

Sonny Perdue Begins Term as Chancellor of the University System

September 23, 2022 | Local News



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Former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue spent his first day as Chancellor of the University System of Georgia on Friday, April 1, 2022, at Georgia Gwinnett College where he celebrated and invested Dr. Jann Joseph as the third president of GGC.

In 2005, while Perdue was governor of Georgia, he signed Senate Resolution 33 which allowed for the creation of GGC, the first new college in Georgia in over 100 years. Chancellor Perdue gave credit for GGC's creation to the former Senator, Don Balfour, an advocate for the Gwinnett community by identifying the need for a higher educational institution within Gwinnett county. In an exclusive interview with The Globe, Chancellor Perdue described what it felt like coming to GGC's campus and seeing the fruits of his labor.

"It was amazing. To see [GGC] literally surpass all the visions we had for it. It's becoming more than a day campus, to have athletics and to have the student experience there for a full-fledged university.

Everyone who was a part of it, I think has a lot of pride. I am also encouraged by the fact there still seems to be strong community support,” said Chancellor Perdue.

Chancellor Perdue has had a long career in public service. He served in the Georgia Senate before serving two terms as Governor of Georgia. Then he served as Secretary of Agriculture under the Trump Administration. However, he considers his current position, “[the] capstone to his career in public service.”

“Capstones are usually symbolic in the fact that they put an exclamation point on life and I think this would be an exclamation point of a life fulfilled of what I view as one of the most important things we do; create energy and economic development and just change lives for the better,” expressed Chancellor Perdue.

Chancellor Perdue stated that, “Academic institutions should be about academic freedom, 1st amendment rights, freedom of speech, freedom of expression and letting the best ideas win. Not saying, No, you cannot believe that, [...] because that is not what America was built on. [America] was built on the Bill of Rights and all those other rights and privileges and the university should be the test bed for those ideas.”

About his role as Chancellor, Perdue said, “Respect comes from the top. Out of many opinions, cultures, backgrounds we become one nation; E Pluribus Union; Out of many, One. Challenging our precedent to create a culture of respect and freedom of expression and liberty of opinions on our campus can help enable civil discourse.”

Chancellor Perdue went on to explain his goals for students saying, “One of my goals would be to help students get out from their student debt where they can proceed with their lives, to move forward with the things they wanted to do post-graduation. The elimination of special institutional fees means dollars in the pockets of students. Affordability is really key.”

“Give [students] options about what possibilities are out there to make college more affordable.”

He also mentioned that he wanted a more integrated advisory system within K-12, helping students pursue the most efficient path through college through the use of dual enrollment or enlisting in the National Guard or Active duty military to help cut costs.

For the first time in decades, enrollment among universities has declined. Perdue attributed the decline to the economy, pandemic and a demographic shift, acknowledging the decline as a challenge.

“Kids can walk out of high school and make \$20 an hour. They look and say ‘Why should I pay you to get a degree when I can make \$20 an hour?’ I think [the pandemic] affected mental health, people are more anxious about coming to college. [The pandemic] tilted the decisions to go into the workplace.”

“There is a demographic shift, we’re having less students graduating from high school so there is less of a pool to draw from. It’s a buyers’ market out there from a student's perspective. That’s why each institution has to be intentional about marketing to students, [and] we got to be intentional about reaching out and reaching down and marketing the benefits of a college education. Where there are underserved populations, we need to be more aggressive in recruiting and helping kids in those areas know the benefits of higher education.”

Chancellor Perdue would not say what specific conservative values he wished to push upon the university system. Instead, he spoke in broad terms about “divisive concepts being taught and cancel culture.”

“[The] social unrest we see, a lot of that is taking place on the campuses. It’s not free speech if it’s only good for some. I don’t have to agree with a speaker coming to a campus,” Chancellor Perdue said. “I ought to be able to speak my mind on whether I agree or disagree, but trying to prohibit, or inhibit that through protest or violence or other behavior that would not enable [the speaker] to continue is the kind of thing I am talking about.”

“Georgia as a whole spectrum of ideology is a relatively conservative state but has a wide spectrum. The fact is we got a lot of ideas out there, all I want the system to do is represent the state as whole giving an opportunity for any student regardless of their beliefs to be heard and respected in their views,” explained Chancellor Perdue.

Although the Board of Regents voted unanimously to appoint Sonny Perdue, age 75 to the Chancellor position, his appointment did not come without controversy. Critics of Sonny Perdue’s appointment claim that he does not have the qualifications due to his lack of higher leadership experience as well as his previous approach to education throughout his career.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission cautioned the Board of Regents that the selection process for the Chancellor position must “remain independent of outside influence and that the system’s “chief executive officer” must have “appropriate experience and qualifications” or risk losing accreditation barring students from receiving federal financial aid.

In the opening of his cover letter to the Board of Regents, Perdue states “ [he] did not pursue nor “wanted” the job as chancellor” however later in the letter he stated that “he told the Board of Regents that if they could find someone better, [Perdue] would celebrate, because as a grandparent of 14, he still had 12 grandchildren that [he] wanted to go to school in GA. If [the Board of Regents] thought [he] was [the best for the job] then [he] was willing to serve.”

Chancellor Perdue draws a salary of \$524,000 a year, placing him in the top 1% of all earners within the state of Georgia. He justified his salary by saying that students and faculty can expect him “to do his best and to work really hard to make [the university system] the best in the country. To empower [students and faculty] to be all that they can be, hopefully provide resources and the advocacy for the university system to the general assembly, public and private funders.”

When asked about how Chancellor Perdue planned on empowering and advocating for students and faculty, Chancellor Perdue mentioned solutions but also said “the university system was not immune to the challenges of modern day higher education. These are challenging times not only with the pandemic but with the culture revolution [...] There needs to be some stability to help guide the state’s values and policies through higher education.’

The Board of Regent members serve seven year terms and are appointed by Gov. Kemp, with the appointments often going to top donors and supporters. However, two of the former members of the Board of Regents terms expired at the beginning of January and Gov. Kemp replaced those members with two members who were supportive of Perdue’s appointment.

Then due to the congressional redistricting process, two more members lost their positions and the governor replaced one of those people with a member who was supportive of the governor and his appointment of Perdue. In total, five members were replaced. Perdue also has members on the Board that he had appointed during his term as governor.

Students criticized Gov. Kemp's appointment of Perdue and created a group called Students Against Sonny, collecting over a thousand signatures on a petition on Change.org. Faculty members across the University system also wrote letters expressing their opposition to Perdue's appointment.

Chancellor Perdue responded that critics "would have to ask those questions to the Board of Regents. There were 19 members and a unanimous vote. Apparently, they had well qualified people who were interested in the job and I was selected. I was honored and appreciated the opportunity. As far as I can tell, it was very much a process that was as pure as it should have been and unencumbered by politics."

Aside from his lack of higher education leadership experience, many are concerned over his denial of man-caused climate change. Chancellor Perdue accused the DC media for being antagonistic towards his views and claimed they would characterize his answers as "I don't believe in climate change."

However, in an interview with CNN, Perdue said "we don't know" the causes of climate change and obviously scientists- many scientists believe it's human caused, other scientists believe it's not."

Perdue is also accused of attempting to allegedly limit the circulation of evidence of climate change and the increased danger of human-caused climate change, according to Politico during his time as Secretary of Agriculture. He has denied this allegation.

With colleges actively researching and encouraging students to combat the effects of man caused climate change, Chancellor Perdue had this to say:

"Climate is changing, it has been changing. We can do things irrespective of if we believe man was the cause. There are mitigating things we can do, that we ought to be doing, to help extend the life and benefit of the planet. We have a responsibility of being good stewards and helping sequester carbon. Get the truth, get the facts. We can be problem solvers. If we can be problem solvers of how to enact better methods or practices that can benefit mankind, that is what we ought to be about."

Students and faculty showed concern that Perdue did not resign his cabinet position as Secretary of Agriculture, unlike some of former President Trump's other cabinet members after the deadly insurrection on the capitol on January 6th leaving 7 people dead including multiple officers. The negative optics when Perdue continued to work for a man who attempted to lead a coup against his own country caused questions about the impact of how students, faculty, and others employed by the university system would approach working with Perdue.

"I was not involved at all. I had a job to do as Secretary of Agriculture. I had a department. I was committed to serve out my term, which I did, just as I will here. [I will] do my best to serve with dignity, respect and empower our institutions to be all they can be for our state," Chancellor Perdue defended.

"I think [people will approach me differently] until they get to know me. When they get to know me they're gonna find me to be a very open person who is willing to engage them on any issue, any

questions. Recognize that we won't always agree, but we can understand one another and go forward from there," Chancellor Perdue said.