“Let’s Look a Little Further”

The time has come to say farewell to Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher, fifth president of Georgia Perimeter College. It’s time also to reflect on her decade of leadership that has placed Georgia Perimeter among the prominent two-year institutions of higher education. by Kysa Daniels

As secretary to the president of Georgia Perimeter College, Barbara Price has witnessed a great deal of interaction between Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher and students. She especially remembers the time last year, when Belcher “jumped through hoops” to get a student enrolled in classes at GPC just days before the fall semester began.

The student had experienced an unfortunate incident during her first semester at another school, and was having problems with enrollment at Georgia Perimeter. She and her mother made a special twelfth-hour appeal to Belcher.

“The mother was anxious, yet continued to have hope that the president would understand her daughter’s unusual circumstance,” Price says. And Belcher did just that. Price says this story is characteristic of the extraordinary effort she has watched Belcher pour into not only students, but faculty, staff and community as well. “Her take always is, ‘Well, let’s look at this a little further.’”

It is this type of energetic spirit, on the part of both Belcher and the college community, that has moved GPC dramatically forward during the past 10 years. In 1995, after becoming Georgia Perimeter’s fifth president, Belcher embarked upon an aggressive mission to position the school as one of the nation’s pre-eminent two-year colleges and promised a “journey filled with excitement, challenges and opportunities.” It came quickly.

“During Dr. Belcher’s first few years as president, there were many major changes,” recalls Dr. Sallie Paschal, chief operating officer of GPC’s Rockdale Center and GPC’s soon-to-be-built Newton Campus. “We changed our name, went through semester conversion and decentralized our operation. Looking back, I believe Dr. Belcher was very successful in guiding us through this tough period.”

On June 30 Belcher will end her decade-long tenure as GPC president, just as the college winds down from a yearlong celebration of its 40th anniversary. She retires after an overall 33-year run in higher education and with the satisfaction of achieving her goal to place Georgia Perimeter among the top postsecondary institutions in the country.

“Dr. Belcher has served Georgia Perimeter College – the third largest institution in the University System – with distinction on the statewide and national levels,” says University System of Georgia chancellor Dr. Thomas C. Meredith. “For an entire decade, she has led the college’s growth and expansion, while maintaining its commitment to academic excellence and access.”

Indeed, Belcher has presided during a period of exponential development and inventive change at the college. Throughout it all, she has emphasized the philosophy of “students first” and the concept of doing “the common things uncommonly well.” And, when accolades are attributed to her, she promptly calls attention to GPC’s faculty and staff members.
This is a time for bringing people around one table to share in the fruits of our labor,” she says. “These are GPC’s achievements, and it’s about each one of us.”

That said, Belcher’s retirement, coupled with GPC’s 40 years of existence, presents a particularly good opportunity to assess exactly what has happened during the 10 years of her presidency. It also has prompted a look back at her vision for the college, which she expressed in her 1996 inaugural address when she stated: “We are a two-year community liberal arts college, the kind of institution that not only teaches our national values, but practices them: access, inclusion, opportunity, merit and quality.” The following pages highlight more of Belcher’s inaugural thoughts, which give present-day context to the goals set and accomplishments achieved.

We will miss her dynamism, her energy and her vision – both within the University system and at Georgia Perimeter College.

Dave R. Pierce
President Emeritus
American Association of Community Colleges

Her willingness to extend herself to others as a teacher, mentor, and role model for women in general and women of color in particular, is remarkable. She has been on a mission to train future leaders of the community college arena for decades.

Thomas C. Meredith
Chancellor
The University System of Georgia

The newspapers have reported that this occasion represents several firsts…”

Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher,
Inaugural Address, May 3, 1996

Belcher, a Missouri native who considers Seattle home, recalls being a somewhat reluctant recruit for the president’s post at GPC. But, a bit of Southern hospitality and a single meeting with the 22-member hiring committee changed her position.
“During that interview, I felt like I was home in my living room entertaining people and having a nice conversation,” she says. Belcher, whose experience includes five years as president of Minneapolis Community College, 15 as a professor and administrator at Washington’s Bellevue Community College and several as a psychiatric nurse/psychotherapist, also made quite an impression on the committee. Her hire in 1995 ended a two-year search and sparked a new era not only at the college, but within the entire University System of Georgia. Belcher had become the system’s first minority female president and first minority president of a non-minority institution.

During her May 1996 inaugural speech at the Atlanta Civic Center, she joked about the “personal firsts” the appointment represented for her. “[It is] the first time I’ve worked in a place where people call me ‘ma’am’; the first time I did more business on an interstate highway than in my office during the course of a normal day; and the first time I’ve lived in a place where intelligent people completely forget how to drive if it begins to snow.”

Former USG chancellor Dr. Stephen Portch, who appointed Belcher, today praises her decade of progressive leadership. “From nurse, to lawyer, to educator, Jacquee is a natural leader and a complete professional,” he says.

The president’s dedication to pursuing excellence is aptly illustrated by Dr. Dennis Harkins, provost of Clarkston Campus. “When I interviewed for the provost position, Dr. Belcher visited my previous college and interviewed two former presidents, two vice presidents, four deans, five faculty members and four advisory board members,” remembers Harkins. “At the end of the day, she knew more about me than my mother.”

“Education does not exist apart from the world, in some parallel dimension or remote tower; rather, it takes place in the wider community.”

– Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher, Inaugural Address, May 3, 1996

From the beginning, Belcher had very specific ideas about what the connection between GPC and the community should be. Reorganization was a top priority. The president decentralized college operations and placed provosts on four campuses, with the express purpose of building community. The objective today is consistent with what Belcher described when she first instituted the governance change in the mid ’90s.

“The college must become one with its community,” she said in an early address to faculty and staff. “The community needs to understand that the college belongs to the people. We at the college need to understand that as well. Whenever a significant meeting is held in one of our communities about its growth and development, Georgia Perimeter College must be at the table.”
Decentralization, which gives provosts the flexibility and authority to develop programs and initiatives that serve communities best, has led to an array of collaborations that marry education and practical application. Campuses partner with local elementary schools to provide unique learning experiences for GPC students as well as the schoolchildren; the nursing program, located at Clarkston and Lawrenceville campuses, partners with hospitals to give nursing students clinical training and provide qualified employees to address the nursing shortage; the Dunwoody dental hygiene program joins other institutions in providing dental care to elementary children.

“Dr. Belcher will be most remembered for empowering the campuses to interact and uniquely serve their surrounding communities,” says Harkins.

GPC has dramatically expanded its outreach to diverse populations in the community. The Hispanic Healthcare Initiative, a three-way partnership among GPC, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund and the Hospital Corporation of America, Southeast Division, is a good example. The initiative aims to increase the number of Hispanic nurses and other professionals by providing scholarships in the nursing program.

To better serve the international population in communities adjacent to GPC campuses, the Clarkston Campus, along with Continuing Education, recently spearheaded the creation of the Center for International Language and Culture. Among other functions, the CILC will provide tutorial and social support for international students and support for the international business community. It will outreach to refugee and immigrant communities. Similarly, a partnership with The Lost Boys Foundation provides 12 scholarships to Sudanese refugees orphaned by civil war.

Other partnerships include the college’s nationally-acclaimed Sign Language Interpreting program, which received a big boost last year when the Coca-Cola Foundation, along with a matching grant from the state’s Equipment Technology in Construction Trust Fund, underwrote the creation of a state-of-the-art sign language interpreting lab. The interpreting program addresses the growing need for qualified interpreters for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. Its students rave over the new technology.

In fall 2003 Georgia Perimeter launched its criminal justice degree program on Clarkston Campus in partnership with the DeKalb County Police Department, which seeks to employ a greater number of educated officers. Upon receiving the degree, students enroll in the police academy or transfer to study for a four-year degree in criminal justice.

More recently, the college unveiled the Center for Service-Learning, which partners with local organizations to facilitate volunteer opportunities for faculty, staff and students. “All GPC volunteers serve as ambassadors of the college as they work to improve the lives of those in their own neighborhoods,” says Dr. Napolita Hooper, who directs the initiative. Faculty members are working with Hooper to incorporate community service into the curriculum.

Georgia Perimeter also has conveyed its commitment to community with its Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday Celebration, initiated by Belcher in 1997. The event attracts thousands of attendees and notable speakers, such as Maya Angelou, James Earl Jones, Phylicia Rashad and Danny Glover. In addition, there is an ever-expanding list of partnerships between the college and a variety of corporate, civic and educational organizations designed to address needs of the college and businesses in the community.
Dear Jacquelyn,

I am delighted to congratulate you on your retirement as President of Georgia Perimeter College.

There is no more demanding profession than yours and none that is more rewarding. You have dedicated yourself to empowering America’s students with the knowledge, values, and skills they need to achieve personal and professional success. You have made lasting contributions in higher education.

I know your dedication will be well remembered by the many people whose lives you have touched over the years. Best wishes for every future happiness.

Sincerely,

Bill Clinton
In short, Belcher believes the best way to prepare students is by example. In this regard, she, and GPC as a whole, have been leaders. Belcher also believes adequate preparation requires adopting a customer service attitude of putting “students first.”

It’s more than just a catchy tagline. And, sometimes it requires a personal touch from the president herself. Belcher remembers meeting with a 13-year-old home-schooled student and his parents, who wanted him to continue his education at GPC. The president initially had reservations about the boy’s preparedness, although he was academically advanced. Yet, after meeting with the family, Belcher says she felt confident of the teen’s potential for success. The student enrolled at GPC. “She really took the time to listen to those parents and try to help that particular student,” recalls Price.

“How do we prepare students for the global society?”

Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher, Inaugural Address, May 3, 1996

As its student population is rapidly diversifying, Georgia Perimeter College provides many special programs to help international students adjust to American culture. Below, from left, Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher, Lew Belcher and coach Alfred Barney board a bus bound for the state’s two-year college basketball tournament. Dr. Belcher also attended the women’s tournament that weekend.
Under her leadership, Georgia Perimeter has promoted the “students first” concept through a vast array of programs and services. It has instituted the award-winning Navigating the Academic Waters freshman orientation program; piloted a class scheduling system that will reduce the work of academic departments and better meet student scheduling needs; and developed the Campus Pipeline web platform, which will integrate existing databases for various student services, allowing students and faculty to access a single log-on page for previously unlinked information.

GPC’s Leadership Academy, supported by community partnerships, targets underserved students, focusing on ways to increase their numbers among college graduates. Academy participants study in learning communities, a growing trend at GPC and among the nation’s colleges. Learning communities enable a group of students to take courses and progress through the curriculum together as a means of integrating them into collegiate life and improving study habits.

Georgia Perimeter’s Gateway to College Academy, a program aimed at addressing the high school dropout rate, is one of the latest programs geared toward putting “students first.” The charter school, which opens this fall in affiliation with DeKalb County schools, will serve 16-to-20-year-old dropouts by giving them a second chance at a high school diploma while at the same time earning credits toward a college degree. Such programs underscore GPC’s commitment to accessibility.

“Anything we do, we really strive to make sure that we can answer the question, ‘Am I putting the student first?’” Belcher says.

The president’s support has even extended beyond the classroom. “How many other presidents ride the team bus on basketball road trips?” says Tonya Andrews, Belcher’s long-time executive administrative assistant.

“For a community college, which prizes teaching above all else, every occasion becomes an opportunity for teaching.”

– Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher,
Inaugural Address, May 3, 1996

PC writer-in-residence and associate professor of humanities Jack Riggs is accustomed to being on the teaching end of things, yet he learned a valuable lesson upon first meeting Belcher. Riggs was among dozens of faculty participating in a district-wide GSAMS teleconference conducted by the new president in 1995. One of his colleagues asked Belcher a question to which she answered, as sometimes can be her style, briefly and to the point. Riggs commented to his colleague, “Well, she really cut you off, didn’t she?” Thanks to an open microphone, everyone, including Belcher, heard Riggs’ sarcasm. The lesson: make sure all mics are off before making offhand remarks. The next day, Belcher visited Lawrenceville Campus, where Riggs worked.

“I got down on my knees and begged her forgiveness,” he jokes. “And she was so warm and gracious.” So much so, Riggs acknowledges Belcher for helping him to realize his dream of writing and publishing his recent novel, When the Finch Rises. “She is completely responsible,” he
“She gave me a sabbatical to do it and encouraged me for years to finish it.” The lesson: forgive and nurture.

Partly as a result of this experience with Riggs, Belcher established the Writers Institute not only to bring visiting writers to students but also to provide fellowships and sabbaticals for faculty members to work on publishing projects. The vision includes a focus on senior citizens and pre-K-through-12 student workshops and camps.

A flood of state and national awards in recent years to GPC faculty and staff members gives testimony to a nurturing environment at the college. Programs winning national awards include freshman orientation, hybrid course training, MLK and a nursing partnership. Dr. Virginia Carson and Dr. Deborah Preston won national recognition as American Council on Education fellows. In the past two years, 12 faculty members have received Teaching Excellence awards from the National Institute for Organizational Development. The college literary magazine, *The Chattahoochee Review*, won the Governor’s Award for the Humanities. Gene Sheppard was among a few teachers nationwide to win a NASA fellowship. The Office of Marketing and Public Relations won two gold awards and a silver in its professional organization’s national contest.

Belcher won’t take that much credit. But, she will say that she has purposely created an environment that nurtures the growth and development of the “GPC family.”

“She helps college employees to succeed by supporting us in doing our jobs – not telling us exactly what to do, but rather helping us develop into effective leaders ourselves,” says Dr. Virginia Michelich, GPC vice president for educational affairs.

One example is the Belcher-instituted Magic of Leadership workshops, open to all employees, which encourage professional development and promotion from within the college.

“Employee development is a significant part of my role as president,” Belcher says. “I’m pleased with our college community’s response to opportunities for growth and development. Our employees are the greatest resources we have. Very little quality performance would be realized at GPC if they didn’t embrace lifelong learning, resulting in their growth and development.”

Teamwork  Fran Mohr, continuing education, back left, and Patrice Masterson, human resources, back right, guide Georgia Perimeter College employees in a cooperation exercise during a Magic of Leadership session.
Your influence ... extends nationally, and there are many people across the country who have served with you and are grateful for your many contributions. In particular, Jacquee, I want to thank you for your service to AACC and to the Presidents Academy. I was privileged to have served with you on the AACC Board of Directors and on the Executive Committee and appreciate your leadership as Board Chair.

–George R. Boggs
President and CEO
American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)

You have provided creative and energetic leadership reflecting the highest standards of excellence, and it has earned you the respect and admiration of your colleagues. There is no greater compliment.

Sonny Purdue
Governor
The State of Georgia

Georgia Perimeter College has been most fortunate to benefit from your leadership and experience for the last ten years.

You are an important part of the College Board family and we thank you for your service on our Board of Trustees. We all appreciate your valuable insight and contributions to our mission.

Gaston Caperton
President
College Board

Jacquee, you have made many major first strides in higher education - especially in the community college arena. The lives of countless students, faculty and staff, as well as my own have been changed for the better because of you. To you, I am forever indebted. The best way that I can honor you for what you have given is to continue to build upon the strong foundations that you have worked so tirelessly to establish.

–Ding-Jo H. Currie, Ph.D.
President
Coastline Community College

Our state is indeed indebted to your dedication to excellence at Georgia Perimeter College. I know I speak for all of the people in Georgia who tip their hat and wish you the very best in the future.

–Roy E. Barnes
EXCERPTS FROM GEORGIA STATE SENATE RESOLUTION

HONORING AND COMMENDING Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher, outgoing president of Georgia Perimeter College; and for other purposes.

WHEREAS, Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher was the first minority president of a nonminority institution and the first minority female president of the University System of Georgia; and

WHEREAS, under Dr. Belcher's leadership, Georgia Perimeter College has transformed from a localized community college to a vibrant urban institution of higher education that boasts an enrollment of more than 21,000 students yet maintains its small-campus, hometown college appeal; and ...

WHEREAS, Dr. Belcher has assembled an administrative team that has significantly impacted the college's growth, creating plans and funds for new campuses, and immensely increasing scholarships, community partnerships, academic resources and faculty development; and ... 

WHEREAS, as a result of her outstanding management over the past decade, Georgia Perimeter College will continue to grow in enrollment, reputation, program availability, and many other areas of excellence while continuing to respond to the emerging needs of the communities it serves ...

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE that the members of this body join in honoring and commending Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher ... for her innumerable contributions to improving the quality of education received in Georgia's institutions of higher education and extend their sincere best wishes for her continued success.

Senate Resolution 445

By: Senators Butler of the 55th, Miles of the 43rd, Adelman of the 42nd, Jones of the 10th and Henson of the 41st.

Adopted in the Senate March 17, 2005

Mark Taylor, President of the Senate

Frank Eldridge, Jr., Secretary of the Senate

Eric Johnson, President Pro Tempore

Gloria Butler, Senator, District 55th
Newton County farmland is about to become the University System of Georgia’s newest college campus. Open fields, fences and furrows will give way to campus greens and high-tech facilities filled with students taking course instructions and life lessons from learned professors.

Over the past decade, GPC has seen unprecedented growth in physical expansion, including a new location at Georgia State University’s Alpharetta Center, a new classroom building plus a state-of-the-art library at Dunwoody Campus and relocation of Lawrenceville Campus to the new Gwinnett University Center. Construction is underway for a 50,000-square-foot Student and Community Conference Center on Clarkston Campus, and ground was broken this spring for the new Newton Campus scheduled to open in 2007. In addition, new classroom buildings for Clarkston, Dunwoody and Lawrenceville campuses have been approved by the Board of Regents.

Paschal is especially excited about the Newton Campus, which will replace the current Rockdale Center and serve an eight-county area. “We are very pleased at the opportunity to serve these outlying counties,” she says. “Dr. Belcher has always emphasized access, and this new campus will make public higher education opportunities available to many Georgia students who didn’t have it before.”

Institutional advancement also has played a major role in Georgia Perimeter’s growth explosion. The Georgia Perimeter College Foundation, which now counts corporate CEOs among its board members, increased private giving by 690 percent since Belcher’s arrival. Scholarships awarded to students from these funds increased by 1,200 percent over the same period. Funds raised by the annual George Fellows Memorial Golf Tournament grew 300 percent from 1998 – the event’s inaugural year – to 2004. Additionally, the GPC Foundation has been instrumental in forging many of the previously mentioned partnerships.

In 1998 GPC opened a grants office, which has been responsible for bringing millions of dollars to the college. The office has greatly augmented funding for student and faculty needs, especially during ongoing periods of budget reductions.

Technology, too, has taken a front seat at the college since the 1990s. Belcher has encouraged innovations such as expansion of online classes. In the 2001–02 academic year, Georgia Perimeter became the state’s first two-year college to offer students the opportunity to earn a degree entirely through online courses. Other advancements include creation of an award-winning online hybrid course program (part online and part classroom instruction), establishment of online labs, “smartboard” technology and high-tech training labs.
“It has become the decade of high tech for GPC,” says Dr. Paulos Yohannes, one of GPC’s chemistry professors and award-winning medical researchers. “We have high quality teaching technology available in almost every classroom. I know of colleagues in other universities and industries with much less technology at their work places.”

“The future does indeed hold exciting promises …”

– Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher, Inaugural Address, May 3, 1996

Georgia Perimeter today has more than 21,000 credit and noncredit students. Its economic impact on metro Atlanta exceeds $800 million. And GPC’s existence sustains more than 7,000 jobs.

In addition, the high level of educational services at GPC prompted the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to give the college an outstanding re-accreditation report. More-over, Georgia Perimeter has become a first-choice institution due to its quality, cost and accessibility to senior institutions in the University System of Georgia. GPC currently provides more transfer students to the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech and Georgia State University than any other college.

The numbers and accomplishments also speak to Belcher’s effectiveness as a leader. “Dr. Belcher was able to see the global picture, was willing to make the hard decisions, and as a result the college has continued to move forward in very positive ways,” says Andrews.

Decatur Campus provost Dr. Felita Williams adds: “The changes over the past 10 years have raised GPC’s profile in the national and international arena of community college excellence.” Selling her vision for the college was not always easy, although Belcher, whose leadership extended to national organizations, such as chair of the American Association of Community Colleges and co-chair of the National Advisory Council for School-to-Work Opportunities, asked no more of anyone than she did of herself.

“If we hadn’t had the solid faculty, staff and administrators that we have, we would not have been able to take the giant leaps into making some of the changes that were made,” Belcher says.

So, where to now? “Going forward, it will only get better than it is right now,” she predicts. “This college is so strong and so fortified with great, wonderful, good people who are committed to its mission. The future for Georgia Perimeter College potentially is nothing short of phenomenal.”

Faces of the future Clockwise, from top left: Georgia Perimeter College seeks to prepare all students to live and work in a global society; point guard Earl Calloway exemplifies the spirit of excellence at GPC, as he earned a scholarship to play basketball at Indiana University, a national powerhouse; Dr. Belcher listens to a student at Decatur Campus; the smiles at commencement represent the ultimate reward for college employees – knowing that GPC makes a difference in people’s lives.
Farewell, Dr. Belcher

Dr. Sallie Paschal, center, chief operating officer of the Rockdale Center and new Newton Campus, hosts Dr. Jacquelyn M. Belcher and Lew Belcher at the center’s reception for the outgoing president in April. The Rockdale Center and Clarkston, Decatur, Dunwoody and Lawrenceville campuses of Georgia Perimeter College all held events to honor Dr. Belcher, who says that “retirement” is not the correct term: “My mother used to say, ‘When I retire I’m not getting in a rocking chair.’ Well, I’m not getting in a rocking chair.”