

East Georgia State College
Comments to Fall Workshop

Bob Boehmer

As of August 01, 2017

Good morning.

It is an honor to serve all of you and the citizens of this region as president of East Georgia State College. It is great opportunity to be able to share with you today my thoughts about the climate in which the college does its work, how we are doing in that challenging climate, and where we are going in the future. Frankly, it's going to take a bit of time to cover that ground --- but you deserve to know my thoughts and we all need to understand that we are all in this together. So, settle in --- we've got some stuff to talk about.

I take great pride in in being able to call you my colleagues. We are fighting the good fight together every day. Whether you are a custodian, a faculty member, a police officer, a coach, a senior administrator or play any other role at East Georgia State College, your role is critical to success of our students. Different roles require, of course, different education and experience and different skills and talents, but no one role is more or less important than any other. That is because, when each of you carries out your job with excellence every day, it directly enhances the likelihood that our students will succeed. Each of you has my respect for the specific role you have chosen. Each of you has my gratitude for the way you go above and beyond the call of duty to make East Georgia State College a unique and special place.

Each of you has, also, made a considered choice to be part of the East Georgia State College family. For most, it is a choice made in significant part because of your belief in this college's unique access mission. As an academic community, we share a passion for providing access and opportunity to an incredibly diverse group of students. Our students are racially diverse. Many of our amazing students are first generation college students. Many qualify for admission to more selective institutions and choose East Georgia State College because it is a great value and offers small classes and talented faculty and staff who believe in the importance of each student's future. Many do not meet the admission standards of more selective institutions and seek a point of access to the higher education which will enable them to achieve their dreams. It is a

daunting challenge to meet the needs of this diverse student body, but it is one we all accept readily because meeting the challenge is so very important. We know how critical our work is to improving the economic and social well-being of a deserving region of our state. Thanks to each of you for making that choice --- I know you have other choices available to you – and for reaffirming that choice by coming today to join with your colleagues in committing to another successful academic year ---- one which is sure to be even more successful than the last.

As a valued member of this special academic community, each one of you has observations, opinions and creative ideas **which I value highly**. No one at East Georgia State College should ever believe

that they must remain silent because of their job at the college ---- because they have heard it is “not your place.” Certainly, all of us should ordinarily voice our suggestions and concerns first to our own supervisor. However, none of us should ever feel silenced because of our position. When we do choose to speak out, we, of course, take on a corresponding responsibility speak in a professional manner demonstrating civility and respect. At East Georgia State College, **we embrace creativity and initiative, we respect the opinions of every member of our community and we encourage everyone to express their opinions. We embrace a culture of free expression and a culture of respect. And we all understand the high accompanying responsibilities.**

This culture of free expression and respect is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do. East Georgia State College is a small institution with a modest budget operating in an economically challenged region of the state during a turbulent period of time. We are surrounded by sister institutions with far more resources. We will survive and thrive only if we are creative, cutting edge and nimble. We can't afford to waste your creative ideas and observations. If we do, we do so at our own peril.

East Georgia State College is also committed to a culture of integrity. As I turn on the cable news late each evening, as I read the Chronicle of Higher Education, as I follow my beloved sports teams and as I read Business Week, I am regularly scandalized by the overt and growing lack of

integrity among our leaders in politics, higher education, sports and business --- and so many other areas. It appears that many not only fail to value integrity, they celebrate their lack of it. They say, for example, “that’s just how business gets done.” We owe it to our students to communicate to them what integrity means, why it is important and how it is infused into our student code of conduct and code of academic integrity. If our colleges and universities do not adopt integrity as a core value and practice it daily, we can hardly expect to find integrity in the workplaces of American.

So let’s now spend a few moments together reflecting on this turbulent climate for higher education in the county, in our state and in this specific region of Georgia. To

begin this reflection, let's start with the elephant in the room --- consolidation. The most frequent question I receive from faculty, staff and members of the community is whether East Georgia State College will soon be consolidated. Honestly, I do not believe that anyone other than, perhaps, a few of the state's top decision makers know which institutions will be consolidated in the University System of Georgia within the next few years. However, **I have no reason to believe that the consolidation list will include East Georgia State College.** We are as financially sound and well-managed as any institution in the state. We have a strong base of support from the best local legislative delegation in the state. Our enrollment and housing occupancy have been strong. Moreover, I simply don't think

that it is productive to spend time worrying about it. We have, in my opinion, weathered the storm thus far due the fact that we focus our energy directly on our students and we demonstrate willingness to change when needed. Continuing to survive and thrive will require an even greater nimbleness. Let's focus on that – focus on our amazing students -- and not let our decisions be driven by a concern about consolidation.

One way to think about surviving and thriving in a time of turbulence is to consider what we should **not** do. In other words, it is useful to think about the behavior of access institutions across the United States **unlikely** to weather this rising storm. Consider my personal list of patterns of behavior likely to spell irrelevance for any access college.

- Fail to be mission driven. **Unsuccessful** access institutions fail to continually remind themselves why they exist. They try to become something else instead of celebrating who they are. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- Be insensitive to financial struggles of students and their families. The cost of attendance at **unsuccessful** access institutions rises faster than incomes of the students and families they serve. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- Be slow, plodding and resistant to change. Always fall back on the claim that this is just the way higher education works. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- Keep data about progress towards goals as close to the vest as possible. **Unsuccessful** access institutions will **not**

be transparent, resisting calls from the public and regulators to share information about what is working and what is not working in efforts to improve retention and graduation. **That** is not the East Georgia way.

- Establish internal budgets each year based strictly on last year's budgets. **Unsuccessful** access institutions will be frozen by the resulting inability to shift to meet emerging needs. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- Rely solely on state funding and tuition to fund programs. **Unsuccessful** access institutions will continue to view fundraising campaigns and external grant applications as the purview of larger research institutions. **That** is not the East Georgia way.

- Isolate your institution from the community it serves. Focus on meeting your internal needs rather than on improving lives in your community. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- View other higher education institutions as competitors in a market for a limited number of students, rather than as partners in a shared effort to encourage more students to choose college and to provide multiple pathways to success. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- Fail to make student needs the top priority in making decisions about what classes and programs to offer, when to offer classes, where classes are offered and in what format. **That** is not the East Georgia way.

- Hold on with all your might to arcane internal processes intelligible only to those who administer them – not to students who must navigate those waters to graduate. By all means, use acronyms whenever possible when communicating with students and their families. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- Fail to develop new cutting edge degree programs responding directly to the dramatically changing workplace. **That** is not the East Georgia way.
- And, of course, remain blissfully unaware of changes in the ways students learn. **That** is not the East Georgia way.

If this is not the East Georgia Way, what is? This requires that we all understand the external environment we are facing. As long as it is my privilege to serve as president, it

is my commitment to you that I will work steadfastly to assure that we are an access institution which understand our external environment and which continually changes to survive and thrive. So, let's talk about that changing world.

Consider first that we a small college in an economically challenged region surrounded by larger more robustly resourced sister institutions. That alone is a big challenge. But, even more challenging is the simple fact that the higher education climate in Georgia and the nation is in a state of dramatic, constant, rapid state of change.

- First, consolidations, as I have already mentioned, are the rage. A few short years ago, for example, there were 36 University System of

Georgia institutions. Upon completion of the Georgia Southern University/Armstrong University merger, there will be 27.

- Enrollment at colleges and universities across the county is struggling. Access institutions are being hit particularly hard. College going rates are declining even as high school graduation rates rise. Potential students are choosing work instead of college as unemployment rates fall. As larger, more robustly-funded institutions decrease admission standards and create special access programs to address their own enrollment pressures, there is **even greater enrollment pressure** on access institutions like East Georgia State College.

- State funding is decreasing as a share of the total cost of higher education all across the county. That means, quite simply, that students and their families are picking up a bigger share of the tab.
- Raising tuition to address these declines in state funding is simply no longer a viable strategy. Students, parents, and legislators simply have no appetite for tuition rate increases which outpace inflation rates.
- Students are becoming increasingly mobile and are searching more and more for courses and programs offered online and in flexible formats.
- Alternative forms of credentialing are becoming more widely accepted by employers and institutions across the

county. In addition, even the most elite institutions are more and more willing to award academic credit for prior learning.

- The workplace college graduates are facing is changing dramatically as artificial intelligence and robotics become commonplace – not science fiction. Students are seeking degree programs uniquely designed to meet this changing workplace. This changing workplace does not make our bread and butter --- general education, the core curriculum --- irrelevant. It makes it **more relevant than ever** because the ability to think critically to solve unknown problems is so much more important. But this does mean that we cannot sit back and deliver our curriculum without

change. Our curriculum, our learning management systems and our methods of delivery must be continually updated to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in a modern workplace.

- Student loan debt has spiraled out of control in the United States as the total cost of education has risen and the share of that cost borne by students and their families has increased. That's a double whammy. These borrowing trends are resulting in corresponding demands for increased accountability from accreditors, the University System of Georgia and the federal Department of Education. That accountability trend will accelerate.

Frankly, East Georgia State College has been doing very well in this challenging environment. Our success is no reason to rest because the rate of change is going to accelerate. However, it is a reason to celebrate our amazing successes. Consider:

- Since 2012, our enrollment has been strong, increasing each year. This is due to hard work in recruiting and retention, our highly regarded “let’s get associated” campaign and to our nimbleness. We have responded to enrollment pressures by opening a new and successful campus in Augusta and by stepping up to satisfy the need for Move on when Ready programs in the region.
- We have increased our residence hall capacity to 412 beds and housing

occupancy rates are high. We have a waiting list right now and are today considering overflow housing plans for the Swainsboro Campus.

- We have remained one of the best higher education bargains in the country. In newly released rankings by the federal department of education, East Georgia State College is on the list of the **lowest tuition cost institutions** in the United States as well as on the list of **lowest net price institutions** in the U.S.
- Our student loan default rate, which was only a few years ago approaching 30%, has dropped by almost 10 percentage points.
- The number of East Georgia State College graduates has risen

dramatically due to the steps taken to implement our Complete College Georgia plan, our reverse transfer initiative and our African American Male initiative.

- Over three fiscal years, including the current year, we will have added over \$20,000,000 in physical assets – a second residence hall, an expansion to our Academic Building and an addition to our Student Center. All of this has been accomplished **without taking on any additional debt**. That is in large part due to the strong support of our legislative delegation – Senators Hill and Stone and Representative Parrish – and we deeply appreciate that support.
- Our overall financial management is extremely strong. Year after year we have clean audits. It is important to

understand that staying out of financial hot water is one of the best ways not to be a consolidation target.

- Our state funding allocation for FY 2018 had the second highest **percentage** increase among all USG institutions. As all of you know, this does not mean we are flush with discretionary dollars. The increased costs of operating an institution --- our recent salary raises, and our increased TRS costs being the largest examples -- - consume those additional dollars. Despite that fact, East Georgia State College is extremely appreciative of this increased allocation. **Absent this increased allocation, significant cuts would have been necessary.**
- Our IT infrastructure is robust despite the fact that we have fewer people

maintaining that structure per server and per work station than anyone in the state.

- We have matured from a Public Safety Department staffed primarily with security officers to a professional Police Department with certified police officers keeping us safe 24 hours per day, seven days per week.
- We have gone from a few vending machines to a vibrant food service in just a few years. Shortly, it will become even more vibrant with the addition of options in Statesboro. Frankly, our biggest problem is managing the potential for overall weight gain which the improved food presents.
- Our status with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Commission on Colleges is strong. In recent years, the Commission has visited both our Statesboro and Augusta campuses to review substantive changes and has approved both. The Commission reviewed and approved our prospectus for our Fire and Emergency Services Administration Bachelors Degree Program and our RN to BSN program. The Commission will visit in early spring 2018 to review the nursing program on-site. Following our Fifth Year Interim Report and QEP Impact Report, our QEP was approved. The Commission did request a Referral Report to demonstrate compliance with academic program assessment requirements. That referral report was accepted without need for additional

monitoring. More on meeting Commission requirements in a minute.

- As of the beginning of fall semester, we will offer three bachelors programs, 15 associate degrees with disciplinary distinction and an associate of arts in core curriculum. In 2011, by contrast, we **offered only one degree program** – an associate of arts in core curriculum.
- Assets of our Foundation assets have increased from under a million to over \$2,300,000 since 2011. This has been due, in large part, to generous gifts to create the Correll Scholars Program from Pete and Ada Lee Correll and a generous recent gift of an additional 138 acres of land adjoining our current Swainsboro campus from the Gambrell family.

- We are beginning our third full year of the Correll Scholars Program this fall. Students who have already participated in the program have had marvelous educational experiences and have had an extremely positive impact on our academic community.
- Faculty and students from the University of Georgia spent a great deal of time during the last year helping us develop a new physical master plan. It is called “A Campus in the Pines.” This will be finalized with your feedback this fall. This plan presents a long-term vision for our beautiful 380 acres. It will enable our campus to grow in a thoughtful manner designed to meet the needs of the students of this region for many, many years to come.

- Although we still have a ways to go to meet our salary goals, significant strides have been made to improve our overall salary structure through implementation of the Vinson Institute Salary Study recommendations.
- East Georgia State College has become a leader in the state in making education accessible for intellectually disabled adults. I am extremely proud of the college's leadership in this important area. I am proud of our CHOICE students. I think it is important for us to step back today and remind ourselves of the reasons for the CHOICE program. At the most fundamental level, our mission is to provide access to higher education and these students **have the same right to access as all of the other treasured**

youth of this region. In a short time, this program has grown from three students to fifteen. Many of those students are living in our residential halls. I look forward to the college's continued statewide leadership in this area. I expect all in the East Georgia State College community to continue to welcome these deserving young adults into our community and to include them fully in the activities and organization of our community.

- East Georgia State College has made dramatic improvements in the graduation rate of our African American Male students through our AAMI program. In 2013, we were one of the few institutions in the University System of Georgia without an AAMI Program. We now have a vibrant

program supported by key partners such as Nordson Industries and the Mill Creek Foundation and are participants in a large federal grant program to further increase our success in this critical area.

- Our four athletic teams represent us proudly across the state and the region even though our programs are the newest in the league. This is not the forum to discuss win-loss records and awards. Today, it is important to recognize the contribution our athletic program is making to awareness of East Georgia State College. Although athletic achievements have been dramatic, the contributions made to a positive image of our college across the state and region and beyond is even more important.

I do wish I could say that all of this success gives us time to rest. It doesn't. We have, however, much more progress to make to remain vibrant and relevant in this volatile higher education environment. Let's consider a few things we must do now:

- We must continue to enhance our culture of respect. The hard work facing us is simply not going to be accomplished if we do not fully embrace this culture --- a culture which respects the important contribution each of you makes every day.
- Continually improving student recruitment practices have been a key to our recent success. Our approaches to recruiting **must continue to change** dramatically to respond to the changing external environment. We must become

even more focused on individual potential students and must be even more data driven in our recruitment. Consider that the rate of high school graduation is growing while the rate of high school graduates choosing higher education, the college going rate, is decreasing. This is a need East Georgia State College must **meet head on in our region**. We cannot recruit high school students simply by identifying broad geographical target areas. We **must use data and technology to identify individual students** who are qualified for college and yet are not choosing college. That is East Georgia State College's sweet spot. We can't simply place ads in a newspaper in an area where target students reside or simply talk to their graduating class. We **must develop**

techniques to reach those potential students individually and demonstrate a direct and personal interest in their future.

- The Georgia Southern University/Armstrong University consolidation presents both challenges and opportunities. While the standards of one of the consolidating institutions may decline a bit, the standards of the other may rise a bit. We must reach out to students in the areas where standards have risen and welcome them to our institution.
- We must develop new degree and certificate programs targeting the needs of our region and the emerging needs of our students. These must not duplicate degree programs offered by our sister institutions. They must add value. A lot

of work has been done and is being done right now, for example, to design and formally propose to the USG a new bachelors degree program --- a bachelors of applied science. That is a high priority indeed.

- We have an incredible amount of additional work to do in the area of assessment of academic programs and support units. There are increasing demands for sophisticated program assessment from both the University System of Georgia through its Comprehensive Program Review requirements and by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges through its Institutional Effectiveness Principles. Let me be completely clear about this.

Assessment is not something the Office of Institutional Effectiveness does alone. It is the responsibility of each academic and administrative unit. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness obviously plays a central role in helping all of us understand requirements and in compiling our work. However, the process of defining the outcomes to be achieved by students in each program, the process of collecting and analyzing the data, and the process of implementing change when needed **are the responsibility of each unit.**

- The University System of Georgia recently launched a new initiative to review all administrative processes throughout the system. This is known as Comprehensive **Administrative** Review.

Sound mundane? It is, of course, I assure you, very important to our future. An small initial cohort of institutions was asked to participate. We have been invited and have accepted. I know that there is skepticism about the process and fear. Being part of the initial cohort is a chance to be part of the solution and I ask all of you to have an open mind and to participate actively in this process.

- Budgetary constraints have always greatly limited faculty and staff professional development opportunities at East Georgia State College. We can't address fully address all of our needs in this area in one year. However, we can begin. In spring 2018, we will initiate an internal leadership development program. We will select a small initial cohort to participate in an internal

program designed to prepare participants for leadership roles at East Georgia State College. I hope a good number of you will consider applying for this first cohort.

- We are on the verge of adopting a new advisement plan. This is not only required by the University System of Georgia, it is more importantly a central component of our efforts to increase graduation and retention. Concurrently, Degree Works is now being upgraded for full implementation in spring. It is essential that everyone connected to the advising process fully embrace the use of Degree Works once the upgrade and full implementation of that system is completed.
- Communication and collaboration among units of the college must increase

dramatically. As you all know, I feel strongly that this is particularly important for Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Consider as an example the importance of orientation and course registration and advising to student success. We cannot say “that is a student affairs thing” or “that is an academic affairs thing.” **These are “student success things”** and student success is the job of each and every one of us. Senior administrators in all areas must take active, aggressive steps to assure that their efforts to achieve student success are strategically coordinated. Silos are out at East Georgia State College.

- Recently, a lifelong adult resident of Swainsboro visited campus for a college event. I was amazed to learn that this

visit was this resident's first. How is that possible? This story still takes place far too frequently. Similarly, I met downtown recently with community leaders and students. The unfamiliarity of some of the students with downtown Swainsboro struck me hard. Repeated events such as these two make it clear to me that we must do even more to make our campus welcoming and inviting to the community which made this campus possible; and that we must do more to make it practical for our students to become part of that community.

As it turns out, it is not a simple to make this happen as it is to say it. Attitudes which have been built over decades do not go away just because we declare that the community is welcome on campus.

Students don't start going downtown regularly just because a business puts an ad in the newspaper. East Georgia State College needs a location downtown to make us highly visible in the heart of the town. We need a transportation mechanism to convey our students into the heart of town. Neither of these is inexpensive or easy. But, both are deserving of a strong consideration. This year, I will be working closely with the SGA, a group of community leaders and the foundation to investigate ways to make both of these happen. If any of you are interested in assisting with the hard work necessary to evaluate the alternatives and to develop solid business plans, please let me know. Your expertise would be of great help.

- East Georgia State College is a diverse campus. We have roughly the same number of African American students and Caucasian students. I am proud that our student body well represents the racial composition of the community in which we live. I am also proud that our college is aggressively addressing the fact that our African American male students have historically graduated at very low rates --- far, far lower than other ethnic groups among our student body as I discussed earlier. The keystone of our AAMI program is mentoring. I hope that many faculty and staff of all ethnic backgrounds will consider finding ways to participate in the mentoring opportunities provided by our AAMI program.

I do have a significant concern about the racial makeup of our campus which I need to share with you today. I am concerned that we could become two campuses in Swainsboro – a black campus and a white campus. Although no one intends this to happen, this could become the case through benign neglect. It is critical that all of our student organizations, our residence halls, and all of our student activities be intentional in organizing themselves in a manner which assures that they are welcoming to all of our students.

- The college is becoming a player in external grant funding. The foundation has recently provided us with funds to obtain the services of an expert consulting firm in this endeavor. It is

already paying dividends. This is another area in which early and enhanced communication among key East Georgia State College personnel is critical. At the moment an idea morphs from a wild idea to a concrete concept, that is the time the communication among the principal investigator, the Business Office and the Office of Institutional Advancement must begin. That communication must continue until the activity funded by the grant is completed. Please be certain that takes place.

- Our student body is changing dramatically. Engagement of these students in the life of the college is critical to retention and graduation. Many of our students are actively engaged in the life of the college through involvement in co-curricular activities.

Yet, far too many of our students are not meaningfully engaged. The upcoming construction of the exciting new addition to our student center presents a unique opportunity to design activities and organizations assuring that a higher percentage of our students are meaningfully involved in college life.

- Similarly, I encourage all faculty and staff take in active role in the life of the college. Whether it is attending a Vision Series event, enjoying a First Friday at the Morgan House, celebrating with colleagues and community members at the annual patriotic concert or taking part in any one of the many college events offered, participation in the life of the college is one of the true joys of being part of a college community. Let's all

participate as fully as our schedules allow.

In closing, I want to ask each person in the room why you got out of bed and came to this fall workshop this morning. I do realize that, after these lengthy comments you were already asking that. However, let's all think about this together. All of us, myself included, of course are motivated in part by the simple fact that it's our job. All of us, of course, have doubts each day. In my own case, there's my new grandson in Portland, Oregon and the fact that most of my contemporaries are retired and spending mornings drinking coffee and waxing eloquent about politics. However, after I have had my 4am cuppacoffee and really think about it, I finally realize that I got out

of bed because there are so very many bright and talented and deserving students in this region who need a special place like East Georgia State College --- a place which is affordable, a place where students know that every person from entry level employees through senior administrators got out of bed that morning so that they have a chance to succeed, a place where everyone knows that many of our students are the first in their families to go to college and we don't expect them to know the secret handshakes and hidden doorways, a place where faculty and staff demand a lot from our students and correspondingly respect those students even though they may not yet be sophisticated about the academic process, a place that values every student, every staff member and every faculty member, a place which exhibits a culture of respect.

Today, I ask each of you to look inside yourself as we begin this academic year and ask whether you share this passion for this special place, this deserving region and our amazing students. If you don't, please dig deeper. It's there. Let's jointly and silently commit today to get up tomorrow morning and every day during the 2017-2018 academic year fully committed to giving every one of our students the chance to succeed and giving this region the economic boost it needs.

Thanks for all you do!