

Hello, everyone and welcome to our virtual Celebration of Philanthropy!

Like all of you, I wish this event was in person

But after a long and demanding year, hopeful signs abound, and for the fall, we are looking to resume many of our traditional campus activities, while continuing to observe social distancing protocols as needed.

By August 1st, we plan to have 100% of our staff on ground for final preparations for the new academic year.

And we anticipate that the fall semester will have a familiar, pre-COVID look, with faculty and staff resuming in-person teaching and working in a more robust campus living and learning environment.

In the fall, more than 75 percent of classes are currently scheduled to be offered either fully on-ground or in a hybrid format, with the remainder fully online.

And this represents an increase of more than 10 percent in our number of online offerings, compared with fall 2019 – a by-product of the pandemic that is certain to become a growing feature of higher education moving forward.

I'm so proud of the way that the members of our extended Southern community joined together to support each other and advance our mission during this difficult and stressful time.

We've faced – and continue to face – unprecedented challenges, but ours is a caring community and we have worked collectively to resolve issues as they arise.

The fact that we were able to remain open through the fall semester and into the spring – when many other institutions did not – says a great deal about our community and its shared resilience and commitment to student success.

Indeed, one positive by-product of the pandemic is that all of us have been forced to think in new, innovative ways.

And we have seen this repeatedly across our departments, from orientation and student engagement to enrollment services, information technology, facilities and residence hall preparation, alumni outreach, commencement and other special events.

All of this creative thinking and sheer hard work has ensured that Southern continues to operate effectively, and interact positively with our many constituencies during these extended months of remote learning and working.

Throughout it all, we have stayed...Southern Strong.

That's one reason why we are presenting today's event, as a way to acknowledge you, our donors, whose generosity has assisted so many of our students during a time when many are facing social and financial pressures.

On behalf of these students, I thank you – your support has never been more needed, or more meaningful.

There have been a number of highlights during the spring semester, and I'm happy to announce that last week, the 2021 Henry Barnard Distinguished Student Award recipients have been named. They are, Camryn Arpino-Brown (psychology), Therese Ziaks (chemistry), Paul McKee (psychology) and Asma Rahimyar, our 2020 Rhodes Scholar, (political science and philosophy).

All of these students are worthy of acclaim for their excellence in the classroom and their service to the community, but I do want to briefly single out one of them.

A Marine Corps veteran and a first-generation student, Paul McKee has stellar academic credentials that have earned him consideration as a finalist at top doctoral programs in neuroscience, including Stanford, Brown, and Duke.

His professors know Paul is an inspired learner, but he also inspires as a promoter of interdisciplinary research.

So much so, that he has worked with the SCSU Foundation to create an endowed scholarship fund through a personal donation of \$25,000.

This is a wonderful gesture from a non-traditional undergraduate.

Our students never fail to inspire.

I thought that you would also be pleased to know that new capacity limits for outdoor ceremonies will allow us to host some celebratory year-end events, including in-person Commencement ceremonies for our 2021 graduates. They'll be joined by a smaller number of 2020 graduates who've opted to walk this year.

Five joint undergraduate/graduate ceremonies will be held per School or College on Jess Dow Field May 18-19, with a limit of two guests per student.

This will be a joyous occasion, marking the first time that we will have held a major gathering on campus for almost one and a half years!

We're making every effort to make this occasion a special one for our seniors and graduate students, whose final academic year at Southern has been defined by pandemic restrictions.

All of these developments reaffirm that the beating heart of our institution is alive and well, and I firmly believe that there will be positive developments for Southern that will emerge in a post-COVID world.

During our months of remote teaching and working, we have gained expertise in new ways of offering both course delivery and student services, and the best of these may become a staple of our operations in the future.

There will also be new avenues to explore in academic programming, as the fall-out from COVID-19 creates new areas of workforce emphasis.

To remain competitive, we need to focus on regional needs, workforce development and industries of the future and also identify and promote nationally competitive degree programs.

Already, we have a host of new graduate programs approved for the fall, including an Executive master's in public health; master's degrees in Applied Behavior Analysis and Physical Activity and Chronic Disease; and our fourth doctorate, an EdD in Counseling Education and Supervision.

There are also a host of 4+1 programs, cutting edge certificate programs in data science and cybersecurity and a new bachelor's degree in tourism hospitality and event management. All geared toward current trends and marketplace needs.

As we move forward, there will be a renewed focus on community partnerships and philanthropic giving, along with grants and other sources of external funding.

And we will continue to work to build a campus community of understanding, acceptance and inclusion, by promoting awareness and removing systemic barriers to equity on our campus.

Our social justice commitment also extends to supporting our students who are in need.

And during this pandemic, the financial pressures have never been greater: nearly 80 percent of students at Southern rely on jobs to provide for life's essentials, yet many are still coming up short.

In the fall, we were able to take a large step to meet that need with the creation of Southern's Food Pantry and Social Services Center in the Wintergreen Building.

It was funded in large part by remarkable \$530,000 that you and a record number of donors contributed during our 2020 Day of Caring.

And it is symbolic of a commitment that we will continue to make to ensure our students' success in the classroom, and in their personal lives.

As you may know, we are currently in the midst of our 2021 Day of Caring campaign, which will culminate on April 28.

This event brings the Southern community together as ONE to help enhance programs and student scholarships.

At the conclusion of today's event, we will be releasing a very special \$25,000 matching gift that only you in attendance are aware of.

This means that you will be able to immediately log onto the giving link - southernct.edu/dayofcaring - (which is being entered into our chat here)...

... and a gift made to your scholarship could be doubled, up to \$5,000.

I'd like to thank Peter Werth Jr., for his very generous gift that is allowing us to do that.

Again, on behalf of our students, I want to thank each and every one of you for what you have done - and what you will do - to move Southern forward and help us achieve our goals.

I also urge you to reach out to your fellow alums, your friends and encourage them to join you in supporting Southern.

For just as a Southern education truly can transform our students' lives, it is also a gift that keeps on giving.

Across the state and beyond its boundaries, our graduates are leading by example in these unprecedented times...

...with our alumni in health care, business, education and other fields using their Southern education to serve others and keep our economy moving forward.

They are living proof that, when we invest in our students, we receive our investment back many times over.

Thank you again, everyone, and I hope that the warmer months ahead are personally rewarding and enjoyable for you and your family and friends.