

Association County Commissioners of Georgia New County Commissioners Training Program

Georgia Center · December 7, 2006

Economic Development and Georgia's Future

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the University of Georgia's service to this state and to your communities. As the flagship land-grant institution in this state, UGA has an obligation to connect the wealth of resources in the faculty with the people of this state.

The Vinson Institute, which conducts this training program, is a great example of the service the UGA offers to the people of Georgia. The Cooperative Extension Service, which has a presence in every county in the state, is another. More than 180,000 Georgia young people are involved in

4-H through the University of Georgia. And I fully believe that providing a great education to this state's best students is one of the most significant ways that UGA serves Georgia.

Before I talk to you about how we can work together to secure a bright future for all Georgians, I want to thank you for your service to your communities.

Elective office at the local level is a high calling and one that requires dedication, devotion and determination. You have taken this step because you believe in your communities and you want a better future for them. It won't be easy – politics and friendships sometimes make for a volatile mix – but democracy depends on people like you, and I am grateful for your service.

I want to talk to you about three things today: civility in public discourse, the companion challenges of economic and workforce development, and how the University of Georgia can help you and your communities.

I like politics. I served on the staff of a United States Senator and a Governor of Tennessee. I ran for Congress myself – unsuccessfully. I have been paying close attention to politics locally, statewide and nationally for most of my adult life.

But I have never been as appalled at the conduct of campaigns as I was this year. What passes for discourse on the national and state level is little more than vitriol and angry sound bites. The airwaves were filled with negativity to an extent that I've not

seen before, and you were probably as sick of it by November 7 as I was.

It's no wonder that only half the eligible voters cast ballots these days, which means that a little more than a quarter of the people are choosing our leaders. The more that those voters are on the fringe, rather than the middle, the more that candidates must play to the extremes, and the vicious cycle rolls on.

Somehow, we must rise above the general degradation of civility in American society today. It's not just politics, although politics is the most extreme example.

Last month, as I was thinking about what I wanted to say to you today, one of my staff members, who had recently taken a sick day, told me what she had seen on television. She said she spent the day watching people on talk shows, pundits and candidates on "news" shows, and contestants on "reality" TV yelling, screaming, insulting and fighting with each other. "People just aren't nice to each other anymore," she said, and that sentiment resonated with me.

Youth sports coaches fighting each other on the field. People shooting each other over video game systems. Fistfights in mall parking lots. Neighbors suing neighbors about fences. Vulgar gestures in traffic.

Where are their mamas?

It is the distance from the constituents, I believe, that has led the national debate toward the lowest common denominator. Tip O'Neill said "All politics is local;" he was right, but too many have forgotten that lesson.

You are fortunate that you know the people who will be affected by your decisions. You'll see them at church, in the grocery store and on the sidelines at recreation department sporting events. You'll look them in the eye, and they'll look you in the eye, and you'll have a conversation. That's the way it ought to be. You'll be an example for some in higher office.

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Second, we share a common goal of securing a brighter future for Georgians, and to do that, we must focus strategically on workforce development and economic development. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the word “strategically” implies that there is a strategy; Georgia is beginning to understand the need for a unified strategy to promote economic development and good jobs for her citizens.

Georgia’s workforce must be intellectually prepared for the jobs of the knowledge economy. The capital which fueled the economy of the 1970s and 80s was traditional capital – equipment and vehicles and facilities. The capital of the 21st century is human capital – knowledge and flexibility and lifelong learning.

That idea must infuse not only the educational system – K-16, kindergarten through a college degree – but society and families. There is a focus on stardom in Georgia, whether it be athletic stardom or entertainment stardom, that borders on anti-intellectualism. Tom Friedman, in his book “The World is Flat,” wrote that in China, Bill Gates is Britney Spears; in America, well, Britney Spears is Britney Spears.

Brainpower or star power – where we will focus?

We need a cultural change that starts with the birth of every child and is characterized by an expectation that each child will pursue and attain the education he or she needs in order to be successful in the knowledge economy. Georgia provides the educational opportunities, but individuals have to seize those opportunities.

Now, let me hit where it may hurt a little: What happens in the high school classroom Monday through Friday from 8-4 is infinitely more important than what happens in the football stadium on Friday night. And a 1200 on the SAT is far more important to the vast majority of young men and their futures than a 4.5 time in the 40-yard dash.

Is Friday night in your communities important? Absolutely. Like you, I have spent many a Friday night sitting on cold bleachers. Athletics build community spirit and teach valuable life lessons, like discipline and teamwork.

But if our young people are focused on stardom as their future, they would, frankly, be better off buying a lottery ticket.

Too often, Georgia loses industries with the potential for creating good jobs because the available workforce is under-educated. Too often, the best jobs available in Georgia go to highly educated people from other states because there aren’t enough Georgians to take those jobs.

In recent years, more than a third of UGA freshman have Social Security numbers that indicate they were born out of state. Our belief is that most of them moved here when their parents came here to take those high-paying, intellectual capital jobs. They are the children of Big 10 engineers and doctors and researchers. (In an earlier age, they would have been called carpetbaggers . . .)

We need to prepare Georgians to take those jobs, and that preparation starts in elementary school with a focus on academics and success in school.

There are other states in the South which, years ago, railed against intellectual development, the urban divide and the value of a diverse workforce. Georgia is fortunate to have had leadership at that time which realized that economic development was the key to the future, even if it meant some uncomfortable changes. The growth and expansion of the greater Atlanta area is the result of that foresight.

Those other states are still playing catch-up, but if Georgia does not commit to investing in human capital, we will lose out not only to our neighbors on opportunities like Kia and pharmaceutical plants, but to competitors around the world. We can no longer be the best in the South and feel like we have accomplished something; the competition is lined up around the globe, and a UGA grad is as likely to work in Cairo, Egypt as Cairo (kay-row), Georgia.

The days of companies, industries and the military locating in the South solely for cheap labor are over. The labor market, to use Friedman’s term, has flattened. The technology of the personal computer and the Internet – the emblems of the knowledge economy – has eliminated that advantage.

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This state needs a coordinated, strategic effort to enhance economic development. And just as the culture change in academics must start at the household level, the push for a unified economic development strategy will succeed only if it starts at the community level. And I am here to pledge that the University of Georgia will help in any way it can.

Location, weather and lifestyle are important factors in attracting the kind of industries and companies we want in Georgia, but they are well behind an educated workforce and an education system that works to support those industries and companies. If this state does not continue to nurture and develop a sophisticated workforce, the future will not be bright.

In the book "The Rise of the Creative Class," Richard Florida writes that creativity is "the ultimate economic resource," and describes the creative class as one that values flexibility, autonomy and the opportunity to have an impact over base salary and vacation time. These creative workers, he says, live like artists and scientists always have – setting their own goals, working independently (even within a structured setting) and believing in their ability to make a difference in the world.

They are the knowledge workers. Georgia needs to understand this demographic and what it means for the state. As always, the past and the future have assets to offer.

There are many successes to study in the state: good production and processing, primarily in the southern part of the state; the adaptations of some of the textile plants in the north; Kia coming to the Columbus area (and Columbus is a great example of a community which recognized the changes that were coming in the textile industry and worked strategically to prepare itself for the next wave of opportunity); the ports in Savannah and Brunswick and the growth of the import/export and distribution sector.

The high-tech business and research industry anchored in the north Atlanta arc is perhaps the most visible example of Georgia's success in the knowledge economy and an example of the kind of public-private partnerships that are essential to today's economy. Anchored by the wealth of intellectual resources at UGA, Georgia State, Georgia Tech, Emory and even the Medical College of

Georgia, this corridor has real potential to be a leader in the biotech industry, which I believe is the leading industry of this century.

A mix of industries is necessary for Georgia to remain viable and for Georgia's citizens to have the opportunity for success in the global economy.

Let me close by sharing with you just a few of the ways that the University of Georgia can help your communities in this effort. Land-grant universities are charged with teaching, conducting research and serving the people of their states. We take that charge very seriously at UGA, and I am deeply moved by the commitment of our faculty to meet that charge, and meet it in many ways.

Just as the Cooperative Extension Service has a rich tradition of supporting the state's agricultural industry, the Small Business Development Centers throughout the state are helping individuals achieve their dreams of starting their own businesses. There are 18 local offices from Valdosta to Rome and Columbus to Savannah, and five statewide offices addressing the specific needs of small business owners.

The College of Environment and Design offers planning assistance for communities. The Vinson Institute has helped many communities with salary studies and employee classification structures.

The list goes on and on, but the spirit of the land-grant mission is that what is ours is yours. If we have a resource that can help you and your community, we will make every effort to provide it to you.

We are proud of our long relationship with ACCG and the services we are able to offer to you and your colleagues. Please take advantage of the certification programs offered by the Institute. Through the Vinson Institute, UGA reaches virtually every elected official in Georgia, from city council members to the General Assembly.

Jerry, thank you for your service to ACCG and to the state of Georgia. You have been an advocate for your constituency, and have done so in a gentlemanly manner. We are all indebted to you.

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Civility and dignity in the conduct of the public's business. A coordinated effort to provide a secure economic future for all of Georgia's citizens. And the assistance of America's first publicly chartered university.

Together, we can do great things for Georgia. Thank you again for the invitation to talk with you today.