require the commitment of each and every member of our campus community.

There is another important component of student learning and success that I want to mention, and that is wellness. College students today are much more attuned to their personal well-being, including issues of mental health.

Our strategic plan recognizes this reality and seeks to expand wellness programs and services available to our students. To support this goal, I am funding with private dollars two new initiatives that will be led by Vice President for Student Affairs Victor Wilson and our University Health Center.
The first will broaden the Health Center’s existing platform of mental health care with online therapeutic support and mobile applications, and the second will enhance the Health Center’s outreach efforts with new wellness coaching and peer mentoring programs. These initiatives will be implemented over the remainder of the year, and I hope they spur further programs across campus to promote student wellness.

**GROWING RESEARCH, INNOVATION, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Let us turn now to the second strategic direction: growing research, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Earlier, I noted the tremendous progress we have made in this area. Our research enterprise is expanding by leaps and bounds. Our innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem is booming.

Each year, it seems, we surpass the achievements of the last. Never in my long career at this institution have I witnessed a period of such profound acceleration. Yet I see potential to do even more.

I believe we have a unique opportunity before us, an opportunity to continue transforming the University of Georgia into a world-renowned, research powerhouse. Obviously that transformation has been happening for a sustained period of time, and our strategic plan will help us continue our trajectory.

It starts with finding new ways to collaborate across our academic disciplines and beyond our organizational boundaries. The most pressing research questions of this decade will demand interdisciplinary and multi-institutional approaches.

We are positioned perfectly to respond. In fact, our greatest strength as a research university is our breadth. From the sciences, agriculture, and engineering; to the arts and humanities; to law, business, and all points between, we find deep faculty expertise. Now we must challenge ourselves to form new synergies across schools and colleges and build new bridges between our research programs and our industry partners.

The latest faculty hiring initiative, announced in the fall, will aid us in this endeavor by recruiting faculty in several strategic areas, as will the interdisciplinary seed grant program, which most recently funded seven faculty teams to support research projects spanning 15 colleges, schools, and other units. Just last month, the University announced a new pre-seed funding program to stimulate the formation of large-scale, interdisciplinary research teams.

Second, our strategic plan calls for continued investment in infrastructure. Our facilities, technology, and support systems—they, too, must continue to evolve over the next five years to increase productivity.

This investment in infrastructure must be matched equally by an investment in our researchers, innovators, and entrepreneurs, as well as the staff that support them. Here again—new professional development and mentorship programs, new honors and awards, will go a long way to encourage and reward excellence and strengthen our culture.

Growing graduate education is another critical part of this strategic direction. Our graduate students bring fresh ideas, energy, and a drive to discover, and they provide critical support for the research, scholarship, and creative activities of our talented faculty.

They also teach and mentor our undergraduate students. Growth in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship is simply not possible, at any meaningful scale, without growth in graduate education.

That is why the Provost is expanding the role and responsibility of our Graduate School. As part of that effort, I am creating, with $500,000 in private funds, new doctoral fellowships to attract outstanding graduate students to our University. I hope this initial contribution motivates our alumni and friends to rally around this goal as a cornerstone of our strategy for future fundraising in support of graduate education.
Our Innovation District also will play a central role in our second strategic direction. Over the past year, we made great progress on this initiative. We launched exciting programs such as Dawg Camp Innovate and the Faculty Innovation Fellows program. We also opened Studio 225 as the new home of our thriving Student Entrepreneurship program, and we announced plans to renovate the Spring Street Building to support our growing pipeline of faculty startups and expand project-based learning and industry engagement.

Today I am delighted to announce a $3.5 million gift from The Delta Air Lines Foundation to complete this renovation and activate new programs within the facility. This gift will transform the Spring Street Building into an energetic hub of creativity, collaboration, and entrepreneurship, and it is just one part of a $5 million pledge from the Delta Foundation that will also support the student success center in our College of Engineering.

It was only five years ago that the Foundation donated $5 million to help establish Delta Hall in our nation's capital. This latest commitment continues a legacy of supporting our major priorities, and I want to express my deepest appreciation to our friends at The Delta Air Lines Foundation for their generosity.

Staying with the Innovation District for just a moment longer, I want to mention another development, a new community partnership, called Innovate U. Innovate U will launch this summer as a weeklong residential program for rising high school students in the Clarke County School District. It will be led by our Fanning Institute for Leadership Development and teach skills in design thinking, teamwork, and communication, while introducing students to the innovation landscape of our campus and city. Registration opens in March, so stay tuned to learn more about this latest partnership with our local community.
STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES ACROSS GEORGIA AND AROUND THE WORLD

Now on to the third strategic direction: strengthening partnerships with communities across Georgia and around the world. There is a passage at the end of our mission statement that I want to highlight.

It reads: “The University of Georgia is responsive to the evolution of the state’s educational, social, and economic needs and aspires [...] to even closer contact and interaction with [...] institutions throughout the state as well as the citizens it serves.” Note the words “responsive,” “closer contact,” and “interaction.”

This passage captures the essence of our third strategic direction. As a land-grant scholarship, technical assistance, and training. This certainly is an area of existing strength for us.

Consider, for instance, our Cooperative Extension and Public Service and Outreach units. To remain relevant in this decade, however, we must focus even more on programs that address community-identified needs and issues, and we will.

Programs like Archway Partnership and Service Learning have shown us that this type of work is mutually beneficial. Not only does it empower our communities, it also creates research, scholarship, and experiential learning opportunities for our faculty and students.

As a related goal, we must continue to expand our economic development presence across the state, with particular focus on underserved communities. Our Small Business Development Center will certainly play a leading role here.

“Over the next five years, I believe we can do even more, be even more, for the citizens of this state and beyond.”

and sea-grant University, we must remain responsive, always striving for deeper engagement, greater impact.

Yet our obligation will never end at the state line, for we have national and global commitments. Look no further than our campuses in Washington, DC; Cortona, Italy; and Oxford, England.

In fact, I like to think of our service mission as a set of concentric circles, originating here in Athens, reaching across every county in Georgia, and spanning our nation and our world. Over the next five years, I believe we can do even more, be even more, for the citizens of this state and beyond.

Our strategic plan outlines several goals to get us there. First, we must increase collaborative, community-focused research,

But this goal invites units from across campus into the economic development space to develop strategies and alliances that target areas of highest need throughout Georgia. Growing our economic impact is critical to the future of our University and our state, and we have the ability to scale up.

At the same time, over the next five years, we must expand the role of our University on the world stage. The key will be more global partnerships that leverage our academic strengths. New and ongoing international cooperative agreements, sponsored projects, and study abroad programs will elevate our reputation and our impact around the world.

Finally, our strategic plan aims to create more opportunities for students to engage in our service mission. Graduates of the University of Georgia are expected to become leaders in their fields and their communities.
It is paramount that our students develop the knowledge and skills they need to make a positive difference in the lives of others. Strengthening our partnerships across Georgia and around the world will provide these opportunities to our students.

As I wrap up, I want to express my deepest appreciation to the nearly 40 individuals who played a leadership role in developing our 2025 Strategic Plan. Vice Provost Michelle Cook and Special Assistant to the President Kyle Tscheupert co-facilitated the planning process.

They worked alongside Deans Linda Kirk Fox, Dale Greene, Don Leo, Sam Pardue, and Anna Scheyett, who served as co-chairs. Allan Aycock, who oversees accreditation for our University, also provided leadership. To all of you and the many others who contributed—thanks for your service and for your dedication.
I want to leave you today with a quote from Harvard University President Emeritus and historian Dr. Drew Faust. She said, “The future we face together, the future we shape, will depend perhaps most of all on who we are and who we will be.”

So as we embrace new goals for the future, let us also reaffirm who we are—what unites and inspires us: our love of learning, inquiry, and discovery; diversity of thought and respect for others; integrity and service. Over the next five years, these foundational values will be just as important to our success as the goals we are determined to achieve.

The state of the University of Georgia is strong and growing stronger. Our future is bright and boundless. In the years ahead—joined in deed and purpose—we will write the next chapter in the amazing story of our institution, and it will be a chapter—like those written before—that reveals the transformative power of the Bulldog Nation.

Working together, we will expand our positive impact on people and communities throughout Georgia, our nation, and our world—because that is what we do. That is what we care about. That is who we are.

I am excited about our future. You should be, too. I look forward to continuing to serve alongside you as President. Thanks, everyone, for being here today. Have a great afternoon.
PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

• Expand experiential learning opportunities for all students.
• Enhance training, support, and recognition for all who provide instruction.
• Enhance infrastructure and support for evidence-based teaching methods across the curriculum.
• Promote academic access and success for all students, with particular consideration for underrepresented, rural, first-generation, and other underserved students.

GROWING RESEARCH, INNOVATION, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

• Provide resources, support, and incentives to nurture a diverse and inclusive culture of excellence in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship.
• Promote collaboration among academic units and between these units and external organizations to drive interdisciplinary research and commercial activity.
• Align the human and physical capital of the University to expand the research enterprise and fuel innovation and entrepreneurship at all levels of the organization.
• Enhance communications about the University’s strengths in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship and the impact of those activities on local, state, national, and international communities.

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES ACROSS GEORGIA AND AROUND THE WORLD

• Increase collaborative, community-focused research, scholarship, technical assistance, and training in Georgia, across the nation, and around the world.
• Strengthen UGA’s role in economic development across the state, with a particular emphasis on underserved communities.
• Broaden opportunities for students to engage with the diversity of communities in Georgia and across the nation and world on locally identified needs and issues.
• Develop high-impact global partnerships that engage and support UGA areas of research and service excellence.
• Strengthen communications regarding how UGA sustainably supports and benefits communities through research, teaching, and public service.
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