

## **NEW STUDENT CONVOCATION**

President Joe Bertolino

August 26, 2019

So, here we are – WELCOME CLASS of 2023!

I hope you have enjoyed New Owl Weekend - your first couple of days as a member of this community.

I've had the chance to meet a lot of you – during move in, or with your athletic teams at CONN hall. In fact, one of you visited this past spring and indicated to me that he was planning to go to another institution, but evidently I talked him into coming here...not only did he enroll, he became part of our FLEX program (First Year Leadership Experience). I had to make sure I gave him a shout out because he introduced himself to me at least a dozen times and I had trouble remembering his name – Erian Diaz! So make sure, over the course of the semester, you stop me, reintroduce yourself and say "hello." Like Erian, be patient...may take me some time.

Before we get started....lets see if you remember what I taught you at orientation and if you are ready to start your new journey with us as a new OWL. SC.....SU.....

We have been waiting...for you.

And now, all of us are delighted that you're here, and we can't wait to help you feel at home and fully prepared to launch your college career.

You're arriving at a truly exciting time for Southern.

We just completing our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

We're creating new academic programs and partnerships that will prepare you to be part of a global society when you graduate.

Our campus already looks great, thanks to our hardworking facilities team. Down on Farnham Avenue, we're completing a new k-4 lab school, which will offer great experiential learning opportunities for our student teachers. And this fall we're going to be starting on a new health and human services building, followed by a new home for the School of Business

Want to intern with some of Connecticut's leading bioscience companies? You can do it here through our BioPath partnership with the City of New Haven.

Want to act with some of New England's most prominent thespians? You can do it here through the renowned Elm Shakespeare Company, now resident on our campus.

Want to study abroad in the hometown of the legendary rock group, the Beatles? You can, thanks to our growing exchange partnership with Liverpool John Moores University, in England.

Just the tip of the iceberg.

All of that may sound great, but I know that it takes a while to get to know a new place and new people.

And you are probably experiencing a lot of feelings at this time – in fact, they can be a bit overwhelming: excitement, nervousness, loneliness, anticipation – it's all good.

Because you know what? I felt that way too when I arrived here as president just over three years ago – it's a big change moving from the Northeast corner of Vermont, where I lived before coming here to urban New Haven.

But you know what helped me ...and it will help you...remembering that, YOU are not alone!

Sure, there will be challenges and obstacles along the way.

But there are literally hundreds of people and resources here to help and assist you in facing those challenges head on and finding and seizing opportunities. We want you to succeed – and if you take advantage of that help – you WILL succeed!

Because Southern is a special place, a tight-knit, supportive community where you will become the person YOU want to be -- just listen to these words of advice from three members of the Class of 2019:

“In just three years, I’ve been abroad three times doing mission work and studying independently at our sister school, Liverpool John Moores University. As a sustainability intern, I had the opportunity to build some great projects and help make Southern green” - Megan McNivens, a psychology major from Old Saybrook.

“If there’s one thing I wish more people knew about Southern, it’s how one-on-one you can get with faculty members, especially in your major. There’s nobody better to talk to you about your future than someone who does what you want to do.” - David Robledo, a public health major from Norwalk.

“I’m a people person, and I’ve always gotten such positive vibes from the faculty and staff. They care about your success and are willing to be there for whatever help you need.” - Paula Alarcon, a biochemistry major from East Haven.

These students clearly know what makes this place special. And they’re sharing that advice with you because they want you to have what they see as the true Southern experience.

And believe me, after a full round of Week of Welcome activities, and the start of your classes, you’ll soon be up and running. I promise.

So, who makes up your class?

Well, as of now, we have 1,545 registered Freshmen for Fall 2019.

In our Freshman class, we have...

- 39% who are male and 61% who are female
- and 40 % are students of color
- 95% of our new students are from Connecticut – 147 towns and cities
  
- 5% of your class are out-of-towners. They hail from 19 states – New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Hampshire, California, Delaware, Kansas, Illinois, Maryland, Maine, Minnesota, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia and Vermont, along with the District of Columbia.
  
- And they come from four foreign countries: Canada, Dominican Republic, Ghana and the United Arab Emirates.
  
- The top 5 majors of the entering class are Nursing, Undeclared, Business, Education and Psychology
  
- This year, we have 178 students who've come to us through GearUp programs in Waterbury, New Haven and East Hartford: congratulations to all of you!
  
- And a big shout out to those of you who are legacies - your Mom or Dad - or both! - attended Southern. (Raise your hand)
  
- Among your number is a certified Horseback Riding Instructor who trains horses and practices therapeutic riding with children with disabilities.
  
- Another new student did a multi-year internship at a fish production laboratory and successfully designed an environment for spawning a colony of comb jellyfish.
  
- I met a student on Saturday who plays the Yukalali.
  
- Another of your classmates provided leadership for a “Mane Event” at 15 hair salons, raising more than \$30,000 for Infinite Love For Kids Fighting Cancer.

- And another founded an awareness-promoting Gay-Straight Alliance at their high school and plans to start a non-profit advocating for the mental health issues of LGBTQ youth.
- And finally, another started a We Are the People First organization to promote respect for people with disabilities – oh, and by the way, she is also the reigning Miss Teen USA!

As you know, our admissions staff read all of your essays, and they told me that they were struck by how much many of you have in common: students of immigrants; first-generation college students; students who struggled to find themselves during high school; students who have lost loved ones; who overcame challenges; students who wrote about their faith and their families and those who inspire them.

These are your classmates, and I encourage you to share your personal stories with them, because each of your unique experiences and viewpoints will enrich our academic community.

Now, you have grown up with technology – it has helped you learn and communicate, and has made the world a much smaller place than it was when I was a college freshman.

Those are all good things!

I'm guessing you will learn a lot about one another and share through texting, tweets, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook – as you should (just not during this convocation!)

In fact, I invite you to get engaged with our vibrant social media scene at Southern and also visit my sites on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook – just look for the handle SCSUTopOwl and check in when I do my Friday Snapchat takeovers.

But if I have one main piece of advice for you today, it is this:

Over the next few years, take full advantage of the rich array of intellectual, social, cultural, and service opportunities available to you both on our campus, and in the wider community.

Show up, get involved, meet new friends, connect with your faculty, staff, peers. And if you pay attention, you'll learn how to interact with people whose ideas and values may be completely opposite to yours, and to see the world from their point of view.

This point is critical, because, as you know, our country continues to be tarnished by recent incidents of bigotry, racial hatred and violence.

As we begin a new academic year here at Southern, I believe it's important to emphasize that we value each and every member of our community, as part of our campus wide commitment to social justice.

We will not tolerate hate in this community. We will not tolerate racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, or any form of bigotry whatsoever.

At the same time, we also value the right to free speech and to airing different perspectives - even some that you might not agree with.

Where better to learn about others points of view and to debate and converse with others who you differ with, than on a college campus? And you will.

You'll find that we have created a campus culture where people are willing to share their multiple points of view on myriad topics and participate in constructive dialogue, in a safe, welcoming environment.

And for this to continue, it's imperative that all of us treat one other with dignity, respect, kindness, compassion and civility.

Because it is by joining these two values -- social justice and free speech -- that we can best have respectful and truly productive "courageous conversations," about the pressing issues of the day.

Remember, that as the newest members of our campus community, you have a larger responsibility – to each other. When you participate in events and activities, when you walk around this campus, when you interact with others, you must be “intentionally kind.”

It could be as simple as helping a person carry a package or their books. It could be a bit more challenging: confronting inappropriate behavior or hurtful remarks.

Helping a fellow student with their classwork, saying a kind word, giving someone words of encouragement, saying thank you your housekeeper, custodian, receptionist, police officer, food service worker, etc, standing up for an injustice, fighting for what you believe is right. These things matter at Southern.

So, I end with this story.

A field mouse asked a wise owl – what is the weight of a snowflake? “Why nothing more than nothing!” answered the owl.

The mouse went on to tell the owl about the time he sat on a branch and counted each snowflake until the number was exactly 3 million, 471 thousand, 952.

Then with the settling of the very next flake – CRACK.

The branch suddenly snapped, tumbling the mouse and the snow to the ground. “Humph...such was the weight of nothing,” said the mouse.

So, the next time you think your contributions, your acts of charity, your works of justice, your gifts of love, and your “intentional kindness” are nothing, think again! They all add up, allowing great things to happen.

Just remember - you too, can make a difference.

Welcome to Southern!