

# James T. Laney Graduate School Dean's Address

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As we gather today, I am filled with a profound sense of gratitude and anticipation. I see the annual Deans address as an opportunity to reflect on the journey we've embarked on together over this past year and what is still yet to come. In this moment of pause, we reconnect as members of an academic community bound by a shared commitment to excellence, innovation, and transformation.

Looking back over the past year, I am in awe of all that we have accomplished as we navigated both expected and unforeseen challenges - I know our continued success is directly attributed to our intellectual community's relentless spirit and resilience. In short, it is because of each of you.

Today, I will focus on where we have been, and where we are going next.

## Acknowledgements

But first, I want to thank President Fenves, Provost Bellamkonda, and the LGS Executive Council. Their support has been essential for the success of our graduate programs.

Their leadership and commitment have inspired and enabled us to achieve remarkable progress and confidently navigate through times of uncertainty - their guidance has been invaluable, and I appreciate their continued dedication to excellence and fostering an environment where innovation and collaboration can thrive.

I would also like to thank Tamara Caspary for her time as chair of the Executive Council as well as Bernard Fraga and Kathryn Kadous as outgoing EC members this year. I'd also like to welcome Walter Rucker as our incoming chair.

## In Remembrance

But before we move on, I would first like to pause, and remember Marcus Urquiga, former Director of Business and Finance. Marcus had both a great business acumen

and gentle heart. His dedication and passion for his work were inspiring, and this loss is felt by all of us. I would now like to have a brief moment of silence as we remember Marcus.

## **Our Why**

For us to excel as a school, we need to be grounded in our why. Our "why" is the foundation of our purpose and actions, the core of our identity. Our vision provides a clear direction toward a future we aspire to create, while our mission outlines the steps we take to turn that vision into reality. Together, they steer our efforts, ensuring every decision and action aligns with our overarching goals.

## **Emory Mission and LGS Vision**

Our north star is the Emory Mission - To create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity.

In keeping with the broader mission of the university, our vision is to be a nationally and internationally recognized leader in advancing academic excellence through innovative scholarship, research, teaching, and programming that prepares a diverse and inclusive graduate student body for success as leaders and in service to the global good.

## **LGS Mission**

How do we get there? Through the LGS Mission, which is to promote discovery and enduring knowledge by preparing innovative, thoughtful leaders in research, scholarship, teaching, and practice in service to the global good.

James T Laney shared "We in universities are not only guardians of the pursuit of knowledge but also stewards of the tradition in which that knowledge is applied for the good of society – indeed the world"

By staying true to our why, we maintain coherence and integrity in our pursuit of excellence, innovation, and impact. This alignment empowers us to navigate

challenges, seize opportunities, and make meaningful contributions that resonate with our community, society, and beyond.

## The State of the School

### *An Academic Year of Change*

As I mentioned earlier, the 2023-2024 academic year was a year of change for graduate institutions nationwide. Unprecedented shifts have marked this time, challenging us to adapt and grow while ensuring that the educational journey maintains a focus on acquiring knowledge while evolving with the times. As we navigate through these changes, the opportunity to redefine the learning landscape and forge innovative paths forward has never been more exciting or essential.

For Laney, these changes included both the Supreme Court ruling, impacting admissions practices and student unionization efforts.

In June 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that the consideration of race in admissions is no longer permitted. This left many questions about what this meant for admissions and diversity at Emory.

What I want you to know is that our commitment to diversity is unwavering – I remain a passionate advocate for diversity and inclusive excellence in academia and believe that if we expect our students and alumni to solve the most complex problems of our time, we must first equip a diverse student body. And yet, diversity is necessary but not sufficient to accomplish these goals. We absolutely must create a dynamic and inclusive environment in which diverse students can thrive, thereby fostering groundbreaking research and paving the way for a more equitable society.

That said, these changes allowed us to reflect on areas where we could enhance our approach to admissions. This led to meaningful process changes, including an updated application and clarifying who can access the application and demographic data. We have also introduced a new rubric designed to offer clear guidance to faculty reviewers and decision-makers. In our stride toward increased transparency, we now ensure that applicants understand what programs seek and how their applications will be assessed. This evolution in our admissions practices reinforces our dedication to diversity and our commitment to fairness and clarity at every step of the application process.

The Supreme Court decision wasn't the only major change graduate education faced over this current academic year. This past fall, Emory doctoral students cast their votes in strong support of union representation, aligning with a nationwide trend where graduate students have become increasingly more unionized.

The Workers United, Southern Regional Joint Board, SEIU, now represents our doctoral students in terms of matters related to wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment. We are still early in the collective bargaining process, but negotiations are underway.

Our commitment to our students has been steadfast throughout this process - we intend to work in good faith with the union throughout negotiations. Our commitment to providing a high-quality, student-centered graduate education is, and will remain, our top priority.

### Strategic Framework

We know that one important way to achieve our mission is to listen. Last year, we embarked on an important journey of collaboration and reflection, engaging in a series of listening sessions that brought together the voices of students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The outcome of these sessions is a strategic framework that guides our actions and aligns with our shared vision and goals.

As I mentioned earlier, everything we do is grounded in our why. Our 3 key priorities are to:

1. Promote Interdisciplinary Academic Opportunities through the expansion of master's programs and strengthening student experiences.
2. Enable Inclusive Environments through a faculty mentoring initiative, preparing diverse students for academic success, and implementing a student flourishing initiative.
3. Facilitate impactful scholarship through increased student interactions across a variety of intellectual communities, developing a grant writing program, and formalizing programs that offer opportunities for experiential learning both globally and domestically.

One highlight of our strategic initiatives is our expansion and focus on master's programs. This will be accomplished through several key actions. First, in close collaboration with the Emory College of Arts and Sciences, we have hired a staff member who is focused specifically on the growth of our master's programs, ensuring that we have the necessary support and attention to the details required for expansion. Thus, I am pleased to welcome Ariel Edwards, one of our newest staff members to the school. Ariel's hiring is just one of many examples of how we are working in close partnership with the Emory College of Arts and Sciences, which is essential to ensure that all possible academic resources are brought to bear on areas of strength. Moreover, we are working on efforts to increase the pipeline of underrepresented students through a formalized relationship with one of the Atlanta University Center schools. Lastly, improving upon the master's student experience is a priority, as we aim to offer an unmatched educational journey that meets the needs and exceeds the expectations of our students.

But this is just one highlight – each office has initiatives that directly align with these broader strategic priorities.

- Academic Operations—Our new Customer Relationship Management System (SLATE) has enhanced our admissions process and student progress management, enabling a one-stop platform for applications, reviews, student records and forms, and more, with significant gains in coordination, efficiency, and transparency.
- Advancement and Alumni Engagement – Is carrying out work that is foundational to many of the initiatives described in the strategic framework. Her team works to drive philanthropic support for graduate students and programs through donor cultivation and alumni engagement.
- Business & Finance - Automating processes for recovering sponsor tuition, which increases efficiencies.
- Communications - Highlights and amplifies our students and faculty achievements. Her office keeps the LGS community informed through newsletters, emails, a revamped website that is coming soon, and social media.
- Emory Diversifying Graduate Education, hosts programs such as Summer Opportunity for Academic Research, or SOAR, a 10-week summer learning experience for potential LGS students to enhance their professional network

and readiness for graduate school across multiple disciplines throughout the Laney Graduate School. Taken together with community-building events that target underrepresented and international students, Dean James is leading our efforts towards building an inclusive culture within graduate programs across campus.

- English Language Support Program – Is now designed with the student needs in mind. Along with her team, Heather has revamped this program by developing optional courses that are designed to be a resource for students at their time of greatest need.
- Professional Development and Career Planning - Leading student-focused programs to support professional development, including student coaching. This work has allowed key programs within the school to evolve to meet our current demands.
- Senior Associate Dean – Overseeing efforts to grow Master's programs, as just described, the approval of new programs, and a faculty mentorship initiative that supports high-quality mentorship of graduate students across the university.
- Student Affairs - Developing an initiative focused on graduate student flourishing.

### Happening Now and Next

Next, I would like to take you through what is happening now and next at LGS.

This fall marks an exciting time for our campus as we introduce new graduate and professional student housing right off of North Decatur Road. Just a short walk to most programs across campus, this addition fills a significant gap in our efforts to support graduate education at Emory. The first of the two properties is opening this fall and will include programming to support community-building for graduate and professional students across campus.

Our graduate students are not the only ones finding a new home in 2024. Soon, LGS will have a new home right next door.

Our current location in the administration building is being repurposed, allowing us to relocate to a new space that aligns with our goals and provides several advantages for our entire team and the students we support, including providing shared spaces that

enable us to connect and meet with students, faculty, and each other more easily. This change is expected to occur this upcoming fall, though this timeline is fluid.

### Admissions Update

In keeping with a substantial increase in undergraduate applications at Emory, we are seeing unprecedented increases here at LGS - we have seen an impressive 32% increase in applications, illustrating that, regardless of external pressures on graduate education, through our prolific faculty, the university's strength and reputation continue to be recognized by a growing number of prospective students from all over the world.

Humanities – French saw a 50% increase

Natural Sciences – Computer Sciences and Informatics saw a 175% increase

Social Sciences – Health Services Research and Health Policy saw a 139%

We already know that these applicants are among the most sought-after students, and we look forward to welcoming this new cohort to Emory this fall.

### Our Students, Faculty, Alumni, and Staff

Our students, faculty, and alumni are at the heart of our achievements, and their dedication, creativity, and pursuit of excellence are the cornerstones of LGS. Without their passion and commitment, our continued success and ability to make meaningful contributions to society would not be possible.

LGS has over 1800 graduate students doing amazing things, including Hayley Roy – a 3<sup>rd</sup> year History doctoral student who recently was awarded a Fulbright and Audrey Jones, an Anthropology PhD student who is both a Center for Faculty Development and Excellence fellow and Martha and William Dobes Outstanding Graduate Teaching Fellow.

We also have over 1700 faculty, each of which is foundational to the delivery of a quality graduate education. Tene Lewis, one of our professors of Epidemiology in this very building, was just one of 10 women who participated in an all-woman round table to highlight women's health with Jill Biden earlier this year.

We also have a large and diverse group of alumni, who are using their graduate education to change the world, including two of this year's 40 under 40,

- Sidra Khalid – a Masters in Development Practice graduate who is working and living in Pakistan, promoting gender research within the International Water Management Institute.
- And Lauren Murphy – who has taken her passion and training in psychology and behavior analysis to build a career that spans the species - from her research studying the social and emotional processing in rhesus macaques to now a career in consumer behavior and consulting for some of the world's largest brands.

The majority of our philanthropic support each year comes from alumni. 83% of our donations came from Laney Graduate School alumni last year. To our alumni, we thank you for your generous support and hope to continue to engage with you in meaningful ways over time.

Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge and thank the more than 50 LGS staff. Would those of you who are here tonight please stand? You are the backbone of our school. Thank you for your deep commitment to graduate education.

### How LGS ranks

Our institution is undeniably home to remarkable students, distinguished faculty, and accomplished alumni and staff- this is a testament to the exceptional graduate education our programs deliver. Every April, the US News & World Report unveils its rankings of graduate and professional programs. Year after year, our institution proudly stands among the elite. While these rankings alone do not encapsulate the full extent of our programs' excellence, we know that they are important to prospective students, who often refer to these rankings when deciding where to pursue their graduate education. A few notable callouts from this year's report that are in the top 10 include:

Environmental Health Sciences - #3

Behavioral, Social, & Health Education Sciences - #3

Epidemiology - #4

Biostatistics – moving from #11 in 2023 to # 5 in the nation

Clinical Psychology – moving from #18 in 2021 to #7

Health Services Research & Health Policy- #8



Congratulations to all of our programs this year.

### *The Future is Bright*

Let me close by saying that the future is bright. In our students I see the bright future for our academic community; our vision for the coming year is one of academic achievement and holistic growth.

Here's to another year of barriers broken and boundaries pushed. Together, we are not just shaping the future of this institution but are making a profound impact on the world beyond our campus. Thank you for being an integral part of our community, and letting us embrace the year ahead with optimism, determination, and an unwavering commitment to our shared mission.

### *Closing*

I would like to close with a quote from Dr. Laney, whom I must publicly thank for a generous gift just given to the school.

“The rhythm of a university requires those places where one goes alone to study or to do research or to think, but also needs those places where it is appropriate and inviting to come together”