

A GW. Institution

Senior Vice Provost
and Senior Vice
President of Student
and Academic
Support Services
Robert A. Chernak,
EdD '97, will
retire and join the
GW faculty.

BY JULIA PARMLEY AND KELLEY STOKES

In 1988, the university's undergraduate acceptance rate was more than 75 percent. Today, it's 32.6.

That change, and many more, was made possible in large part because of Robert A. Chernak, senior vice provost and vice president of student and academic support services, who retired in June after 24 years at GW. He is taking a six-month sabbatical before joining the faculty of GW's Graduate School of Education and Human Development, where he will teach courses in higher education administration.

Over the years, Dr. Chernak's responsibilities at GW have included oversight of undergraduate admissions, student financial assistance, athletics and recreation, student life, student health, and counseling. In the past, Dr. Chernak also oversaw the Office of Alumni Relations, the University Police Department, and the Marvin Center.

"In his 24 years of service to GW, Bob has transformed our enrollment practices and improved all aspects of student life," President Steven Knapp said when the retirement was announced.

For instance, Dr. Chernak oversaw the creation of the 189,000-square-foot Lerner Health and Wellness Center and the recent multimillion-dollar transformation of the Charles E. Smith Center, and he helped lead efforts to develop the 2012-16 strategic plan for athletics and recreation (see story, page 10). Since his arrival, the number of residence halls has more than doubled, including 14 Greek townhouses and three Scholars Village townhouses.



24 Years of Service



JOHN WAMIS

(From left to right, clockwise) Dr. Chernak is known for his humorous and interactive speech during the opening of each session of Colonial Inauguration, the university's freshman orientation program. Dr. Chernak poses with CNN anchor and friend Wolf Blitzer, and Whoopi Goldberg, who performed at Colonials Weekend in 2003. Dr. Chernak (second from left) and his longtime friend and colleague, former university president Stephen Joel Trachtenberg (second from right), participate in a groundbreaking ceremony on the Mount Vernon Campus, which Dr. Chernak helped the university acquire in 2000. Dr. Trachtenberg and Dr. Chernak worked together at three different universities over 33 years.



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A passionate athletics fan, Dr. Chernak can often be seen on the sidelines cheering for the Colonials. One of his most memorable GW experiences, he says, was the men's basketball team's appearance in the NCAA Tournament Sweet Sixteen in 1993. "That was a major, major, major turning point in the history of GW," he says. "It started a momentum that really began to reshape the institution."

In addition to supporting the Colonials, Dr. Chernak is a loyal Boston sports fan. His time at GW led him to develop a close friendship with the late Red Auerbach, BS '40, MA '41, DPS '93, a former GW basketball player, Boston Celtics coach, and Dr. Chernak's "boyhood idol." The two attended many GW basketball games together and played racquetball weekly for many years.

"He was like a second father almost," he says affectionately. "I learned a lot from him in terms of winning and philosophy about life."

In 1999, to make sure new students felt welcomed into the GW community, he created Colonial Inauguration, a summer orientation program for incoming students. Well known for his approachability and quick wit, he personally greets parents and students during the sessions and gives a humor-packed welcome speech, during which he tells stories, pokes fun at Yankees fans, and commiserates with parents about the college search.

"Parents would always tell us that Dr. Chernak was their favorite part of the new student orientation program because he was honest, fun, and warm," says Jacqueline Hackett, BA '08, MPP '10, who worked as a Presidential Administrative Fellow for the program in 2009.

Another university tradition Dr. Chernak started is the annual Colonials Weekend, when thousands of families and friends visit campus and participate in three days of activities. Some of the famous personalities who have headlined Colonials Weekend include Jay Leno, Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams, and the Beach Boys.

Dr. Chernak says that events like these are important to building a sense of community and pride among GW students

and parents. They are “sort of an exclamation point to the fact that this is a special place—that things happen here.”

Reflecting on his 24 years at GW, Dr. Chernak says his interactions with members of the GW community—including his more than 250 employees—have been “a big part” of his focus.

Rather than the increase in applications, residence halls, or athletics championships, he cites his greatest accomplishment as “having the right people in the right positions doing the right jobs, and providing the kind of vision and leadership that is necessary to spur their best efforts.”

He has always placed a heavy emphasis on the “human component” of his work, he says, and promotes idea-sharing to help people “think outside the box and expand their understanding of what is possible.

“I’m not driven by getting the paper stuff done; I’m not driven by getting to every single email; I’m not driven by answering every call within five minutes. I am driven when someone has a problem—a student has a problem and they need help; a parent has a problem; an employee has a problem—I’m driven by that.”

In recognition of all that Dr. Chernak has contributed to the university, an anonymous donor established the Robert and Linda Chernak Endowed Scholarship Fund and made a large commitment to GW’s Barcroft Park project, a multimillion-dollar renovation of GW baseball’s home field in Arlington, Va.

Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations Mike Morsberger says the endowed scholarship is a “demonstration of the love the collective GW family has for this man.”

“I cannot begin to tell you how often alumni, parents, and various other friends and donors bring up Bob’s name,” Mr. Morsberger says. “Bob is an administrator, a faculty member, a legend in the field of enrollment management, an alumnus, a donor, a vocal Colonials fan, an advocate for all things GW—Dr. Chernak is an institution.”

While Dr. Chernak is proud of the academic advancements the university has made since 1988, he says it’s what students learn outside the classroom that truly prepares them for life after GW.

“It’s the invisible part of a GW education that is beyond the facts you learn” that makes students successful, he says. “That invisible part prepares students for a ‘life worth living’—a successful career, sense of family values, financial acumen, a good sense of citizenship, and being a valued member of the community.

“Those are the kinds of attributes I like to see GW graduates have when they leave that make them very special and very identifiable as someone who has a GW degree.”

Dr. Chernak says he is looking forward to joining the GSEHD faculty in January.

“I think I have enough working knowledge of higher education through things I’ve done over the years that I can bring a very pragmatic approach to the classroom in addition to all the theory,” says Dr. Chernak, who taught at a junior college in Boston as his first job after serving in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War.

“I always said that when I was ready to step out of administration, I’d like to go back to the beginning and finish my career in the classroom,” he says. “And that’s what I now have an opportunity to do.” **GW**

For more information on Dr. Chernak’s career at GW, including a photo gallery and video, visit go.gwu.edu/chernak.

For more information on how you can support the Robert and Linda Chernak Endowed Scholarship Fund, contact Matt Banks at mbanks@gwu.edu or 202-994-5125. To make a gift, visit go.gwu.edu/chernakfund.



(Above) Dr. Chernak and his wife, Linda Chernak, dance at Monumental Celebration, a graduation event, in 2003. Dr. Chernak says he is looking forward to the opportunity to spend additional time with her and their daughter Jackie upon his retirement. They celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary this August. (Left) A former athletics director, conference commissioner, and basketball referee, Dr. Chernak is a staple on the sidelines of Colonials games.

JESSICA MCCONNELL BURTT