

Emerging Political Issues

Lynsey Nejman

Georgia Southern University

TO: Barry Dotson, Incoming President, Georgia Southern University

FROM: Lynsey Nejman, Director, Government and Community Relations

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SUBJECT: Emerging Political Issues Regarding Georgia Southern University

Welcome to Georgia Southern University! We are the greatest institution in the state of Georgia, and I am certain you will make an excellent addition to our administrative team. As a university president, your roles are vast and vital to the functioning of the institution. You must commit yourself to the mission of the institution, and represent our institution fully in all matters. In higher education today, it seems everything is changing. I have compiled a list of recommendations regarding these changes in policy, finances, and political actions that will directly affect your position as university president.

### **Open Communication**

The faculty, staff, and students at Georgia Southern University should be your first priority as you step into your new role. Historically, higher education meets change with distrust and anxiety, so your first and biggest challenge will be winning over the campus community. As quoted by Kelderman (2014), Serderburg states, “the new president can quell concerns by doing what politicians do best, working the crowd, pressing the flesh” (para. 25).

It is very important for you to communicate actively with your campus. I recommend that you send out monthly emails to keep them abreast of all you are doing to improve our campus. I also urge you to start a website, with a blog, so that the community will know all you are doing to support us. This interaction will help rally support from inside the institution when dealing with all the external pressures higher education faces today.

## Reporting Requirements

The Higher Education Act was first signed in 1965, and most recently in 2008 in which it became the Higher Education Opportunity Act. This act was established to benefit college students all over the country. However, it created the most intrusive reporting requirements for institutions yet seen in higher education. I cannot stress enough the importance of maintaining these reporting standards, as our cooperation is tied directly to federal financial aid funds. I strongly urge you to review the publication released by the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (2009), detailing all that must be reported and suggestions for doing so.

One of the most important reporting requirements revolves around out of pocket costs, a topic important to our students and their families. In the effort for transparency, we have posted a net price calculator on our financial aid website, and have reported all information to websites such as IPEDS, College Navigator and College Scorecard (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). In accordance with the HEOA, we have also standardized our financial aid award letter.

Government regulation and accreditation practices are overlapping more now than ever (Eaton, 2013). Accreditation agencies have a guide they must follow, as it is “required of all accreditors, emphasizing compliance with federal regulation – rather than peer-based review - as needed to judge quality” (Eaton, 2013, para. 4). Though the practice of accreditation is becoming more redundant, it is still required to receive financial aid funding. I strongly urge you to familiarize yourself the SACS requirements, detailed in their publication *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* (2012). In this publication are standards regarding mission, effectiveness, educational programs, resources, and many other sectors of our institution. Additionally, they include a section regarding federal requirements.

Please be aware that many offices on campus work together to maintain the reporting and distribution of this information. We adhere to the rules stated in the HEOA in its entirety; however, you must be aware of all we are doing. Please maintain contact with my office for any updates. Additionally, observing requirements are very important to the existence of our institution, and many will inquire about it. I suggest you include any updates in your monthly emails, as well as dedicate a section of your website to this ongoing practice.

### **In the Best Interest of the Students**

As the figurehead of Georgia Southern University, it is imperative that you represent the best interest of your student body to the public. You have substantial influence with the University System of Georgia as well as local and state governments. However, I strongly urge you to join professional networking groups such as American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Association of American Universities. Belonging to groups such as these can give a much louder voice to college presidents on a national scale. Make no mistake: you are the most influential person on this campus and you must use your influence wisely. Work with other college presidents to help lobby for higher education at the local, state, and federal levels. As a member of the academe, you are among the most knowledgeable lobbyists for higher education reform.

While in the process of higher education lobbying, make yourself aware of other large players in this political game. A number of foundations have a lot of political power in Washington, as well as substantial funds to create grants for institutions that follow their direction. Remain aware of these foundations, namely the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation and the Lumina Foundation. They can provide considerable funding, however, be cautious of their gifts. Those who create educational reform plans in these foundations are not higher education

professionals (Reid, 2014). Rather, they are taking successful business models and forcing them onto higher education. They are pushing legislation quicker than the academe feels comfortable with (Parry, Field, & Supiano, 2013). Because they are strong lobbyists as well as influential grant supporters, they have the ability to reform higher education policy and practice simultaneously. They can provide necessary funding for programs here at Georgia Southern University; however, I strongly recommend that you consult my office, as well as your deans before you make any decisions regarding foundation monies.

### **Financing the University**

One of your many roles is to secure external funding for Georgia Southern University. This funding can come through many forms, such as external contracts and private donations. However, you must also consider reallocating and investing funds we already have. You must create a budget that will benefit our students and make our education superior and more affordable. One way you can do this is to start offering more Massive Open Online Classes, known as MOOCs. If we start to offer large, entry-level courses as MOOCs, we can make strides in trimming our budget without detracting from our educational prowess. As long as the MOOC is designed to reflect the caliber of work required by on-campus courses, they are less expensive to produce, less expensive to enroll in, and can cater to a much larger population of students (Galil, 2014). We cannot immediately offer all courses online, but this is an excellent, cost-effective option and I recommend you look into starting a MOOC program.

### **Financial Aid Reform**

As the president of a large, public university, you have a lot of power when it comes to lobbying on behalf of higher education. Your job description is broad, but your most important task is to speak for the academe in public forums. The most important topic on your public

agenda needs to be financial aid reform. As it stands, financial aid is complicated and unnavigable, especially for low-income and first-generation college students. Simplifying this process is something for which you must advocate. Creating one grant, one loan, and one work-study would help your current and future students pay for and understand their financial obligations (Republican Priorities, n.d.). In order to provide students with the maximum amount of funds they deserve, we must take action to simplify financial aid. This will also open up financial aid counselors as resources for our students. They can advise students on their financial aid options, and educate them on the financial ramifications of their choices.

You must also push for Pell Grants to be offered in the summer again. Many students rely on this grant for a majority of their funding and now these students are limited on when they can complete their required courses. At many institutions, removing summer Pell has decreased their completion and graduation rates (Nelson, 2012). Students use summer courses to either catch up or get ahead, and we must provide them every opportunity to do so. It is most vital that you use your considerable influence to accomplish these improvements.

### **Summary**

You have the considerable honor of being the next president of our outstanding university. You have a responsibility to our students. Your actions regarding open communication, campus reporting, sources of financing, external relations, and financial aid reform will define your legacy as our leader. I urge to consider my recommendations, and take action immediately. My door is always open should you have any questions or concerns.

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