

MOVING MILLEDGEVILLE FORWARD



CATHY COX

Georgia College & State University President

by Rick Franzman

Cathy Cox could hardly conceal a broad, beaming smile as she led a phalanx of faculty and administrators down a makeshift center aisle at the Centennial Center. She presided over her fourth commencement ceremony celebration, in May 2025, as president of Georgia College and State University's (GCSU).





The 2025 graduating class coincided with Cox's four-year tenure, representing the first class attending GCSU exclusively under her presidency leadership.

Cox, the GCSU staff, and this group of students have successfully navigated the way forward out of the crippling Covid pandemic era. The challenging years included stagnant student enrollment, along with social distancing and on-line learning. The pandemic disrupted GCSU's mission as the state's designated liberal arts university as it significantly affected education protocols throughout the country.

Cox acknowledged the tumultuous time noting, "This group of students had a difficult experience, first with their high school learning and then their



early college time. It made our method of educating, which is so dependent upon personal interaction particularly challenging.”

In 1996, Chancellor Stephen Porch and the Board of Regents designated this method of highly personal interactive education, critical to the liberal arts institution model to GCSU. This designation provided GCSU university status and permitted the university to establish its own academic admission standards.

After 30 years as GCSU, and with the pandemic behind them, the university is firmly established as an elite institution among both public and private liberal arts universities.

GCSU offers undergraduate degrees in four distinct colleges: Health Sciences, Education, Business & Technology, and Arts & Sciences. Due to the Hope Scholarship program establishment, in the early 1990s, statewide higher education began retaining top tier talent in state.

This talent retention is notably evident at the state’s flagship University of Georgia (UGA) and its designated liberal arts university, GCSU. Cox clarifies these benefits, “Students who used to leave the state for schools like Suwanee and Davidson for a liberal arts education now come here and receive that high quality educational experience.”

With the GCSU Cox leadership and administration, the mission has transformed into a movement in which the student body enthusiastically embraces the liberal arts education culture. The leadership skills demonstrated over the past four years initializing and sustaining the cultural buy-in mission derive from Cox’s diverse professional background. She brings unique and valuable experience to the university leadership.

A Bainbridge native, she was immersed in community service and politics from an early age. Her father served as the town’s Mayor, and later as a two term Georgia State Legislator. “My sisters and I were always encouraged to be active, to be involved in community, to be aware and to read everything we could. It just became part of our DNA over time,” she says.

Under the wing of two gardening grandmothers growing up, Cox set off to Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), in Tifton, GA, to pursue plant science as a potential profession. One long summer internship under a blistering, Georgia sun relieved her of that notion. She pivoted to journalism, under the mentorship of legendary Georgia educator and journalist, Helen Strickland. “Professor Strickland was one of the



most gifted writers, editors, graphic designers, and creative forces I have ever known. She pushed us to do our best and be our best. I'm grateful to be one of 'Stick's' family forever more," Cox proudly states.

After ABAC, her path led to UGA and the Henry Grady School of Journalism, where she provided commentary on public affairs for the school's newspaper, *The Red and Black*. Then followed a first job at the Gainesville Times as a police reporter. The time she spent in the courtroom covering this beat sparked a keen interest in law, leading her to enter Mercer Law School.

After graduation, Cox returned to Bainbridge to assist in her father's caregiving during cancer treatments. She also secured employment with local law firm Lambert, Floyd, & Conger.

After her father's passing, her attention gradually turned toward politics, and she sought his old Georgia house seat in

1992, upsetting an entrenched incumbent. During her second term in the statehouse, Governor Zell Miller appointed Cox as Secretary of State, following the resignations of Max Cleland and Lewis Massey, who both sought higher political office. She then campaigned and won election to a second term.

Next, she set her sights on the Governor's office in 2002, noting, "Constitutionally, Georgia is a strong executive state where there is lots of opportunity to get things done." That campaign ended in primary defeat but opened the door to her career in higher education.

After a stint teaching law at UGA's Carl Sanders Law School, two powerhouse Georgia politicians, Burt Lance and Zell Miller urged her to pursue the open presidency at Young-Harris College. Initially she declined, amusing Lance on his phone call with her response, "Bert, you have the wrong number. I'm a JD not a PhD." However, a confidant and friend, Dean Ruth Thomas of Augusta College encouraged her





to pursue the presidency, and the unconventional candidate Cox was selected. She discovered on that same day the mission of her new administration would be to transform the Young Harris into a four-year college. Cox successfully navigated this daunting task over the next decade, “Because I hired people smarter than me to make it happen,” she laughed.

While at Young Harris, her law school alma mater, Mercer University, contacted her to fill the university’s open dean position. “If it had been anybody else but Mercer, I would not have left Young Harris. But after thinking about it, ten years started to feel like the right amount of time to bookend my career there,” she noted.

Three years later, with the retirement of highly respected GCSU President, Dr. Steve Dorman, Cox considered this available position. At first, Cox was hesitant to pursue the presidency. She had concerns regarding how the Board of Regents might view a past state politician in the presidential role of as premier state institution. Groups of faculty members and administrators at GCSU, once again, encouraged Cox to pursue this position. Her recent Mercer University experience as dean, working directly with faculty, proved a tipping point in her final selection.

After four years of service, the Cox imprint at GCSU is fully evident. She has integrated several of her predecessor’s initiatives, while firmly enacting her own agenda in sustaining and elevating the GCSU mission.

Among those noteworthy projects is the 2023 opening of the Andalusia Interpretive Center at Flannery O’Conner’s Andalusia National Historic Site. Also, a new Music Education department and band building, the first added to the downtown campus since 1996, opened in September. And renovations of Peabody Hall and Herty Hall are also underway.

As physical upgrades demonstrate identifiable signs of progress and advancement, Cox has cast her most notable footprint in fostering a holistic student experience, consistent with the liberal arts mission steeped in encouraging and enabling the total development of the student into a contributor to the wider community.

GCSU Academics & Athletics

One highly visible university sector, where this concept and approach is transparently revealed, is the Athletic Department, led by 16-year veteran Athletic Director Wendell Staton. Cox recognizes the importance of athletics as a touchstone connecting the school to community and beyond. “It’s really the front porch of the school. Athletics is usually the first connection with people,” she remarks.

In support, she has become the loudest cheerleader for the

university's 11 athletic programs, even as she simultaneously lauds Staton as the most prominent cheerleader. "We love having him speak at student orientation where his exuberance gets the new young people, coming in, excited about what they are getting ready to experience," Cox says.

As for Staton's view of the President's enthusiasm for his department, he recounts the time Cox came out to greet the baseball team in the middle of the night last year after returning home from winning a Regional Championship. "She was texting me right after the final out wanting to know when the team bus would be arriving back in Milledgeville," Staton laughs. "But she is at events regularly for all the teams and can rattle off each team's record from memory."

Her affinity for developing a strong and positive connection with athletics has led to the creation of a dedicated fundraising mechanism under the umbrella of the GCSU Foundation. The foundation serves to enhance the Department's finances beyond what student fees provide. Staton formed a Board of Directors earlier this year, and GCSU alumni Hampton Felton joined GCSU as Athletic Partnerships Assistant Director to assess each program's specific needs, and to drive fundraising to meet those needs.

"This is allowing me to do things that I thought would never happen," Staton says. Already, upgrades to several physical sites are in progress including Centennial Center locker rooms, an indoor golf practice area, and major renovations to the baseball and softball venues.

Fully embracing the liberal arts mindset, Staton has set the tone for the holistic student-athlete experience consisting of a three-pronged plan that includes academic excellence, consistently competing for championships, and competing for championships with the highest standard of sportsmanship and class.

With no athletic exceptions of its high admission standards, Staton notes, "The 200 plus athletes in his

program are already high achievers with discipline and work ethics." Last academic year, 29 GCSU athletes were named to the Peach Belt Conference's Academic Distinction Team, which requires a 3.5 GPA along with at least one full year of varsity participation as a starter or significant contributor. Additionally, the program has produced the highest graduation rate among all Division II schools three consecutive years, routinely exceeding 90%. The athletic program has also turned out nine valedictorians over Staton's tenure including most recently, women's basketball sensation Jada Warren, who captured the 2023 Division II National rebounding title averaging 13.8 rebounds per game.

Along with consistent success in the baseball and basketball programs, three recent coaching hires are indicative of the commitment to continue pushing the competitive needle.

Softball coach Brittany Johnson, brought in from St. Leo University, has just completed her inaugural season with a second-place regular season conference record, upending a pre-season poll that forecasted a last place finish.





A long-serving youth golf coach and program director throughout the state, Ben English took over the Bobcat golf program this past season, bringing with him the experience of having tutored a multiple PGA Tour winner, two-time Ryder Cup player and UGA All-American, his son Harris English. He will have another opportunity to blossom a budding prospect this year in junior Andy Scott from John's Creek, who captured the Georgia Match Play Championship this past summer, defeating Georgia Golf Hall-of-Famer Bob Royak in the final.

Also, Jeff Pelkey, previously an assistant at Flagler College gets his turn this spring to keep Bobcat baseball rolling following the departure of Norman Belcher to North Georgia College.

Staton may be most proud; however, of his athletic programs awarded the Peach Belt's Institution of the Year Award for Sportsmanship three years running and four of the past five, reinforcing the department's third leg mission - compete with class.

"When you have players come back after their careers and thank us for coaching them in the right way to do things, those are emotional paychecks you can't put a price on," Staton proudly notes.

Alongside the athletic department gratifying success, Cox takes note of these same holistic attributes transpiring campus wide. At the Health Science College's commencement ceremony this year, Cox recognized students who had engaged in extracurricular activities during their time on campus.



Requesting that the soon to be graduates stand, when she named an activity that applied to them, she began reciting a checklist ranging from varsity sports, community service, study abroad, student teaching, faith-based volunteerism, to independent research. When she finished naming the areas, all 296 graduates had risen, and the audience spontaneously rewarded them with thunderous applause that rivaled the reaction to any game winning shot made at Centennial Center. Cox recalled the ceremony with pride, in these students, which flowed into heartfelt emotion, "These are the types of leaders that we want our school turning out; active, engaged, involved and caring about the wider community."

Cox further explained, "Being a liberal arts college means taking this total student view to one's education. We don't have large lecture halls with power point presentations. We focus on the individual relationship between teacher and student in the small classroom settings. Then we encourage the students to go outside the classroom and take on real world experiences," she adds.

As with numerous higher learning institutions, Study Abroad programs are linchpins for enhanced student academic engagement, and GCSU is no exception. Among the dozens of such programs under Associate Vice-President for International Studies, Dr. James Callahan's leadership, the Belize, South America trip is among the most popular and longest running.

In 2014, Kinesiology Department Head, Dr. Kevin Hunt established the program to assist graduating students in résumé building with real world experience.

Hunt says, "We take 18 students and two faculty members each June to provide essential services while preparing our students for careers in the complex healthcare field."



The two-week trip enlists the group in tasks ranging from conducting health screening, providing occupational, art, and music therapy for elderly persons, instructing college age students in first aid and CPR techniques, dental hygiene and sanitation workshops for elementary students, working in local orphanages, to organizing workshops for teen pregnancy and STD prevention in high schools. The program awards three college credits, and students who have subsequently sought post-graduate placements have achieved a 100% admission rate.

Hunt comments, “The university has been exceptionally supportive of this trip with both scholarship funding and program development. I enjoy autonomy to develop and implement my program without impediment.”

The GCSU Foundation funds scholarships allocated for study abroad and other significant programs. Vice President for Advancement, Seth Walker is now in his third fiscal year and is responsible for enhancing and administering the foundation. He collaborates directly with Cox as one of four Vice-Presidents that comprise the President’s most senior advisors and administrators.

With Walker at the university advancement helm, the endowment has grown to over \$65 million with nearly \$18 million of these funds generated during his first two years on campus. Walker points to his working relationship with Cox as a key ingredient in the growing foundation endowment. “She’s our best fundraiser. President Cox promotes and talks up the University at every opportunity, and it’s a much easier ask of impact donors now that Cathy’s in place,” Walker points out.

“First, GCSU is an easy place to love, and so are these students who are not only bright and committed, but are disproportionately nice,” Cox says as she smiles. “The atmosphere is affirming and supportive for them to reach for new areas of interest and develop new passions. That is the essence of a liberal arts college experience.”

“We want a culture of engagement with community and one another, not just potted plants hiding in the back of a lecture hall,” Cox continues. “We want students hungry to solve problems, open their eyes, go into neighborhoods and be front and center providing leadership for public good.”

While the small classroom allowing for direct personal contact with instructors is the incubator for this formula, Cox does not shrink from engaging in the student interaction role as well.



Her frequent campus presence engaging in ‘cell phone selfies’ with students as a connection is well known. However, actual individual counseling is testament to her authentic mantra of developing and supporting students.

She is particularly inclined to advise law school candidates on issues such as entry requirements, and school choices and expectations. Her accessibility also extended to a GCSU first-year student, who secured an interview with her as source material for a political science project. The now upper-class student, Lane Medders, aced the term paper with a 96 score.

By any measure, President Cathy Cox has aced her first four-year term at GCSU as a higher education leader and contributor in Georgia. If past predicts future, there will be much more to appreciate in the ongoing Cox mission of GCSU’s elevation as the nationally regarded and premier liberal arts school in Georgia. ★MLM

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