

TOWN HALL REMARKS
APRIL 22, 2021

Hello everyone, I hope that you're doing well as we enter the final weeks of the spring semester.

As I reflect on the past year, I feel so proud of the incredible job that we have done as a campus community to prioritize health and well-being, while never losing our focus on student success.

I'm well aware also, that for many of you, this period has been exhausting, both mentally and emotionally.

COVID-19 and its economic and social repercussions, incidents of racial injustice, and a contentious presidential election added to the stress of an unprecedented year.

Many of you have had to deal with loss, in its varied forms, and I am inspired by your ability to move forward at a time of personal stress.

Ours is a caring, resilient community, and we will continue to, look out for each other's health and welfare.

With the arrival of spring on campus, the trees are budding, daffodils are blooming and we see students out enjoying the sunshine on the Buley Patio with the return of the picnic tables.

This is a time for hope, a time to look forward to "the new normal."

Athletics has begun to welcome spectators to their spring sports – baseball, softball and women's lacrosse. We are excited to get back on the field and show our Owl Pride!

We're also preparing to hold some of our traditional end-of year celebrations on campus with the addition of a tent next to Conn Hall, and we anticipate the excitement of five commencement ceremonies in May.

Despite the many hopeful signs this spring, we must also remember that we are not yet out of COVID-19's reach.

I know that everyone is tiring of wearing masks and putting distance between us and our colleagues or students, but we must remain vigilant.

The University will continue to require the use of masks and encourage social distancing through the fall. And, we will continue to follow the recommendations and directives of the CDC and the CT Department of Public Health.

With the emergence of new variants, the number of positive cases in Connecticut has risen as of late and we are still a few weeks away from everyone 16 years and older being able to obtain a vaccine.

While the University will not require that everyone be vaccinated (as a state agency we do not have this authority), we strongly encourage every member of our community to do so.

It is only with a high percentage of our campus community receiving the vaccine that we will get close to herd immunity and imagine a vibrant and active campus in the fall

We recently partnered with Yale-New Haven Health to provide vaccinations to our students in three locations across the state. And in addition, we are exploring an incentive program to encourage individuals to get vaccinated.

So, please continue to take precautions and take care of yourselves and each other.

As you can see, I'm speaking to you today from the patio of Buley Library, and it's great to see familiar faces in attendance – some of whom I haven't seen in a long while! – in the socially distanced audience in front of me.

I wanted to hold this Town Hall "in person," even though many of you will be viewing it virtually.

In doing so, I feel that this symbolizes our transition to resuming campus life in the fall, in the context of health and safety protocols that must still be followed.

In the coming weeks, we will provide a more detailed, University wide re-entry plan.

What I can tell you is this: Beginning June 1st, we will phase in return to work.

How that happens will differ by division, based on immediate, on-the-ground staffing needs.

For example, staff who are student-facing and required for various services or events such as orientation may need to return on June 1st to assist in students' transitions for the fall.

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

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.

For 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 a growth of more than 10 percent in our number of online offerings, compared with fall 2019.

Already, our facilities team is hard at work, remeasuring classroom spaces to prepare for the three-foot separation guidelines that will apply in the fall.

It's important to remember that, while many of us have had the opportunity to complete our workdays from our homes, our facilities staff have been here throughout, keeping our campus clean and operational until we return.

Let's give all of our facilities staff – and our police officers, who've been maintaining campus security – a round of applause.

On a personal level, each of us needs to think carefully about what it will be like to return to campus, and begin to prepare.

For most of us, it will be an adjustment to assume routines that are closer to pre-COVID times while continuing to be masked with social distancing – which we anticipate will continue for some time.

As I have mentioned previously, there are many members of our extended community who have struggled during this pandemic, whether due to COVID itself, or the economic and social repercussions of the pandemic.

I urge you again to pursue the ethic of care that is key to our commitment as a social justice university, and reach out to students, friends, and colleagues who may need our support and understanding as we transition back to campus.

For the rest of this semester, we will continue to pursue mainly virtual teaching and working through the end of the semester, with limited on-ground activities.

But as I mentioned, the 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.

Due to continued social distancing requirements, there is a great deal of planning and work involved.

More than 50 volunteers are needed for each ceremony, so if you can, please respond to the call that went out via email last week.

It's a great chance for you to celebrate with our seniors and reflect on a challenging year in which all of us have accomplished a great deal.

Those accomplishments go well beyond the notable fact that we were able to complete the fall semester with modest COVID numbers – even as other institutions struggled to stay open or moved entirely virtual.

What I am most proud of, is the fact that we never flinched from our commitment to student success and we remained a socially and intellectually vibrant community. Examples of this have been seen throughout the spring semester.

In fact, April has already been a remarkably busy month for Southern-hosted events and conferences.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the welcome opportunity to engage in two excellent events that highlighted our institution wide commitment to social justice:

The first, was a public webinar on the topic of "Green Recovery, Climate Solutions and a Just Transition," in which Southern joined the University of Connecticut and more than 100 other universities worldwide to focus on a critical question:

What can we do this year to help solve climate change while supporting struggling communities that have faced joblessness, sickness and loss?

The second was Dreaming America, in which our Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program hosted poet and activist Seth Michelson for a series of events focusing on the plight of detained children awaiting asylum hearings at the southern border

During his three-day virtual visit, Dr. Michelson met with classes, talked with area Latinx leaders and immigration agencies, presented a public lecture and engaged with community members on how to engage meaningfully in advocacy and social activism.

Congratulations to the organizers of these two thought-provoking and profoundly meaningful events.

This week sees two more major events, our Women's and Gender Studies Conference, focusing on "Gender, Race, Community & Conflict: Pursuing Peace & Justice, Friday and Saturday.

And also tomorrow, the College of Education Virtual Colloquium Series, which has reached hundreds of alumni during the past year, will present COVID-19: What is the future of our children's education?

The featured speakers are Alberto Carvalho (Miami-Dade County Superintendent of Schools and the National Superintendent of the year 2014) and U.S. Representative Jahana Hayes, Southern alumna and National Teacher of the Year 2016.

Please take the opportunity to join this critical conversation.

In recent weeks, we have also received several notable grants:

The National Science Foundation has awarded Southern \$1.4 million over five years to help bolster science and math education in the state's high-needs school districts by recruiting and training a diverse, high-quality pool of STEM teachers.

This funding from the NSF's Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program will support 30 full-tuition scholarships to cover our education students' expenses in their final two years, provided they plan to teach in a high-needs school district for at least four years after graduation.

Congratulations to Carrie-Anne Sherwood, assistant professor of curriculum and learning, who specializes in science education, and is the project coordinator and principal investigator for the grant.

Meanwhile, CARE Director Alycia Santilli is spearheading the implementation of a \$571,000 grant from the CDC to improve COVID-19 vaccine confidence and vaccine access in communities of color in New Haven.

And in Biology, Betsy Lewis Roberts and Rebecca Silady have just been awarded a \$500,000 grant through the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

This award will provide undergraduates from under-represented groups with summer internships in plant health and protection at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station.

Do you notice a common theme in all of these grants? Providing access, serving the community – both critical aspects of our social justice-themed mission.

I'm also happy to announce that 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 the first time in Southern's history that a current student has established such a fund – a truly wonderful gesture.

Our students never fail to inspire.

On the subject of philanthropy, our School of Business recently received its largest ever gift, \$500,000 from SCSU Foundation Board member Lindy Lee Gold to establish an Endowment for Leadership Development.

This wonderful gift from a longstanding supporter of the university comes at a red-letter time for our business school, with the arrival of new Dean Jennifer Robin this summer, a September 17 groundbreaking for a new, home on Wintergreen Avenue, and national accreditation in its sights.

I should note that this new building will be self-sustaining in terms of energy use, supplied by geothermal wells for heating and cooling.

It's the latest in a number of notable sustainability initiatives – our solar panels and the fuel cells that are now being installed on campus will save us more than \$1 million annually in electricity costs.

Back to our philanthropic efforts, which during the pandemic were highlighted by the record-breaking Day of Caring campaign last spring that raised more than half a million dollars.

This outstanding response enabled us to establish a food pantry and social services center in the Wintergreen Building to help us assist our students who were struggling to meet their essential needs.

On April 28, we will mark our 2021 Day of Caring, and with more than \$100,000 in matching gift, there are more opportunities for you to be involved – please give whatever you can to support our students and advance Southern's mission!

I've mentioned in the past how impressed I have been by the creativity of our faculty and staff during this time.

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 academic support to enrollment services, information technology, alumni outreach, special events and others.

For example, IT will be rolling out Hyland Onbase as our new digital imaging and workflow system over the next few months: a critical first step in becoming a paperless university.

They're also expanding outdoor wireless across more of campus and are continuing to adapt classrooms and ramp up support for the various learning modalities that came to the fore during the pandemic.

In the arts, Larry Nye and the Crescent Players produced the Theatre Department's first-ever live, virtual musical *Songs for a New World*, which appropriately had the theme that people's hopes and dreams will help light the way to a better future.

Directing and choreographing the live streamed performances was a challenge – four actors were on stage, masked and 25 feet apart and four offstage on microphones. Support roles such as costume and set designers had to be totally reimagined.

It was daunting, but they accomplished it for four live performances – a wonderful example of Southern talent and ingenuity.

As we start to look past the semester's end, most Summer Session offerings will be virtual, as has become the norm in recent years.

But as we welcome our new students and transfers, we will be offering an array of one-day, in-person Orientation programs on campus, complemented by digital offerings in both synchronous and asynchronous formats for both students and parents.

Our Fall 2021 New Owl Welcome and New Student Move-In for August are also under development.

And as part of this, we plan to offer specific programs, events and activities for sophomores, as many of them have not had an opportunity to fully experience campus life.

All of these programs represent hours of planning and collaboration among our Student Affairs staff and other entities on campus.

As we look ahead, I and members of my leadership team have been developing a set of priorities to move us forward in the fall and beyond.

I will be sharing these shortly with the campus community, and we will be discussing them in more detail through a series of symposia this fall. But for now, I wanted to take the opportunity to review them briefly here.

Some will be familiar, others are new, and in direct response to the events of the past year.

As you know, we aspire to be the Social Justice and Anti-Racist Public University of Connecticut,

and this overarching goal is influenced by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the new economic and social realities faced by many members of our extended community.

Our task is to address these challenges, while continuing to advance our mission of access and affordability, and ensure student success by committing to the following priorities:

Our first, is preparing Southern for the future, in a post-COVID world.

Key to this is stabilizing the university's fiscal position.

While we have received more than \$25 million in federal institutional aid and another \$20 million for student relief, those enormous figures are a one-time deal and will not resolve our fiscal issues moving forward.

It's important to note that, prior to the COVID outbreak, we were already facing both enrollment and fiscal challenges. The pandemic has exacerbated these problems.

With an enrollment shortfall of almost 20 percent in last year's entering class, and more students than ever before facing economic hardship, it's essential that we develop new

revenue streams to enhance our financial aid resources and fund research, creative activity and program development.

Even as we face the reality that Southern may permanently become a smaller institution, enrollment remains key.

Two weekends ago, we were pleased to host our first larger scale in-person event, when 500 students and family members took part in Admitted Owl Day, touring campus and meeting with student ambassadors and staff.

Our current enrollment goal for new first year students is 1,200, and we're aiming to bring in 700 new transfer students for the fall.

Transfer deposits have remained very strong over the last two years and first year deposits are up over 2020 but behind 2019. Still, we are confident that we have enough admitted students to reach our goal – and graduate enrollment is still trending very positively.

Fall registration has been open for a couple of weeks, and students and advisors now have access to a tool called College Scheduler, allowing students to enter the courses they need and review all available schedule options. This is a tool that the Student Government Association advocated and it is now up and running!

To remain competitive, we also 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.

Of course, bringing in new students is just one element of building enrollment, our second priority.

Moving forward, it is essential that we use data-informed decision making to enhance graduation and retention rates, which, frankly are not where they should be, when measured against those of our peers.

A key way to ensure student success – priority number three - is by removing obstacles to graduation in both our curriculum and bureaucratic processes, while at the same time providing quality, flexible service and an ethic of care to our students.

The college experience can be challenging at any time, let alone during a pandemic, and it's essential that we promote student well-being – both mental and physical health – while enhancing their confidence, resourcefulness and resiliency.

And we all know that outcomes are essential, so we must increase our focus on career readiness, preparation and employability.

As you are well aware, racial injustice has fractured our society in recent times.

And its effects are again resonating this week, with the conviction of Police Officer Derek Chauvin, for the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis last summer.

Our next priority: advancing social justice and anti-racism on campus and beyond, is critical if we are to fully build a campus community of understanding, acceptance and inclusion.

As we move closer to becoming a minority serving institution, we must recruit and retain more faculty and staff of color to reflect the diversity of the student population...

... and remove basic barriers to access from the perspective of first-generation and low-income populations.

With the leadership of our new Division of Equity and Inclusion, we must also create a culture of accountability and responsibility that is committed to realigning policies and procedures that perpetuate inequity, racism and bias.

In recent months, we have held a number of critical conversations on campus relating to racial justice and equity, and students have been notably engaged.

Earlier this week, for example, the Student Activism Committee hosted a town-hall called Words Matter: How Slurs Impact Others, in the Residence Life Quad Life Quad.

And given, disturbing trends of violence nationally toward people who identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander - we are developing a set of programs to recognize May as Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

Please take the opportunity to join in these discussions, share your views and most importantly, learn. Education is power!

Finally, as a public institution, it is incumbent upon us to engage the wider community and expand our reach.

This can include finding more opportunities for experiential learning, internships and off-campus employment, and creating new partnerships with area schools, non-profits and the corporate sector.

But as I mentioned earlier, we must also look to expand the University's donor base and enhance our connections with alumni, many of whom have valuable mentor potential for our students.

Before I take your questions, I want to thank each and every one of you again for your selfless dedication to this university and our students during a time of unprecedented challenge and stress.

In many ways, you set a benchmark for others to follow – you were truly, Southern Strong.

Thank you.