If Emory College’s new dean were to fill out a Facebook profile, he’d certainly include something about math—especially topology and combinatorial methods, his specialties—and about serving as Rice University’s dean of undergraduates. He might also save space for baseball, chess and stand-up comedy.

Robin Forman accepted the position of dean of the College of Arts and Sciences this summer after a nationwide search. A professor and chair of math at Rice, he will also hold the Asa Griggs Candler Professorship in Mathematics.

Dubbing in stand-up no doubt served Forman well in overcoming both the academic and the social sides of Rice undergraduate life. And a sense of humor couldn’t hurt in his new role.

At Emory, his responsibilities include strategic, academic and financial planning for nearly fifty departments and programs, as well as promotion and tenure decisions.

Chess, like comedy, is a longtime hobby. “I don’t get the chance to play in clubs or tournaments any longer,” Forman says, “but I still enjoy studying the game, keeping up with the progress of the top grandmasters, and I’ll occasionally head to a chess website for a quick game over the Internet.” When he’s at home, the dean also enjoys reading, with tastes that run toward “literary fiction, with the occasional spy novel thrown in. But I’ve recently found myself drawn more to nonfiction.”

And baseball? That’s a family affair. Dean Forman is joined in Atlanta by his wife and son, Saul, age 13. “Saul is passionate about baseball,” he says, “both as a fun and a player. And Ann and I have enthusiastically joined him on his journey. We enjoy watching baseball—sport, college, minor and major leagues—and all our recent family vacations have been baseball-themed. Of course my most joyful and most stressful baseball moments involve watching Saul play. When we’re not cheering on his teams, we can often be found exploring the wonderful restaurant options in Atlanta. We’ve already learned that this is a great city for anyone who appreciates food.”

No one who knows Forman will be surprised that he places a strong emphasis on the student experience at Emory. He served as master of a residential college at Rice, and he remembers his own undergraduate experience as “a thrilling intellectual journey, and great fun. I made some wonderful life-long friends, among both students and faculty. I also took full advantage of the opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities. I played intramural sports, played in rock and roll bands, and, of course, joined the chess club.”

At Emory, says Forman, “The aim of our undergraduate program is to take in high school students and graduate young adults. This requires that they develop in many ways beyond the intellectual growth that forms the core of the College experience. We have to make sure of the entire campus is look forward to working with the Campus Life team to create a student experience, in the classrooms and out, that helps our remarkable students achieve their potential.”

An important part of this, he says, is community service. “There’s a great passion for community service among the students here, and a wonderful collection of opportunities available to them—especially through the Office of University Community Partnership and Volunteer Emory. Our goal should be to continually support opportunities that provide both benefit for the community and educational value for our students.”

Faculty play a crucial role in Forman’s view of a thriving Emory College. As a veteran teacher and scholar, he calls the dual mission of teaching and research “one of the defining features of the College,” adding, “I have had numerous opportunities to chat with Emory faculty, and many of them spoke of their passionate commitment to this ideal. Many in fact came to Emory precisely because they believe in that mission. And it’s been a wonderful experience to walk down the halls of the departments and see the spectacular work that’s taking place in every building on campus.”

“The university is at its best when these aspects overlap—when students have the opportunity to learn by participating in our research mission. The College does this very well,” he says. Forman notes too that he has been impressed by all the "ambitious and creative approaches to interdisciplinary work" at Emory.

Asked to pick the most pressing issue facing higher education today, he answers, “The financial crisis. We had all gotten used to continuous expansion, and this was especially true at Emory, which experienced three decades of quite dramatic growth. This was mission driven growth, with exciting new opportunities for scholarship and student programs. But the last two years required a pause, and even a slight contraction. The positive side is that it has given us a chance to regroup, and to build in new efficiencies.”

Other effects of the recession ought to be resisted, Forman says. “In times of financial stress, there can be a tendency to look at higher education as purely vocational terms. It becomes even more important to educate students, parents, employers, political leaders, and others about the value of a liberal arts education, the role it plays in preparing our students to be successful adults. I’m not speaking just of professional success, but of success as happy, healthy, fulfilled adults.”

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NEW DEAN IN TOWN
ROBIN FORMAN Arrives at Emory