

Georgia Business #427

Guest: Mark Becker President Georgia State University

Richard Warner: Welcome, I'm Richard Warner and this week on Georgia's Business we welcome the new president of Georgia State University. Mark Becker came to Georgia by way of the University of South Carolina where he was in charge of academic affairs and at GSU he is overseeing a body of twenty- eight thousand, a billion dollar campus expansion and an economy that is putting extreme pressure on doing business. Congratulations on the job.

Mark Becker: Well thank you.

Richard Warner: You've been there long enough now, that you probably understand what you're up against, what's the biggest challenge you got?

Mark Becker: The biggest challenge is probably navigating in this economy in a period of which you know, the economy's floundering. There's decreases in tax collection therefore it cuts the state funding and so we have to balance a decreasing state support for the university at the same time the student demand is at a record pace.

Richard Warner: So it's not a matter of students paying for you know. You get more customers you can build more so all is well. The students don't cover the cost of doing business.

Mark Becker: Well not all, no the annual tuition, the share the student pays is just a fraction of the total cost of educating a student so it's a balancing act for us.

Richard Warner: And you knew that when you said yes, I'll take this job.

Mark Becker: Oh absolutely.

Richard Warner: And you still think you made the right chose?

Mark Becker: And I think I can help out.

Richard Warner: Well that 's interesting because you also at the University of South Carolina you were also had a roles in the financial side of USC. The experience that you've had in higher education as it applies to this, what do you do to try and balance those?

Mark Becker: Well of course the first thing is you have to be clear in what your priorities are, you know how are you trung to advance the institution, you have to be clear

that the students, you are going to maintain quality for students you don't want to give that up under any circumstances. So you look at what your resources are going to be and what you can do to improve the institution as well as make sure you don't do anything that would harm the institution.

Richard Warner: You and I were talking before we began about the budget which the way the university system works, you are presented with the budget that you will work with for the year ahead. Do you have opinions, do you have a say in once things get rolling how you operate?

Mark Becker: Well we were asked earlier in the year about how we think funds should be allocated to the extent that there's some parameters that within the board of regents office, I mean the chancellors office working with the board of regents will make decisions on how to allocate the funding that goes through them. And we were asked for some opinions but yeah so but at the end of the day we take what they give us and we work with it.

Richard Warner: January one, you started the job. When somebody starts a big job like that it is probably worth reviewing what's the most effective way to get started. What were some of the first things you did when you walked in the door that Monday morning?

Mark Becker: My approach to this position was to engage in what I call in an act of listening process. Every university has a story about itself a way it thinks about itself, it talks about itself and so what I did is that I engaged a large group of stakeholders, these meetings have now been completed, I did over thirty interviews, some with individuals some with groups such as our foundation board and athletic board. Other individuals would be faculty members, staff members, vice presidents, deans, other senior administrators, individuals outside the university some cooperate leaders some government leaders and went through a structured interview process asking a series of questions. What are the five things most important preserve about Georgia State University and why?

Richard Warner: What did you hear?

Mark Becker: Well I heard a variety of things, I think the top three things in the area of preserve would be A. the importance and the connection between Georgia State University and the city of Atlanta. That Georgia State's been, it's credited with and my predecessor Carl Patton has gotten alot of credit for building the university in a way that has helped to energize and revitalize downtown. And so that connection between the university and the city and the life of the city is very important to the institution. It's important for educational programs, important for our research programs and important for bringing problems that make for good research topics at the same time what we do then benefits the city in a way that has been economically energized downtown.

Richard Warner: You are coming in at an opportune time in the life of a business, in the life of a school to roll out a major new product that's in tremendous demand and it's a very exciting thing. And you're about to roll out something that's in tremendous demand.

Mark Becker: Must be football.

Richard Warner: Must be.

Mark Becker: How could I guess? Actually I've heard that's one of those things you hear a lot about. I was in Washington a few weeks ago to visit the members of the Georgia delegation. Representatives and senators, every office we visited, Georgia State Alum or not, is Georgia State going to have football?

Richard Warner: And honestly now, how do you feel about that?

Mark Becker: Well I'm excited about it.

Richard Warner: Well is the priority right Mark? I mean you know when there's lawmakers, there's a lot of passion about football in Georgia you know. When the eyes of university president is that the right passion to have?

Mark Becker: Well you have to realize that football is not going to be paid by tax payer dollars, it's being funded by student fees and philanthropy so we're not taking away from other parts of the university to do this.

Richard Warner: Student fees go up eighty-five bucks a year.

Mark Becker: And the students volunteered to do that, I mean they voted to do that so I think the priority was a shared priority of the students and of others, so I think it's fine to do that. We're not going to not do other things that are of high priority by doing football.

Richard Warner: For those not familiar you have Bill Curry, where are you going to play?

Mark Becker: We will play in the Georgia Dome.

Richard Warner: Sounds good to me. Will it be a, I realize you're not a profit institution, but is it a profitable thing? It is an expensive thing to do.

Mark Becker: Well you know there are models that were developed, you know Dan Reeves helped study whether or not this was economically feasible and I don't think anybody is predicting massive profits but it is doable and we will do it.

Richard Warner: And from bringing people together that's students and faculty and supporters and so forth I would imagine that that is probably more important than your one loss record is what this does to the fabric of the university.

Mark Becker: Well you know one thing you can look at right now is our applications for next year, up twenty-five percent . Twenty-five percent year to date for freshman fall admits. Everybody else in the state of Georgia is either up a small single digit percentage or even a few institutions are down. Part of that but not all of it but part of it I think is football, the recognition that Georgia State University is really a university on the move, there's a buzz at Georgia State' part of it is around football part of it's about the addition of on campus housing so students that want to have that experience of living at a university with a full compliment of athletic programs as well as student programs as well as academic programs can now get that at Georgia State.

Richard Warner: You were a researcher, back in the beginning, in fact you were a specialist in public health preparedness, emergency response and bio statistics.

Mark Becker: Yes, everybody's favorite course.

Richard Warner: What's bio statistics?

Mark Becker: The application of statistics to health problems or health issues.

Richard Warner: And so you go from this very scientific application of your career into what is my question, fund raising to what extent are you plugged in and responsible for growing the money side of the school?

Mark Becker: I think it would be accurate to say that's what people expect me to do and that's what I expect me to do. It's an important part of being a president. Whether I did bio statistics or not which is generally considered an egghead discipline, I'm a people person. And I have been a people person my whole life.

Richard Warner: Now that's hard to find. An egghead who is a people person.

Mark Becker: Well, but there's not that many university presidents out there either.

Richard Warner: That's right.

Mark Becker: I ended up in the right place perhaps.

Richard Warner: And when you go about raising money like this, I mean the dollars can be staggering where do you look. I presume you have people help you in that endeavor, find the right places.

Mark Becker: Yes, there are people that are interested in Georgia State that are associated with the institution that were involved in the study to see if this would work.

And people have said 'we will step up and do this'. And there other people in the community that are, have become interested in Georgia State because of the addition of football. We have a list of people and it's an ever-growing list and if you have some people you know that are of means and would like to support football at Georgia State I would be happy to take their names when we're done.

Richard Warner: Okay we need them to pledge first for GPB TV and then we need them to pledge to Georgia State University. What are you going to do with the money?

Mark Becker: The money that people give for football?

Richard Warner: Yes, well not football but just overall? Football money is for football right? I mean that supports it self, it's self contained.

Mark Becker: You always use the money where the donor directed the money. And that's an important part. When people give, particularly large gifts of money they have some say in where the money goes, some people give money for scholarships, some people give money for buildings other people give money for faculty research and some give for athletics and so we use it where they'll give it. We have needs in all those areas and we fund raise in all of those areas.

Richard Warner: How much expansion can you do? A billion dollars in construction that's going on but a finite amount of space in downtown Atlanta, so how do continue to grow the physical plant?

Mark Becker: Well you're ever vigilant for opportunities and in a down economy there are some silver linings and one silver lining in a down economy is some people have property available that perhaps the need access to cash.

Richard Warner: And that would allow the school then to expand geographically, does it expand beyond downtown Atlanta? Will you wind up with satellite campuses?

Mark Becker: Well we already have some satellites. We have a satellite up in Alpharetta...

Richard Warner: You have the masters' thing going on

Mark Becker: Right. Exactly, so we have some of our, particularly some of our business programs are in outlining areas already but the core of the campus will always be downtown and the primary growth will always be downtown the programs out in the peripheral will be more of an executive or continuing education nature.

Richard Warner: Let's go back to when you got hired. Who calls who?

Mark Becker: Generally the way it works in this business is a head hunter calls the candidates. Executive search firm, excuse me ..

Richard Warner: Oh yes, they make more than head hunters.

Mark Becker: We call them head hunters but it's an executive search firm.

Richard Warner: So they call you in Columbia, South Carolina, that call comes in '08?

Mark Becker: I think it was August '08, September '08 somewhere around there.

Richard Warner: And we have an opportunity and we've targeted you perhaps as one of the people that we think is a good candidate.

Mark Becker: Yes now in all honesty there's probably been at least one or more calls before of somebody saying Mark I want you to know I've nominated you for this and so you should expect a call from the head hunter and that's the search firms when they go out to build a candidate pool, we say it's the language, they get nominations and so I was told to expect a call and the call came.

Richard Warner: They begin the vetting process

Mark Becker: You mean the search firm?

Richard Warner: The University or in tandem.

Mark Becker: Well there's a sequence that happens and so the first thing is that they have to build a candidate pool and then a search committee typically and in this case a search committee would go through the candidate pool and start narrowing the candidate pool. The vetting goes on all along the way in the sense that the committee that's engaged in the search will be looking at the candidates but in presidential searches things are kept fairly quiet at that stage.

Richard Warner: Did you let USC know that this was going on? Did you let your current employer know?

Mark Becker: Yes, I don't surprise my boss and so he was aware, the president at that time was aware that I was being considered.

Richard Warner: Supportive?

Mark Becker: Yes.

Richard Warner: And you go through this, you probably begin googling Georgia State University to find out every thing you can about the interview process.

Mark Becker: That's part of it, yes.

Richard Warner: When you get in front then of your committee the people for the first interview how did that go? How did you prepare for that?

Mark Becker: Well the interview that you go through for a presidency is very similar to the interview you go through for a dean ship, for a prov ship or for the executive vice president of academic affairs. So in a sense you have practiced this before. There are certain questions that get asked all the time and I think that the most important other part is just be yourself.

Richard Warner: The questions that they ask you is not the where do you want to be in five year kind of variety. They are probably looking for a real concrete understanding of the school and well in fact what they said, the regents said after they went through this interview process with you was that they were very impressed with your thoughts about GSU's future. What were those thoughts?

Mark Becker: I can't tell you exactly what they were. I don't remember exactly what I said.

Richard Warner: I'm just wondering where you see the school going.

Mark Becker: Certainly I think the conversation very much revolved around GSU and it's location in Atlanta being a rising urban research university. In the United States of America our flag ship institutions as referred to most states, were founded as land grant institutions, University of Georgia in this state. Not always land grants but in many states, Penn State and University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin, ect.. Those institutions were founded in the 1860's and really have flourished since the second world war in particular. They were very important before the second world war but post second world war those institutions have grown in size and grown in stature. And I think a good part of the conversation we had about in the twenty-first century the urban universities like Georgia State that were really founded in the twentieth century are now coming into their own. You know the United States is going through really an urbanization and weather you listen to David Brooks or Richard Florida or any of these people that are commenting on the change in demographics and the changing geo-demographics of the U.S. we're becoming a more urbanized country and universities like Georgia State are going to become more and more important to their cities and their states during this process in terms of student interest will grow as we're seeing the research that will take place and it's relevance, you know the land grants were built around an agrarian society and were very important to the advancement of the U.S. during that period. Now our urban universities like Georgia State are going to very important for the twenty-first century and this shift and transition we're going through right now.

Richard Warner: You may have answered it but why lead then with research as opposed to the students? Is it because does the research pay in ways that student enrollment doesn't?

Mark Becker: Well it's not an or it's an and. It's never an or. My entire life as you mentioned earlier, I started as a researcher in a research university you don't separate education and research you blend them. And so for an institution like ours where the faculty is engaged in research and in education the students have several unique advantages. One is for that students that actually want to get to the cutting edge, the leading edge of their field they have the opportunity to work with faculty and research, doing undergraduate research experiences. Also, when a faculty member comes into the classroom, they're more current than the text book. Because they're working in the field. And textbooks are great things and text books get revised but having a faculty member who literally wakes up thinking about this discipline, goes to bed thinking about it, not only how am I going to teach it but how am I going to push back the frontiers of knowledge. That's the extra value added for the student.

Richard Warner: Do you have to pick then on a vertical or two the Georgia State we'll focus on moving forward when it comes to research or are you just research?

Mark Becker: Well do you mean in terms of areas of research?

Richard Warner: Do you have to pick your market?

Mark Becker: There will be times in which when there's more money around and you can invest in new areas, you have to pick. There's certain areas of the university that are already established. Meaning we have a business school, we have a law school we have Andrew Young school of policy studies, we have health and human sciences, we have education, arts and sciences. So the research we do will be in those areas. You will build on where you are already strong, you look for opportunities where your faculty can innovate, can really have a big impact. And so when you are in a growth phase where you can be adding faculty, you look at how to take what you have and build on that strength with additional recruitments. Whether you're bridging disciplines because there are new areas actually coming up, it's not a static world. It's a dance, it's a matter of being opportunistic and a matter of building where you are, you don't get to start with a blank slate.

Richard Warner: We joke that is we old people who went to universities and had no trouble getting in back in the seventies. That we could not get into those universities today because perhaps because HOPE raised the bar and the kids are smarter and their test scores are better and they study more. Is that going to leave some kids behind?

Mark Becker: No. That's a good question and you hear this a lot and actually over my career it's been ironic, I've been offered jobs that wouldn't take me as a student. They

wanted to hire me as a faculty member, they wanted me to teach their students, they wanted me to do research under their banner but they would have never taken me as a freshman. Which I always thought was ironic. To answer your question, no students aren't getting left behind, one of the interesting parts of higher education in America is it's not a tightly coupled system. Meaning we don't control it, we have a state board of regions over thirty- five institutions but we also have technology systems, we have private institutions. There's a place for every student in America. There is a place for every single student. Not every student may get to go to his or her first choice but as myself as an eighteen year old, I wasn't clear on what I wanted to do. I actually started in a community college trying to figure out is this what I wanted to do with my life. And from that I found my way to completing two years in a community college to a state institution that did not have doctoral programs. It was Towson State University in Baltimore Maryland. It was a commuter school, primarily undergraduate about ten thousand students at that time, twenty thousand today. But their the love of learning and the love of really wanting to go the frontiers of my particular area got ignited. From there I went to the big research university and that's just one example. Any student who wants to get an education, assuming they can work out the finances and it's all price ..

Richard Warner: That' s the second half of the question. There's the academic piece, was my test score high enough were my grades good enough to get in. But then you get to this whole economic crunch, can I afford to go?

Mark Becker: Well again, there are many different price points in the market starting with the two year institutions and the vast majority can. And in fact we've got Pell grants, we've got other forms of student aid available in the President Obama's stimulus package, they actually increased the money in Pell grants, which is for low income students to actually get assistance, a direct grant to go to school. So, yes the vast majority of folks can get access to higher education.

Richard Warner: I'm not getting any red flags from you about the future of HOPE financing which so many Georgia students pin their hopes on.

Mark Becker: I have not heard of any significant changes in the immediate future.

Richard Warner: You also mentioned that students, and this hits home, my daughter goes to Georgia State so I'm talking to the boss here. There is the ability for a student now even in this intense competitive situation to change their mind or to have not have made up their mind. The system will accommodate so much academic pressure to perform and decide. There's a way to operate the way we did which is I have no idea of what I want to do.

Mark Becker: Well I think that's the beauty of American higher education. In many nations in the world you 're literally programmed from about the age of ten or twelve, meaning you get tested very early in some of the European countries and if you test you get sent off in the tracks. You take a system like myself, like many kids, you're seventeen, eighteen, you don't know exactly what you want to do. I actually changed

majors in the middle of my junior year until I finally settled on what I wanted to do and everything went swimmingly. I still got out in four years, I was still able to go onto graduate school without missing a beat. The way that education is structured in this country is unique but it is a model that nations all over the world, the European Union Nations have looked at very carefully and have studied as they try to come with their own system for the EU as opposed to individual nations. Many of the Asian nations are very interested in our model because our model has a flexibility to it that not only allows people upward mobility but it also seems to feed creativity that we actually in our system of education part of it is having that liberal arts foundation that we have. We actually bring people through various disciplines and it really is a system with it's flexibility and it's firm support of a general education feeds a tremendously creative economy as well as a work force and populous.

Richard Warner: That daughter I was mentioning that goes to Georgia State just transferred from South Carolina so she's following your career path. I would be interested to see where you go next.

Mark Becker: You're going to hold me accountable for that?

Richard Warner: My observation about South Carolina as it relates to Georgia. Georgia has the HOPE scholarship, it's been around long enough that it's had a tremendous impact on enrollment, on students, on the quality, raising the bar, South Carolina just got that relatively recently and my impression of USC, I mean no criticism at all was that is was so much I hate to use the word poorer school financially than say University of Georgia or Georgia State. Did these HOPE scholarship programs, these lottery funded initiatives are they going to change the face of education where ever they pop up?

Mark Becker: Well there's more to it than that because the program in the state of South Carolina is fundamentally different than the program in the state of Georgia. In the state of Georgia it's tide to tuition. The HOPE scholarship pays your tuition. Okay and that therefore has kept tuition in the state of Georgia at a moderate level. In the state of South Carolina the scholarships are for a fixed dollar amount and so what's happen is that the state has not kept pace with tuition. The institutions have kept increasing the tuition.

Richard Warner: Sure as they do.

Mark Becker: And the state of South Carolina, I think it's well known that tuition at the University of South Carolina is much higher than the University of Georgia. But is you look at the combination of lottery scholarship money, no excuse me not the lottery scholarship money, state funding and tuition because the way it gets collected in South Carolina is through tuition. Because the money goes to the student as a fixed amount and they pay it in tuition. When you look at the combined state contribution and the student contribution in South Carolina, it's significantly less than when you do the same thing in the state of Georgia. Actually, I wrote about bed piece in the Columbia paper about this a couple of years ago because of the all the nash of teeth over tuition. The state of North

Carolina funds higher education at the highest level. In this region, Georgia's second and then South Carolina third and the gap's between Georgia and South Carolina are substantial.

Richard Warner: So is your impression that Georgia's doing it right?

Mark Becker: I think Georgia has done better, they've done well. It's a limited resource environment, it's you know we would always like to be able to do more because you like to be able to do even better, weather if it's more students or even give them more high quality opportunities. But Georgia has done a good job, I think the important thing going forward is not to lose track of what's been accomplished.

Richard Warner: Looking forward, we have you back five years from today, what's Georgia state going to look like compared to today?

Mark Becker: I think we'll probably be a little bit bigger. I think it's just inevitable that the state of Georgia's growing, demand for places in our student body are growing. If we manage it well in terms of the resources , the land, having money for the faculty, I think we can get a little bit bigger and continue to grow and meet demand. And I think we will be better, I think we will be very strategic and focused on raising the bar on what we do in terms of everything, research, teaching, and the way we engage with the community.

Richard Warner: No regrets taking the job?

Mark Becker: None at all, not at all.

Richard Warner: Mark Becker is the new president at Georgia State University, been in the job a matter of weeks if not months, congratulations.

Mark Becker: Thank you.

Richard Warner: And thanks for being with us. And thank you for watching. You can catch a replay of our broadcast in Atlanta on the radio it's WCFO that's at 1160 AM and you can also listen to this broadcast, the audio of it on itunes. Just go to itunes and do a search on Georgia's Business. You can also sound off to me directly at richardwarner.com. And now for all of us here at Georgia Public Broadcasting, I'm Richard Warner, thanks for watching us and until we meet again, next week, don't sell yourself short.