

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT EMORY UNIVERSITY



UNIVERSITY SENATE ADDRESS

Remarks as Prepared

Gregory L. Fenves, President, Emory University

Thank you, Giacomo, and good afternoon to the members of the Senate and all those who are watching online.

Carmel and I have been at Emory for about eight months now, and from the very start, we were warmly welcomed by the Emory family.

Eight months is a short time for a university founded 185 years ago, and really, a short amount of time for anything important — except for delivering an inaugural address. I was planning to do this talk last September, but because of all we are going through, it felt too soon. I needed to listen. I needed to understand all that makes Emory distinct. And we all needed to get through some of the most difficult days in our university's history.

And when it was suggested I should give some sort of celebratory opening address as president last year, well, it felt kind of like those famous words from that iconic Georgia band R.E.M. — whose guitarist went to Emory for a little while — the opening lines of their most popular song, which go . . . “Oh life, is bigger / It's bigger than you.”

I think all of us in our own way have felt those words ring true in our lives throughout the past year.

When more than half a million people have died in this country — and millions more around the globe — because of a devastating pandemic. When Black women and men are killed in the streets and in their homes. When Asian Americans are targeted. And when — despite all of the loss and injustice, all of the changes in our lives — people across this land, and nowhere more so than here at Emory, pull together and put every ounce of themselves into transcending tragedy and adversity to heal us so we can continue on.

In a year such as this, I think we all see that, yes, life is bigger than we ever imagined.

But still, at the same time, with the gravity of this historic moment, we also found ourselves looking inward a whole lot, experiencing our lives in a different form — at home.

And about my new home: One of the first things I experienced when Carmel and I arrived in Atlanta were the trees. Snaking and tall and wrapping around the campus. The Georgia Piedmont forests in the hills of the city are an unmistakable embodiment of the region's majestic beauty.

And those trees have a special significance at Emory. They have been planted for generations in celebration, in commemoration, and used as a marker of both achievement and loss.

So, with that tradition in mind, when we return to campus this fall and bring our students, faculty and staff back to learn, teach and discover, we will be planting two trees — one on the Quad of the Atlanta campus and one on the Quad of the Oxford campus — to honor the resilience of the Emory community.

We will make this gesture for the Classes of 2020, 2021 and all of our students who, in spite of unbelievable adversity, adapted, persevered and met the moment.

We will do this for the nurses, doctors and researchers who treated thousands of patients, developed a vaccine in record time, and made sure that others got the care they desperately needed.

We will do this for the frontline workers — the Emory staff members in facilities and groundskeeping, the IT experts, the administrative staff, the designers and communicators, the police officers and many more — who dedicated themselves like never before to keep our campus running in the midst of the pandemic.

We will do this for the faculty members, who built new virtual classrooms while continuing to make extraordinary creative works and deliver world-changing research.

We will do this for our alumni, who rallied for Emory and answered the call time and again to serve.

And we will do this for the city of Atlanta, a place that anchors us, made up of individuals and organizations that we have partnered with during the crisis, emerging together, stronger and reinvigorated.

You might ask: Just two trees to symbolize all of that? It would take a forest to adequately capture this year! But, you know, a forest starts with one tree and then a second, and then it grows from there, and that's the spirit we want guiding us in the months ahead — one step, one kind moment, one action at a time — on the road not only to a return to campus, but to reimagining and reinventing.

One of the many things that drew me to Emory is the mission of the university: to create, preserve, teach and apply knowledge in the service of humanity. These words capture the distinctive ethos of Emory.

Create: When COVID-19 swept across the nation, this university was forced to create new knowledge and awareness about a highly infectious disease. This took many forms — from researchers like Dr. Nadine Rouphael, who made breakthroughs on the way

toward developing the Moderna vaccine, to Dr. Monique Smith, who served as an emergency physician throughout the crisis and who has emerged as a prominent thought leader in health equity.

Preserve: Three years ago, the Rollins School of Public Health and the CDC hosted a conference in commemoration of the 1918 flu pandemic that looked at the past as well as preparedness and prevention. This exemplifies how we have been studying, for many years, the histories that parallel the present moment, and that knowledge has positioned us to lead throughout this crisis.

Teach: From the moment our campus closed one year ago, our faculty and graduate instructors were given the challenge of a lifetime — to reinvent their pedagogies and find new ways of connecting with their students.

As only one example, Humanities Pathways — a joint initiative between Oxford and Emory College — was able to bring in prominent alumni speakers whose schedules and locations would typically have prevented them from traveling to Georgia to share their insights and inspire, and there are so many other schools, units, departments and individual faculty who found their own ways of taking the adversity and limitations of the last year and turning them into fresh opportunities for growth.

Apply: Our transition in response to COVID-19 was made possible because we have consistently applied our knowledge to keep our community healthy throughout the pandemic.

This semester, we have ramped up testing across campus, with students who live on campus taking twice-weekly tests.

With a focused execution and broad commitment from everyone at Emory, we have been able to weather surges in cases and keep the university open and healthy.

But we aren't across the finish line yet. And with new variants spreading and COVID-19 fatigue setting in, we have to remain dedicated to the health of the community as we navigate this final stretch of the pandemic.

I am confident that all students, faculty and staff will have the ability to receive vaccinations in the coming months. And I strongly encourage everyone at Emory to get vaccinated when you are eligible.

This will allow us to resume our mission on campus, with all faculty expected to be available for in-person teaching and research this fall. For staff, each school and division is shaping policies and plans for a return to campus, including options for flexible work where suitable.

But as we plan for tomorrow, we also need to take a look at ourselves and our values as a university.

Emory was founded in the American South before the Civil War on Muscogee lands. The legacy of human enslavement and subjugation is a part of Emory's history. This

was a segregated institution by law and tradition for a longer period of time than it has admitted African American students. And it changed because of the Civil Rights Movement, which had its heart right here in Atlanta. These truths are a part of our history. We must speak about them and understand them, and we must also realize that we have a responsibility to evaluate ourselves and continually make improvements as we move forward.

And before I even started, I saw this taking place at Emory in the form of a movement — a passionate plea for progress and change long overdue.

And this movement wasn't being led by administrators. It was led by our students who — in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and here in Georgia, Ahmaud Arbery and Rayshard Brooks — stepped forward to take action, to combat racism and to create a more just, inclusive and equitable Emory.

So, listening to our students, especially the Coalition of Black Organizations and Clubs, I committed to adopting the following measures:

- Recharging the Task Force on Untold Stories and Disenfranchised Populations, which is preparing recommendations to honor enslaved persons who built Emory, establish scholarships for their descendants, and acknowledge the contributions of Indigenous people, among other actions;
- Reappointing the Committee on Naming Honors to review contested historic names and consider other names for buildings and celebratory titles;
- Renovating identity spaces to provide a welcoming place for our students; and
- Leading a discussion on policing at Emory to build trust between the community and the Emory Police Department that protects and serves the campus.

The task force and committee have been meeting and carrying out their research, and before the end of the semester will deliver their reports to me. The student identity space renovations and planning for Cox Hall are underway. Emory has now joined the Universities Studying Slavery consortium, and the landmark research that Emory faculty members have produced related to racial and social justice has been impressive. Especially during this last year, they have been the leaders our nation has turned to time and again.

But this is not enough. For Emory to be a diverse, equitable and inclusive university, we have more to accomplish.

And to do this, I have asked Dr. Carol Henderson, vice provost for diversity and inclusion, to lead us. She has charged seven DEI Communities with helping to create a Strategic Plan that will be shared with the Emory community this coming fall.

We will have a dialogue, build a common understanding of our vision and values, and then plan for the years ahead with goals and processes in place that can keep us on track as we make meaningful progress for the future of Emory.

Because at Emory, through our actions, bold ideas, teaching, creativity, art, scholarship and community, we have the ability to create the future for ourselves, and from all that I have seen, it is no exaggeration to say that the future starts right here at Emory.

And much planning has been done. We have the foundation in the form of One Emory. But I've been asked what is One Emory? How do we make it a reality?

At its essence, One Emory is about putting students at the center of all we do. It's about research and creativity that is innovative and integrative. It's about a workplace where staff thrive, and it's about Emory's role as a vital thread in the interwoven fabric of the city of Atlanta.

When you study the past, look at the present and think about what's ahead of us, you know how complex the world is. History, culture, identity, economics, health and technology are brought together by individuals, institutions, governance and society in complex ways. To put it simply, real life isn't organized in the same neat way a university is!

A sociology graduate won't interact only with other sociologists. A public health graduate will work with individuals of all backgrounds — policymakers, elected officials and more. I could go on and on.

The structure of disciplines and organizations at the university, which has many advantages, can also create unnecessary barriers to collaboration. So, when I think of One Emory, I think about how we can enhance our teaching and research by reducing bureaucracy and incentivizing partnership so our faculty and students can explore the world as it is and how we want it to be — interactive, vibrant and inspiringly human.

The pandemic unexpectedly has led to new partnerships across the university, and there are many examples of interdisciplinary research and educational collaborations that have been conducted at Emory for years, but there's much more we can do to make it a fundamental part of who we are as a world-class university.

And we do that by pursuing and refining our primary mission of education, research and public service.

And it all starts with faculty.

Our faculty must be excellent and diverse, and those qualities are self-reinforcing. We have high expectations for faculty to become leaders in their fields to, in fact, define their disciplines and create change through advances in scholarship and creativity. In the classroom, outstanding teaching leads to deepened learning and the continued development of our students and new insights and discoveries by the faculty.

I want people to ask: What does Emory think? We want the research of our faculty and graduate students to be impactful and also at the vanguard, leading the way and intertwining with other disciplines.

And as we plan to strengthen our academic mission even more, incoming Provost Ravi Bellamkonda and I will partner with deans and the faculty to identify strategic opportunities to invest where Emory has unique advantages, opportunities and expertise. We will also invest in undergraduate education and our graduate and professional programs, which we must continue to elevate.

And we need to make more progress to increase the diversity of our faculty through recruitment, search processes and retention. And speaking of retention, we must enhance the way we support faculty throughout their careers so that we are a university where the best faculty come to grow and become leaders. Excellence, diversity and leadership are the key elements for the Emory faculty to be truly eminent.

Eminent faculty seek great students at all levels — undergraduate, graduate and professional. And great students want to come to a university with inspiring professors who can challenge and motivate them.

Emory College and Oxford College should be the first choice for talented students of all backgrounds from across the U.S. and around the world — the first choice.

But, how can we make the complete Emory experience a superlative one? The liberal arts education at Emory prepares each and every student for an enlightened life of citizenship and service. Education in the humanities, social sciences and the sciences empowers students and prepares them for a wide range of fulfilling careers and, for many, professional and graduate studies.

But at Emory, we have a problem: Too many of our undergraduates are not completing their degrees here. I know this is an issue the university has examined in depth, and many good ideas have been put forward.

And today, I am setting a goal that in three years, Emory will achieve 97% retention for first-year students. Our first-year retention has been as low as 93%. This may not sound like a big difference, but it is. Attaining a 97% first-year retention will have a major effect on our students and their experiences as they begin at Emory.

We recruit students before they come to our university, but I want to add to that idea by making sure we re-recruit every student once they have joined us, and we do this by providing outstanding, unparalleled first-year experiences, those life-changing moments at Emory when a student's world opens up and they realize all of the potential they have within them.

We made a huge pivot for first-year students in fall 2020, and we are doing it again for the students entering in fall 2021. The changes we've made during the pandemic have helped us learn a lot about the academic and non-academic needs of our students, which gives me great confidence that we can achieve this improvement in student success in a short amount of time.

At the graduate and professional school level, Emory is known for some of the finest programs in the country. But we can be even better.

Master's and doctoral students are the scholars and deep thinkers of the future who work closely with the faculty. And in addition to their advanced education and research, Emory must do more to build supportive and inclusive communities so graduate students can fulfill their goals and so that we address what can frankly be an

isolating experience for too many dedicated scholars. And we also have to improve time-to-degree, retention and placement after graduation.

At Emory, we have outstanding professional schools in Theology — our first professional school — Law, Business, Medicine, Nursing and Public Health. The reputation of a university is associated with the standing of its professional schools. And we have much to be proud of, but also more progress to make.

Professional school students come to Emory to learn from esteemed leaders who infuse theory, practice and craft with experience and mentoring to unlock the poetry of their disciplines and prepare students for professional careers of consequence.

As I've talked with the deans of the professional schools, a common concern has come up — the debt many students take on, particularly those who focus on public service and addressing the needs of underserved populations, is far too much.

This is a national problem, and the solutions will require resources and partnerships with dedicated alumni and supporters, and we're going to work together to take this problem on.

Finally, as we build upon One Emory, we must focus on our home in Atlanta, the vibrant, dynamic and diverse city that is much more than our location.

As a leading institution in this city, we have an obligation to serve and so many opportunities to collaborate and engage. It is a place to learn from and contribute to. It is where our ideas take shape and come to life. And I look forward to working with the faculty, our dedicated students, and of course, our incredible staff to grow Emory's connections in Atlanta.

And our staff have an important role in One Emory. Their talents enhance all functions of the university. We have so much to gain by working together, by building deeper partnerships and communicating more effectively, so that our staff are not only aligned as they do their vital work, but also inspiring one another and coming up with ideas to improve Emory.

So, these are the elements of One Emory that will define our future.

And now, at this pivotal moment for Emory, we will bring together our legion of dedicated donors and benefactors, alumni, community members and partners to achieve our ambitious plans.

Later this year, we will announce our vision for Emory's next comprehensive campaign, and I see the goals of the campaign as a North Star for Emory's future, a guiding force as well as a statement about our principles and values. This campaign will raise the resources to invest in our people — the success of our students and the eminence of our faculty — and it will define the future of undergraduate education, professional education and graduate study at a truly outstanding research university.

This will be a campaign for our future. This will also be a campaign to live up to our highest calling as a university “to create, preserve, teach and apply knowledge in the service of humanity.”

I’ll finish today with an observation. I started here amid a pandemic when I couldn’t meet with you, have meals and participate in your events and programs in person, and that has been frustrating.

But in a strange way, I feel like I’ve gotten the chance to see Emory from a different perspective than I normally would have. Ceremony and performance have been stripped away.

I’m in meetings now every day with staff and faculty who are in their living rooms, with students in their homes here on campus and around the world. Family members are walking by. Dogs are joining presentations. We are dressed casually within the view of the Zoom camera. I’ve been invited into your lives in a genuine way.

And I’ve been able to drop in on more classes and meetings and events, and in turn, I’ve gotten the chance to be inspired, to listen, to learn and to understand what makes Emory distinctive.

So, I’m glad for this unique opportunity I’ve had to get to know you all in this new way.

And with that spirit in mind, I’ll leave you now with profound words from Tayari Jones, Emory’s Charles Howard Candler Professor of English and Creative Writing, from her masterful novel “An American Marriage.”

“I don’t believe that blood makes a family.
Kin is the circle you create, hands held tight.”

For Carmel and me, it is the honor of our lives to be a part of Emory, and I look forward to the day not far from now when we can all greet each other in person, as a university, as the Emory family.

Thank you.