

Written Statement

of

Brooks A. Keel, Ph.D.

President

Georgia Southern University

Statesboro, Georgia

Before the

Committee on Education and the Workforce

The Need for the “Workforce-Grant University”:

Preparing the 21st Century Workforce

April 2, 2014

The Need for the “Workforce-Grant University”: Preparing the 21st Century Workforce

Brooks A. Keel, Ph.D.
President, Georgia Southern University

Executive Summary: The Land-Grant University was established to provide a broad segment of the population with a practical education, directly relevant to their daily lives. While technical schools play a role in worker readiness, businesses are realizing that the future workforce may require a more in depth, four-year degree. Universities should be incentivized to better serve the role of “worker readiness” by extending the Land-Grant concept to create the “Workforce-Grant University”. Comprehensive Universities, like Georgia Southern University, are uniquely positioned to influence “worker readiness” by not only teaching the theory of the discipline, but also by exposing students to the practical aspects of applying the theory to a real world work situation. In addition, industry can play a role through serving on university advisory boards, ensuring state-of-the-art curricula, and by supporting internships, co-ops, and forgivable loans. Communities can provide housing for interns/co-ops, and orientation programs to help the student learn about the community in which they will live once employed. Together, “Workforce-Grant Universities”, along with industry and the community can play a significant role in the economic prosperity of the US by producing a highly educated and trained workforce.

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 established the “land-grant university” as a mechanism to meet a growing demand for agricultural and technical education in the United States. One of the original intents of the land-grant university was to make education available for the working-class American, providing a broad segment of the population with a practical education that had a direct relevance to their daily lives. In other words, an education aimed at improving job readiness. More than 150 years later, the Land-Grant University has become synonymous with world-class basic research, providing millions of students with a first-rate education in a variety of disciplines.

However, regarding workforce readiness today, two things are becoming apparent: 1) business and industry, more and more, are requiring that their employees possess postsecondary education and training; and 2) due to access, affordability, and capacity issues, this workforce demand cannot be met by land-grant universities alone. In most states, “Comprehensive Universities” help meet the increasing demand for higher education and training. These universities tend to focus more on applied research, their missions often support wider accessibility and affordability opportunities for students, and they are uniquely positioned to emphasize the importance of “worker readiness” in their curricula. Comprehensive Universities also tend to focus more on fostering productive credit transfer relationships with 2-year colleges and technical schools, who serve as important enrollment pipelines for students desiring to extend their certificates and associate degrees to the bachelor level.

Complete College Georgia, a statewide effort championed by Governor Nathan Deal and stemming from Complete College America, has estimated that 60% of jobs in Georgia will require at least some postsecondary credential by 2020, further indicating that college completion will play a key role in driving the economic potential of this state. Because of the future workforce demands of business and industry, coupled with the increasing awareness of the relationship between college education and job placement, colleges and universities now must

focus not only on college completion (i.e., graduation rates) but also on the worker-readiness (i.e., job placement rates) of their students following graduation.

While technical schools address a critical need in this country, many industries and businesses are realizing that in the next decade and beyond, their future employees will need to possess a more in depth, highly specialized skill set. These skills include a deeper working knowledge of the discipline, greater critical thinking ability, team-based problem solving experience, advanced communication skills, a greater appreciation for innovation and creativity, and an enhanced ability to translate advanced learning directly into practice. In many cases, these competences can only be realized through a four-year degree, and this need met best by Comprehensive Universities.

If we are going to meet the workforce needs of the 21st century, higher education must rethink its role in educating students. Likewise, governments, both state and federal, should consider ways in which to provide support aimed at incentivizing colleges and universities who are dedicated to upholding “worker readiness” as a part of their mission. Perhaps it is time to extend the original tenants of the land-grant mission by supporting the concept of a “Workforce-Grant University”.

Higher education today must also face a “New Normal” in the way it does business that extends beyond simply “doing more with less”. Reductions in state subsidy of higher education, coupled with rising costs and declining enrollment have resulted in increased tuition burden to students and their families. Even the value of higher education has come under increased scrutiny, forcing universities to further justify their efforts. This New Normal is causing higher education to focus more clearly on increased access, affordability and accountability. Hank M. Huckaby, Chancellor of the University System of Georgia, commented on the impact of this New Normal way of business during his 2013 State of the Student address:

“Today’s students occupy a very different world from the one that existed when many of us attended college. Globalization and technology continue to remake economies and transform work at an increasing pace. Jobs and entire industries disappear seemingly overnight. State financial resources to support public higher education continue to be tight. Significant cost shifts in higher education funding place greater financial burdens on students and families and compromise access and impede progress toward graduation.”

The New Normal is causing a growing expectation that universities will play a greater role in economic development through technology transfer and innovation. Furthermore, local, state and federal governments are beginning to hold universities accountable for career readiness of graduates, and industry is relying on higher education to pay closer attention to workforce education and training. The New Normal way of doing business provides yet another justification for the role higher education must play in worker-readiness and in the need for developing the concept of the Workforce-Grant University.

Georgia Southern University, a comprehensive Carnegie Doctoral Research University, is a perfect example of a Workforce-Grant University. Georgia Southern, a unit of the University System of Georgia, is the largest university in South Georgia, and as such, we fully embrace our responsibility of enhancing the economic development of our entire region. We currently enroll

more than 20,500 students from all 159 Georgia counties, all 50 states and more than 100 countries. We provide students with an education focused on preparing them for the workplace, or for graduate programs ultimately leading to successful employment. Students choose from over 110 degree programs, in a variety of fields including education, business, engineering, nursing, the STEM fields and STEM education, the arts and humanities, and public health, just to name a few. What makes us unique, though, is that our students, across all disciplines, are taught not only the theory of the discipline, but also the practical aspects of how to apply the theory to a real world work situation. Our students gain experience in how to work in teams, how to think critically, and how to express themselves creatively. We emphasize student leadership and civic engagement with the intention of integrating learning, service, and leadership to empower students to become active, global citizens who will lead lifelong commitments to service. All of this makes our graduates very attractive to potential employers.

As an example of this Workforce-Grant University philosophy, Georgia Southern engineering students spend between 25-35 contact hours in hands-on physical laboratories (independent of science course labs) in their disciplines applying knowledge gained in lecture sessions. This is more than 2-3 times the amount of physical lab time provided by most other engineering programs. They are taught by faculty who have spent time in industry, and who know what skills industry will look for when hiring. We graduate work-ready, “generalists” engineers who have the knowledge required to build as well as design, and who are as comfortable “out on the shop floor” as they are behind a desk. Because of this practical experience, our engineering graduates know how to translate a computer design drawing into a product that can actually be machined efficiently and manufactured inexpensively. Georgia Southern engineers have a very high job placement rate because industry knows that they are “work ready” immediately upon graduation.

Much debate recently has centered on whether degrees in the arts and humanities adequately prepare college students for success following graduation. Georgia Southern firmly believes that art, music, theater, creative writing, language, and many more such humanists disciplines are indeed a very important part of the Workforce-Grant University culture at Georgia Southern because of the creative problem solving skills, critical thinking abilities, and innovative and creative spirit that these disciplines provide students. We encourage a blurring of the demarcation lines between the arts and the sciences. Such an approach provides students a competitive edge when seeking careers in areas where art and science merge, such as digital media, film, entertainment and video game development industry. Consequently, we are well positioned to provide the state-of-the-art training our graduates will need to be competitive in the digital entertainment field, a tremendous growth area for the state of Georgia.

In order to meet the workforce needs of the future, higher education must work harder than ever before to provide efficient pathways for students to seamlessly transfer from 2-year colleges and technical schools to 4-year degree programs. For more than a decade Georgia Southern has worked closely with East Georgia State College, a traditional 2-year college located 45 miles away in Swainsboro, GA, to establish a branch campus just 4 miles from our main campus. These East Georgia-Statesboro students take classes on the Georgia Southern campus, use our library, recreational and dining facilities, and attend our student athletic events and are in every way indistinguishable from the full-time Georgia Southern student. This arrangement allows

them to receive any required remedial education provided by East Georgia while at the same time introducing them to life on a major college environment, aiding in their ultimate transfer to our campus. We also have written articulation agreements with Savannah Technical College (located 50 miles away in Savannah, GA) in Logistics, which allows students to obtain their associate degree in Savannah, and to transfer all 60 credits to Georgia Southern where they can continue their studies in this field. Similar articulation and transfer agreements are also under development with Ogeechee Technical College in Statesboro in a variety of disciplines.

Industry itself plays an important role in promoting the Workforce-Grant culture at Georgia Southern. We currently have 28 industry and business advisory boards, consisting of more than 384 industry/business leaders, spanning the gamut from mechanical engineering, to nursing, to graphics communication management, to forensic accounting. These external boards meet regularly with our deans and faculty in order to help create state-of-the-art curricula and design practical work training experiences for our students. Industry leaders often visit the classroom and provide real-life advice and experiences, and serving as mentors for our students. Through industry-sponsored internships, and especially co-ops, our students gain valuable work experience which: 1) helps the student decide if that industry is indeed the right career path; 2) affords industry the opportunity to learn if the individual student is the right fit for that particular job, long before an offer is made; 3) significantly reduces industry specific “on-the-job” orientation making the student even more “work-ready” once graduated; and 4) significantly aids in keeping these young people employed in Georgia. All of this significantly increases job satisfaction and reduces the “quit rate” of newly hired individuals.

We are beginning to explore the concept of forgivable “worker-readiness education loans”. These “loans” serve as scholarships for students who participate in business/industry co-op programs. If the student satisfactorily completes the program, graduates, and commits to working with the business for a 1-3 year term following graduation, the scholarship-loan is forgiven. This will further reduce the employee turnover often experienced by newly graduating students and increase the return on investment made by industry in such programs. Such assistance may also provide need-based scholarship opportunities for many of our financially challenged students. State and federal grants and forgivable loans, aimed specifically at this challenge, could also have a profound impact in preparing and keeping employed a highly trained and diverse workforce, as well as significantly reduce the student loan debt burdening many of our graduates.

Lack of short-term housing is often a huge detriment for successful work-readiness co-op students who may spend a semester or more at a time with a business, often at some distance from campus. We are working with local communities to provide affordable, short-term housing, and other community-based orientation programs to help the student successfully participate in co-ops. This will also help the student learn more about the community in which they will live once employed, thus eliminating many of the questions these young people may have about starting a life in a new locale.

In conclusion, Georgia Southern University is an institution committed to applied research and learning through scholarship and service. Georgia Southern University brings together education, research and industry in ways that benefit the state of Georgia and our nation. The

economic prosperity in this country depends heavily on job creation, and in the availability of a highly skilled, educated, and trained workforce. If adequately supported, “Workforce-Grant Universities”, like Georgia Southern, will play a significant role in developing this economy and in producing this workforce. There is a role for everyone, including universities, business, communities, and government, in making sure that the United States will have the workforce needed for the 21st century and beyond.

.....

For further reference, see:

The Land-Grant Tradition, published by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, found at: <http://www.aplu.org/document.doc?id=780>

Complete College Georgia; University System of Georgia Updates on Campus Completion Plans, found at: http://www.usg.edu/educational_access/documents/University-System-of-Georgia-Campus-Completion-Plan-Updates-October-2013.pdf

USG Chancellor Hank M. Huckaby’s State of the Student Address 2013: http://www.usg.edu/chancellor/speeches/chancellors_state_of_the_student_address_2013