THE ECONOMIC CLUB OF CHICAGO

For the First Forum of the 2019-2020 Program Year, the Club was honored to host TIAA President & CEO Roger W. Ferguson Jr., former vice chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. The fire side chat was moderated by Mary Louise Gorno, second vice chair of the Club, who incorporated questions texted from the audience. After the forum was adjourned, Mr. Ferguson participated in a Young Leaders' Continuing the Conversation program, where he expanded on additional topics in a more intimate setting.

Excerpts from the forum fireside chat are below:

On his childhood and early financial education…

"My father was a very interesting person, he had grown up in the depression and the depression got him very interested in banks and these institutions that could throw the entire country into a depression with 25% unemployment rate. And he became very fascinated with things like interest rates. He didn't have any money to speak of, $500 to $1000 was a lot of money for us, but he would keep track of CD rates across all the local banks. […] We would sit down and watch this TV show that was called Wall Street Week with a guy named Louis Rukeyser. We'd watch this thing on our little black and white TV as though we had a million dollars, talking about the market up and down. So when other dads would talk to their sons in particular about sports scores, my father was talking about the state of the markets."

On financial literacy…

"I was just talking to someone today […] about why is it that the level of financial literacy is so low. I think the answer is, it's a rare family in which anyone feels particularly comfortable talking about money as just a natural part of your life the way my father did. That has led me to have this passion for; 'how do we create a higher degree of financial literacy in the world?' That's clearly stuck with me."

On the impact of Alan Greenspan on his career…

"Alan [Greenspan] was not eager to have me join the board of governors, I'm told by many people, because he just simply didn't know me. There are a bunch of great economists in America and of all those great economists, Bill Clinton chose me, a not particularly well-known guy. But what Alan did for me which was spectacular, and he does this for everybody, he was very, very fair. He just observed me moving along in my role as governor, he saw me working really hard, he saw me contributing in places that were far from the glamour of monetary policy, but proved later to be important. When it came time to appoint someone vice chairman, he went to the President and said, 'Ferguson,' which was a stunner because I'd only been there two years."

On how he thinks about diversity and inclusion in the context of TIAA…

"First with our company, TIAA, one has to recognize this is part of our legacy and our history. We had the first woman on the board of a Fortune 100 company in the 1940s, first African-American officer of a major insurance company in the 1950s. My predecessor, Cliff Ward, was the first African-American CO of a Fortune 100 company. So the first thing in the context of my company is diversity and inclusion are our bedrock of who we are and what we stand for. Secondly, in the modern era, as it has always been, it's obviously the right thing to do. There's no one now I think who would push and doubt that. But the third thing is there's increasing evidence, quantitative science, economic science that […] diverse and inclusive teams make better decisions, and organizations composed of such teams end up having better financial performance."

On higher education completion rates and its significance to the business community…

"Now about 90% of high school graduates have some exposure to higher ed, but only about 60% actually complete, and among minority communities the number, the percentage of completion is much lower. […] It's a big difference between having two years of high education, and potentially the debt that goes along with it, versus four years of high education and potentially the debt that goes along with it. If we can get completion rates up that has a big impact. We did use Moody's Analytics to do the macro model and it turns out that getting completion rates up works very much like an infrastructure investment. Very expensive, relatively expensive upfront, but pays off in terms of increasing the growth rate and the size of the economy 20 years down the road."

On his opinion the outlook of the financial markets…

"We've seen phenomenal performance in almost every asset class. There's some talk in the market that that might be disrupted as the economy turns. I think what we see, at least what I see, is probably much slower growth in 2020 but still positive. I don't think we're going to fall into a recession, but I think the growth is going to be relatively muted. And having said that, I still think there will continue to be a search for really good returns. I think many asset classes will continue to rise but maybe not at the same breakneck speed that we've seen of late. […] I tend to think around interest rates and Central Bank activities are going to be cautious on both sides. Inflation doesn't look like it's about to break out, so I don't think many central banks are going to be moving [interest rates] aggressively up, which would slow things down obviously in markets. At the same time, interest rates are all relatively low. We're experimenting with even negative rates. I don't think most central banks want to move much further in that direction. That's not a forecast of what the Fed's going to do; I don't know what they're going to do."

On talk of an impending retirement crisis….

"I think of this as a retirement challenge. If we don't act it will become a retirement crisis. What are the elements of a retirement challenge? First, demographics. Aging baby boomers, by definition, are getting closer and closer to retirement. Ten thousand baby boomers hit 65, the legacy retirement age, every day. So you can see that this is mounting. A second reason why it's a challenge is the decline of the defined benefit plan and the rise of the 401K. The 401K was never meant to be a retirement plan. It was meant to be a supplemental plan, and yet for many it is the source of their retirement savings. Third is too little retirement savings. My former colleagues and friends at the Fed have estimated that the short fall in retirement savings is five, six, seven trillion dollars, huge. Then the final component of it is the bedrock retirement savings vehicle and publicly provided annuity for everybody, is Social Security. And the Social Security trustees have already said that the trust fund as they call it will be depleted in 2035. So, four components of a challenge."

Please note that the content of this program was edited and condensed for clarity.