

STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY ADDRESS
President Joe Bertolino
September 18, 2017

Hello everyone! I wanted to open up with this video because for me it encapsulated the vibrancy that is Southern, and the wonderful Week of Welcome that we put together for our new and returning students.

I've been here a little more than a year now, and I feel that Southern has a special spirit that isn't replicated on many campuses. There's an infectious enthusiasm, a dedication to task, and a sense of pride that defines this university.

We are all working toward a common goal of student success, by building communities and empowering lives.

And so to you, and all of your colleagues, I want to say THANK YOU! Thank you for your good work (from our facilities/custodial teams who helped get the place ready, our clerical staff answering thousands of calls, our police department for keeping us safe, our student affairs and enrollment management staff in bringing in our new class and taking care of our returning students at the start of the year – and in challenging times with the death of one of our students, the DACA announcement, Charlottesville and all that comes with the beginning of a new academic year – their work has been extraordinary. I am grateful to our academic affairs team and our faculty for their work in getting students situated into their new classes, our IT team for teching up the place, to the IA team for all the scholarship support, and to the communications team for their excellent promotional work). I could go on and on, but know that I am grateful to all of you for your continued support and encouragement, and your willingness to both listen with care and participate in the processes that will lead us to student success. And thank you for caring for our students and for each other at a time when society throws many obstacles in our way.

Before I continue, I would like to take a moment to welcome the newest members of our community (new faculty and staff...please stand).

This afternoon I want to remind you of our successes, share with you where we are, what our priorities are, how we will meet these priorities, and what role each of us must play in achieving our goals toward student success. I've got a lot to share with you this afternoon, so sit tight.

Because, while I continue to remain enthusiastic, optimistic, and positive about the present and future of Southern Connecticut State University, at the same time, these emotions must be tempered by the reality of the changing landscape on our campus and in higher education.

On a national level, the value of higher education is being questioned. With tuition rates continuing to rise and student debt spiraling, colleges and universities are increasingly being seen as elite institutions out of touch with what is happening in the real world.

There is an imperative for change and an incredible opportunity to provide relevant, value-added, accessible education. Which is where we come in...

As you know, we primarily serve a working class population, and national studies have shown that regional, public institutions like Southern consistently move students up the economic ladder. In a very real sense, we are educating the people who live in our communities, empowering them through education and increasing their social mobility.

And to me, that gives Southern wonderful value, and a wonderful sense of purpose.

Folks, we can make this a good time for Southern, and the people we serve.

I don't want to sugarcoat things...as you know, Southern and our sister CSU institutions continue to face a series of enrollment and financial challenges. As a result, the strength and resolve of our community will continue to be tested.

But overall, the "state of Southern" is very good, and something to be proud of. In the past 12 months we have come together as a community – built powerful relationships on and off campus, changed the tone of our community for the better, raised the profile of the institution (people are talking about Southern), set the stage for an increased donor base, and shown our resilience and strength as a community in an uncertain state fiscal climate. We've come together to explore strategic solutions to difficult enrollment and financial challenges, pulled together when staff resources and personnel were shrinking, rolled up our sleeves to give that little extra something.....and most importantly, we have done all this with a renewed focus on our students!

Moving forward we must continue to be intentional, present, and engaged in both strategic processes and the many initiatives we have embarked on if we are to ensure the success of our students and our institution.

Where do we stand as we begin this new academic year?

- We are almost at flat enrollment, welcoming many new students this fall - our transfer numbers are particularly strong, up 11 percent. But we are still facing challenges in retention and graduate studies.
- We ended the 2017 fiscal year with a very modest surplus, mostly the product of the hiring freeze that was instituted in the last quarter of the year - and we didn't have to draw on \$2M in reserves as we had anticipated.

- We're submitting our 2018 budget to the Board of Regents tomorrow, and it is tapping our reserves only marginally to be in balance (a few hundred thousand dollars on a \$221 million budget). We need to remain cautious, though, because the state still does not have a budget and the final numbers could be vastly different. This weekend, for example, a budget proposal passed by the state General Assembly included a \$30 million cut that would decimate our system and force us to close programs and eliminate services. While Governor Malloy has stated he will veto this budget, it only reinforces the fact that we are in a very precarious position and that unless we generate additional revenue and find new ways to do our work, we will pay a heavy price.
- With this scenario in mind, it's pleasing to note that private gifts to Southern have increased; total money raised is up 155% from three years ago. And, at a time of great need, Foundation scholarships were at an all-time high for fiscal year 2017 at just under \$800,000 - up 9.5% from 2016.
- As we begin the new academic year, we are moving forward with new priorities, which I'll speak about in depth shortly. All are directly linked to our Strategic Plan, entitled, "Discover Southern: A University for the 21st Century."
- I have to say that our campus looks wonderful - and a big shout out to Bob Sheeley and his facilities team here. You'll be pleased to know that our new Health and Human Services Building is well into the design phase and fully funded at \$74 million by the state - which is a great vote of confidence in our mission and the excellence of our offerings in this field.
- And in terms of facilities, we're not done there. On the horizon are a K-4 lab school - partnering with the City of New Haven - and a new home for our School of Business.
- We continue to be recognized for our efforts in sustainability. Southern is now featured annually in the Princeton Review listings of the nation's greenest colleges; Sierra Club ranked Southern among the top 125 coolest schools in the nation, and our science building was certified LEED® Gold, placing it among the top one-third of Connecticut's most sustainably designed certified buildings.
- We've had approvals for new academic programs in biotechnology, utilities management and environmental systems and sustainability studies - all of which will provide our students with new opportunities in cutting-edge fields.
- And I'm particularly excited about the pending launch of our third doctoral degree, this time in social work. Joining our existing Ed.Ds in educational leadership and nursing education, it will be the only one of its kind in New England and part of what we hope will be a continuing series of professional doctorates, reflecting the growing need for higher qualifications for advancement in fields like health and business.
- Looking further afield, we also received preliminary approval for our first joint master's programs, in business administration and coastal resilience, with our Trans-Atlantic partner, Liverpool John Moores University. We expect to see several hundred students from both institutions crisscrossing the Pond in future years. And an anticipated growing portfolio of joint master's degrees will make our collaboration unique in American higher education.

- We continued to forge vital new collaborations - We are now home to the Community Alliance for Research and Engagement (CARE), supporting its efforts to improve the health of residents in New Haven's lowest-income neighborhoods; we joined the Elm City Innovation Collaborative through our Bio-Path program...and we are welcoming the New Haven Symphony back to the Lyman Center after many years. Its first concert - Guys and Dolls, will be coming soon...get your tickets!
- We received praise at the state level for our efforts in establishing the Minority Educator Initiative through our School of Education. Partnering with local school districts and community leaders, we will recruit minority students into the education professions, offering more than \$70,000 in scholarships.
- During the last year, we were also recognized nationally on a number of different fronts - our nursing and reading programs, financial literacy advisement, our first-year experience program and our development efforts - the latter earning a national CASE award for excellence in higher education fundraising. Most recently we were honored for our successful use of data about student learning to help improve student performance. Southern was among just five colleges and universities in the country to be selected for this Excellence in Assessment designation.
- And in athletics - we reached the nationals in men's basketball and baseball, and continued our run as a conference powerhouse in men's and women's swimming and track and field.
- Folks, the great work that we do on behalf of our students makes a difference, and is rightly being recognized for doing so.

I am confident that we will add to these accomplishments and continue to build our sense of institutional pride. I hope that you will join me in this excitement as we move forward, unified as a community in our commitment to Southern's mission and to the students we serve. AASCU (the American Association of State Colleges and Universities) recently stated that the "sweet spot" in higher education is the connection between liberal arts and professional studies. Sound familiar? Southern is that "sweet spot."

Through our liberal arts programs, we provide our students with the intellectual toolkit that they will need in the rapidly changing economy of the 21st Century - among other things, the capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems. And through an excellent combination of faculty mentorship and experiential learning, our students also receive the practical skills that are a must for in-demand fields of employment

Did you know, for example, that annually we provide more than 2,700 experiential learning and workforce preparation opportunities through internships and on-the-job training, from student teaching to scientific research? Or that our 14 to 1 student-faculty ratio is one of the best of any public institution in Connecticut - the individual attention, it does make a difference.

Given our contributions as an institution, I would say that the buzz surrounding Southern is quite strong - and getting better. When I'm out in the community or meeting with alums, I consistently hear positive comments.

Thanks to our involvement and our increased visibility off-campus, I can't begin to tell you how many state government, local community and business leaders are excited about Southern and are happy about what we are doing here. Even my plumber gave us a plug last year after seeing one of our tv ads! The latest production is now ready to go...let's have a sneak peek here...

The beauty of these ads is that we show them not only on television, but also on social media, where they've received tens of thousands of views. If you're not following Southern's Facebook page I encourage you to do so - it's a great way to reach current and prospective students and their parents.

As I said, all these people I've been meeting have faith in our ability to solve our enrollment and financial challenges and want to know how they can help!

Think about it, since the fall of 2016 we have:

- Raised the profile of the university—significantly.
- Graduated some 1,600 students.
- Created five new degree programs.
- Hired 48 new full-time faculty, including 23 new tenure track.
- Raised more than \$3.6 million.
- Provided students almost \$800,000 in scholarship and program support
- Had 30,000 visits to our Academic Success Center - that's 10,000 more than the previous year and the attention has significantly impacted our students' academic status.
- Secured nearly \$3 million in grants - the largest was a \$340,000 NIH grant supporting a faculty research study of suburban opioid use - a timely and important topic.

In other new developments, we...

- Created a Southern Success Center, a one-stop resource for undergraduates that will help to navigate our policies and procedures and identify campus resources that will help them succeed.
- Continued the enhancement of faculty-student engagement through our FYE program. I should note that for the first time this year, Southern outdid the national sample of universities in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NESSE) category of supportive campus environment
- Moving on... we commenced a redesign of the university website and restructuring of its navigation, which will be completed this fall.
- In enrollment management, we introduced new technologies including undergraduate and graduate applications; a new admissions portal for applicants; and a friendlier advising platform.
- And we worked to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment on campus: launching a series of Courageous Conversations on societal issues; forming a Southern Student Support Team for Undocumented Students, and providing new facilities and programming for our LGBTQ+ community.

Where Are We?

- This fall, we welcomed more than 2,200 new students, and we sit at just about 10,200 students, or about 100 less than we had last year at this point.
- While our retention rate for first-year students is up, we also need to remain focused on sophomore and junior retention.
- Our six-year graduation rate is holding steady at 51.4 percent, but our 4-year rate of 23.7 percent clearly needs improvement.
- As I mentioned earlier, we have managed to balance this year's budget by making efficiencies, retirements, vacancy saving, etc. and despite the recent flurry of proposed plans, there may be no budget for the rest of the year. We're not Illinois, which had no budget for several years, but it's starting to seem like it.
- We certainly can't expect additional monies from the state. And that will present us with continued budget challenges through 2018 and 2019 as a result of our contractual obligations and the effects of inflation on our operating costs.
- We will need to be creative, innovative and work hard to address our weaknesses.
- Think about it, if we retained just 1 percent of our students we would easily reach our goal of 10,406. There it is...10,406!! We're talking about 90 or so students - it's not a huge mountain to climb.
- And we need to reverse the steady decline in our graduate numbers that we've seen the last few years. Improving retention and building a strong graduate program are at the core of a comprehensive university like ours - if these are areas of weakness, then we become vulnerable.
- But again, we must be open to change - we must offer our programming at times and in formats that meet the needs of the working professionals we serve. That's why I have asked Ian Canning to formulate a plan to expand our services to "nontraditional learners" through a Continuing Education program, building partnerships with regional employers and community organizations that support new program development and philanthropy.
- To attract adult learners, we need to examine our curriculum, delivery, and services, including more short-term, hybrid and online classes. It's the wave of the future for Southern...and we need to swim with it.

I'm sure you know that it takes a lot of time, energy, and dollars to run an institution; every aspect matters to the student experience. From the first time they hear our name through the multiple interactions and experiences students have, culminating in graduation.

Times ARE changing. Geographic borders are becoming meaningless. Competition for students is fierce. We will have to change or be changed. There will be no bailout from the state, and we would be foolish to expect or count on one.

Therefore, the implementation of our new Strategic Plan, "Discover Southern," will be critical to our future success.

We must improve our curriculum delivery, our customer service, and the student experience at all levels! We must eliminate barriers to ensure student success! And we must ensure that Southern is the preferred campus of choice within our system.

So – How Are We Going To Do This? In consultation with my senior leadership team, I have established a set of presidential priorities for this academic year, all closely linked to our Strategic Plan. Let me share them with you. The first is a broad set of priorities linked to:
The University Profile

Building on our efforts in the past year, we'll make every effort to raise our profile as an institution "in and of" the community.

As a good neighbor, we will enhance our presence in the local community with an emphasis on being seen as "the premier public University" of New Haven and Southern Connecticut. As part of this effort, we are developing a branding strategy for Southern, drawing on the findings of the Simpson Scarborough survey last year.

As you'll see on the slides behind me, the following priorities are subsets of the four transitional pledges made in our strategic plan. The first two fall under **Strategic Goal #1 - Provide exemplary, transformative and accessible education:**

Priority 1: Student Experience and Success – By assessing data related to our current enrollment status and trends, we'll create a strategic enrollment management strategy that will stabilize enrollment. The emphasis will be placed on determining the best enrollment size for Southern, new strategic recruitment and enhanced retention.

Part of this, of course is already underway, and I've just received a plethora of excellent recommendations from our Strategic Enrollment Management Plan Committee (SEMP-C).

I should note that as part of this process, we'll be working to identify disparities in academic success and achievement levels of students of color, seeking to improve their academic success as we move toward recognition as a Minority Serving Institution.

Priority 2: Academic Excellence/Curriculum/Academic Support – Here, we're going to assess our current curriculum and create a structure providing students with an "academic road map to success/completion." Emphasis will be placed on improved advisement, flexible programs and delivering a curriculum that is improved and more efficient.

After two years in development, the University will introduce a new, comprehensive undergraduate academic advising model with a goal of three years for full implementation.

We'll also continue to upgrade classrooms in an effort to provide a modern and compelling teaching/learning environment. Fifty-one classrooms have been renovated during the last two years.

As I mentioned earlier, we're going to explore opportunities to significantly increase our graduate enrollment including increased offerings of Professional Science Masters, "feeder" certificate programs, and blended 5-year (BS/MS, BA/MA) programs.

And, in what I believe will be a very fruitful partnership, shared degree programs and the establishment of "Southern at Gateway and Housatonic Community Colleges" will be introduced in Spring 2018. We'll be physically present and offering programs at both campuses, which is a very exciting prospect.

The next priority is linked to **Strategic Goal #2 - Advance a university-wide climate and infrastructure that nurtures creativity and innovation:**

Priority 3: Scholarship and Creativity – Southern will seek to enhance and support a growing base of scholarship and creative activities that promote our faculty disciplinary expertise and grow opportunities for supporting our students.

As part of this effort, we'll seek to triple our annual support from external agencies within five years, examine space needs for creative and scholarly endeavors and seek ways to enhance funding to support the activities of incoming faculty.

Strategic Goal #3 is: Promote community well-being, economic growth, and social justice by serving and leading in local and global communities:

It includes **Priority 4: Social Justice** - You've heard me say this many times, but I can never say it enough: we must ensure that that all members of our community are treated with dignity, respect, kindness, compassion and civility.

This November, we'll be expanding Social Justice Week to Social Justice Month, with a host of activities and awareness building opportunities. The President's Commission on Social Justice will also administer a campus climate assessment, launch grants to foster innovation for social justice, and identify policies that create barriers to inclusion.

And we've received donor funds to install a Sandy Hook Memorial in memory of our four Southern community members who lost their lives in that tragedy. The installation will occur in the spring and will be the start of our social justice reflection garden.

The last two priorities fall under Strategic Goal #4 - Steward the University's human, financial, technological, and physical resources in an ethical manner:

Priority 5: Entrepreneurship/Financial Stability – As I mentioned, the budget picture is not settled yet, but essentially we’re looking to create a 2018 budget that is balanced and doesn’t materially tap into campus reserves.

We need to find ways to right-size the institution and expand our revenue streams as we develop more efficient operational processes.

Which is where you come in: I’m looking for the entire campus to community to identify opportunities for efficiency, reorganization, or realignment of responsibilities.

For us to succeed, it has to be a team effort.

Priority 6: Fundraising - We’ll look to expand our portfolio of giving opportunities to enhance student access and success, through scholarships and other awards. As part of this, we’re in the process of establishing an Advancement Council, engaging academic partners and building positive working relationships with Institutional Advancement.

And we’ll continue planning for Southern’s first-ever Comprehensive Campaign, building momentum with the celebration of our 125th anniversary in 2018.

How You Can Help?

I am asking each of us to do the following:

Have institutional pride and to be optimistic. This may sound trite, but it matters to our community and our students. Our students are looking to us for reassurance and support.
WE NEED TO FIND NEWS WAYS TO DO OUR WORK!

We must focus on solutions and problem solving—focusing on that which is important! I want to know how X impacts your ability to do our job, help others, retain students and ensure their success.

I am asking you to fully participate in the process to share ideas and concerns with a focus on solutions. Do not wait for invitations to participate—take the initiative to do so!

Offer each other a helping hand and a kind word.

And remember that we are ALL enrollment managers—everything we do must be focused on the recruitment, retention, the successful completion of our students.

On that note, you’ll see that everyone had invitations to our upcoming graduate and undergraduate open houses placed on their chairs today. My challenge to you is... go out and give those materials to one potential student, and encourage him/her to attend the open houses on October 5 and 15, respectively.

There are more copies out in the lobby...if you can recruit more than one student, go ahead and do it. Remember that just one percent more students will see us reach our goal of 10,406!

I recognize that my words and actions as president have an effect on many people. In this realization, I strive to do all I can to help the morale of Southern be a positive one. With that said, I feel that we have a collective role in this process.

I challenge each of us to look for the good in each other and what is happening around us. I challenge each of us to embrace the message of compassion in our daily interactions.

I challenge each of us to build on the good things that are happening at Southern. And I challenge each of us to do our part in the success of the community.

I want to find new ways to celebrate our successes and the good works of everyone at Southern. Soon, for example, we'll be introducing a new program to recognize our students who maintain a 4.0 GPA through to graduation. It's a mark of excellence - why not celebrate it?

It is said that, "In the battle between the rock and the running stream, the stream always wins." Patience and persistence matters! And I ask that we be both patient and persistent in the months ahead.

This is a strong community. We've been tested before and we will continue to be tested, but I have faith in Southern, in our community, in YOU!

In closing, I want to invite the members of the Southern Blue Crew to join me up here. Starting during Homecoming Week, we're going to have one day a week - usually a Friday before weekend athletics events - designated as Southern Spirit Day, where we all show our true colors and wear Southern blue.

We'll have t-shirts with the new owl athletics logo - here's a sneak peek behind me - available for our students, so that they can trade in their UConn and any other college t-shirt.

It's another way to build community...a way to show that, together...WE ARE Southern.

Thank you, have a great semester and now I'll be happy to take your comments and suggestions for the next 25 minutes...