

TOWN HALL REMARKS
APRIL 21, 2022

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

It's great to be able to offer these annual remarks in person, and again see so many familiar faces in attendance.

As I reflect on the past year, I am 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.

The collective lift has been exceptional. But today, I want to give a special mention to some folks who were true leaders in our pandemic response efforts:

Erin Duff, our COVID Coordinator, Jules Tetreault, Dean of Students, Melissa Lopez, who led our contact tracers and Dr. Diane Morgenthaler and her staff at the Granoff Health Center. Let's give them a round of applause!

I'm well aware also, that for many of you, this period – indeed, the last two years – has been exhausting, both mentally and emotionally.

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.

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

As we move into the endemic phase of COVID-19, we will adjust and comply with state public health and CDC directives as needed.

And even though most of our health and safety protocols are no longer in place, I ask you to remain respectful of those who wish to continue to observe them.

During my class Leadership Retreat, the students were talking about the future, new possibilities and how they could make a difference.

This is not the first time I've heard these type of comments, they've been echoed in student group meetings – even in media interviews.

Our students get it – they come here not just for an education, but for something bigger – they want to make a difference.

And that tells me that our message, and the personal example we're setting through our commitment to social justice and anti-racism is making an impression.

On a related note, it's pleasing to see that our DEI Division is on the verge of becoming fully established, moving this summer to a full suite of offices in the former Health and Human Services area of Engleman Hall.

DEI has a new AVP with whom many of you have had the pleasure of working – Dr. Kelvin Rutledge – and is in the process of hiring for two new positions. The first is focused on recruitment and retention of faculty and staff of color; the second will expand DEI development and educational training.

This outreach will be critical as we enhance our efforts to promote social mobility and close equity gaps.

The arrival of spring on campus brings with it a sense of renewal: 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.

It's also energizing to view the progress on our two major building projects – the Health and Human Services Building and the new home for our School of Business. The HHS building will be formally opened with a ribbon cutting ceremony early next semester.

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

Athletics has welcomed spectators to their spring sports – baseball, softball and women's lacrosse. We are excited to be out on the field and showing our Owl Pride!

Last month, if you recall, we had a thrilling week of athletic success, with our men's and women's swimming and diving teams and our men's track and field team winning their respective Northeast-10 championships.

These teams have been dominating the conference for many years, speaking to the enduring excellence of our athletics program.

Our technology department, which did tremendous work to sustain our online operations during the last two years, has begun a major network refresh project to maintain a resilient and secure computing environment, scheduled for completion in 2024.

The launch of an improved Banner Web experience for students is also imminent. The new Banner will have a modern interface and will have the same features whether you are using a computer, tablet, or phone.

To close the spring semester, we're also preparing to hold our traditional end-of-year celebrations in person for the first time in three years – Honors Convocation, senior send-off and our commencement ceremonies in May.

We're making every effort to make these occasions special for our seniors and graduate students, whose time at Southern, at least in part, was defined by pandemic restrictions.

So, if you can, please take the opportunity to volunteer at any of our ceremonies by responding to the call that went out recently by campus email.

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

Through all the ups and downs, we never flinched from our commitment to student success and we are reclaiming our former status as a socially and intellectually vibrant community.

Examples of this have been seen throughout the academic year, and April has already been a remarkably busy month for Southern-hosted events and conferences.

Recently, I had the welcome opportunity to engage in two excellent events that highlighted our institution wide commitment to social justice:

Two weeks ago, our Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program presented author and activist Carol Lindskoog for a series of events focusing on the plight of Haitian refugees and the rise of the world's largest immigration detention system.

Just yesterday, our Judaic Studies Program hosted a virtual symposium on War and Hope in Ukraine, in which a diverse range of scholars, writers and scientists analyzed the conflict in its multiple and overlapping contexts.

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

I note that events in Ukraine once again remind us how fragile life is, and of the importance of not taking our rights and opportunities for granted.

As a community, we stand with the Ukrainian people, and send our thoughts, prayers and wishes for peace.

And we should remember that there are also other crises around the globe where lives are at risk, and to be mindful of our social justice commitment in the way we view the larger world.

As you know, a large part of being a social justice university is establishing productive partnerships with the community.

We've established two such high-profile collaborations in recent weeks ...

The New Haven Symphony recently announced its residency at the Lyman Center for the 2022/23 season.

This will not only bring concerts to Southern but also a host of internship and learning opportunities through our new Arts Administration and Cultural Advocacy Minor and a new degree in Music Therapy, the only one of its kind in Connecticut.

In late March, there was outstanding news about an expansive new partnership between Southern and Yale-New Haven Health System.

This multi-million-dollar collaboration will provide staff resources, clinical placements, and financial support to our School of Nursing, enabling us to double the number of students who graduate with a nursing degree by 2026.

Not only will this partnership enhance our response to critical workforce needs, it also supports two new initiatives to enhance diversity in the nursing ranks: providing nursing education and career growth opportunities for certified nursing aides and high school students, respectively.

Congratulations to our nursing faculty and Dean Sandy Bulmer for spearheading this impactful partnership with a health system that already employs more graduates from Southern than from any other university.

On a side note, this grant pushes our funding for external awards past the \$9 million mark for FY 2022 – more than triple the amount we received five years ago.

On campus, we have a number of initiatives underway this semester that speak to the heart of our social justice, anti-racist mission:

These collaborative faculty-staff efforts are focused on providing support and academic success for First Generation students, male students of color, undocumented students and high schoolers preparing for college.

One campus entity that has been doing similar work for many years is the Southern Educational Opportunity program, known to most of us as SEOP.

Now entering its 50th year, this wonderful program provides learning and practical skills for promising students facing educational or economic disadvantages that have impacted their preparedness for college.

The program has impacted thousands of students and continues to transform lives and communities.

Dawn Stanton, our director of University Access Programs which includes SEOP, notes that 50 years ago, Southern was less than 1% racially diverse.

Now, 47% of our students are students of color, and diversity is one of our greatest strengths.

The 50th anniversary of SEOP will be celebrated during this year's Homecoming and it will be wonderful to connect with alumni faculty and staff who have helped so many reach their fullest potential.

Jim Barber was the founder of SEOP – Jim, where are you? This program is just one of the high points of your outstanding legacy at Southern!

As you know, one of the high points of the fall semester was the site visit of the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) reaccreditation team.

It followed an exhaustive self-study that said so much about what we have accomplished and what a strong and resilient institution we are.

Thanks to these efforts the NECHE Team concluded its visit with an overwhelmingly positive exit presentation.

I'll be heading to Boston tomorrow to present to the NECHE Board, and I'm confident that we are well poised for a successful 10-year reaccreditation.

Speaking of accreditation, our College of Education recently went through a highly successful review of its teacher and administrator preparation programs.

Southern's performance was assessed against nationally recognized standards and approval was gained with zero conditions attached – an outstanding testament to our commitment to providing the best academic experience we can for our future teachers and school leaders.

Education has other reasons to celebrate: The Obama Magnet University School will hold its pandemic-delayed ribbon-cutting on May 1, with on-campus activities already underway for the “Young Scholars,” as the principal names her students.

And the New Center for Teaching and Learning has been established, launching a year-long colloquium series on mental health as it relates to teaching and learning

Congratulations to Dean Stephen Hegedus and our education faculty on these excellent accomplishments.

And finally, two pieces of exciting news just in:

Earlier this week, at the state Capitol, Governor Lamont hosted the GreenerGovCT awards ceremony, promoting sustainability initiatives at all state agencies and institutions.

I’m proud to say that Southern was recognized twice at this event (and the only university to receive these accolades).

First, we received the Impact Project Award for our three high-impact renewable energy projects – the solar panel installations in various locations on campus, the hydrogen fuel cells placed near the energy center and the 64,000 square foot net-zero building that will soon house the School of Business on Farnham Avenue.

We also received the Innovation Award for the efforts by Suzie Huminski and Heather Stearns from our Office of Sustainability to build and expand the office’s sustainability internship program, which now has more than 70 alumni.

Congratulations to Suzie and Heather, along with Mark Rozewski and Eric Lessne, our AVP for Capital Budgeting and Facilities Operations – our greening efforts are being recognized at the highest levels, and saving the university more than a million dollars in energy costs into the bargain.

I’m also happy to announce that the 2021 Henry Barnard Distinguished Student Award recipients have been named. They are, Sarah Gossman, (History); Dominique Dickenson, (Psychology); Greta Brunello, (Health and Movement

Sciences) and Sydney King, (Anthropology), who is currently working with marginalized communities during a study abroad semester in Chile.

All of these students are deserving of acclaim for their excellence in the classroom and their service to the community.

And finally, as you may know, last week's Day of Caring, raised a record \$865,469 from 1,554 donors, whose average gift of \$557 also set a new record!

Not only did this event raise crucial funds for scholarship and programmatic support, it also generated a vibrancy on campus and unity of purpose that truly brought us Together as ONE.

Indeed, our philanthropy efforts have been making great strides.

Two weeks ago, the College of Health and Human Services received its largest ever collective gift from three individuals – two of whom, Sharon Misasi and Pat Panichas - are both alumni and faculty members, making this support all the more special.

The Believe Fund, also established by Sandy DeCicco, will assist students who are encountering unexpected financial challenges.

We announced the fund during a day long series of events hosted by Sandy's nephews - Jim, Jake and Jordan DeCicco – who spoke with students about their successful entrepreneurial venture, Super Coffee.

And this just in: The Werth Family Foundation, which endowed the Werth Center for Coastal and Marine Studies, has recently agreed to make another multi-million-dollar gift to support the Werth Nanotechnology Industry Academic Fellowship Endowment.

We have already hit the ground running with the selection of the 2022 Werth IAF Fellowship recipients. They will conduct research in partnership with leading companies on environmental sustainability research topics, including fuel cells, energy storage devices and carbon capture.

Congratulations to Christine Broadbridge, our executive director for research and innovation for her continued efforts to ensure that Southern creates new career growth opportunities in the sciences for our students...

And to Vice President for Institutional Advancement Michael Kingan and his team for their excellent fundraising work, which helps ensure that every Southern student receives an exceptional education and the support they need to achieve their goals.

As you just have heard, there are many great things happening at Southern, and our mission of education continues unabated, despite the challenges presented by the pandemic.

However, while COVID-19 may have lost much of its potency, the economic and social repercussions, are still being felt and are likely to linger for a long time yet.

I know that many of you, particularly those who have been at Southern for a long time, have seen fiscal crises come and go, often with minimal effect on our mission and operations.

Believe me when I say, this time is different.

While we will not know the full picture until May, there will be no magic bailout from the state, and the CSCU system collectively is tens of millions of dollars in the hole.

All of our peers have had enrollment challenges. The community colleges have suffered a major decline, which affects all of the four-years since the community colleges are our feeder institutions.

As a result, at least one of our peers is in critical shape: struggling to remain solvent and sustainable.

I have to be honest and say, there but for the grace of God go we – the only difference is that we have more time to make the necessary corrections, thanks in large part to the careful fiscal stewardship of Mark Rozewski and his team.

Currently, we have a structural deficit of about \$25 million – yes, you heard that correctly. It is the largest fiscal challenge we have ever faced.

This is real – and we won't be able to cover the gaps with federal COVID assistance funds next year. The support we received was a one-time deal and will not be available moving forward.

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

To further illustrate this point, and in light of these circumstances, CSCU President, Terrence Cheng has instructed each University President to conduct a deep dive of their respective institutional budgets. Specifically, we have been instructed to present to the BOR a balanced budget, that does NOT propose to use reserves, that reduces costs and identifies academic program changes and non-academic services.

I've asked Mark to work with his team to do a thorough analysis of our revenues and expenditures – looking at our costs per FTE, how much we spend on personnel etc.

Currently, we have about 80 vacant positions and an increasing number of retirements, approaching the 100 mark, two-thirds of them being staff – we will examine each vacant position strategically and determine whether or how it needs to be refilled.

Looking ahead, we will need to rethink our budget structures and strategies – how we distribute resources as well as how we fill vacancies.

With this in mind, I've also asked each vice president to look at their organizational structures so that we can create a viable staffing plan and ensure we have the right people in the right places.

We will also look to support our faculty so that they can spend more of their time in the classroom, freed from the burden of the administrative duties that come with release time.

And we will also review and streamline our curriculum, which has been in need of change for some time now.

Simply put, we have too many majors and classes on our books, which doesn't make sense considering the number of students who are now enrolled.

I need everyone to understand that we are not going to grow through traditional enrollment – the demographics are against us.

As a case in point, our new undergraduate enrollment for Fall 2022 is projected to be stable.

We're seeing double digit increases in applications, a positive pace in first year deposits and a strong head start in new transfer registration.

Thank you to the many Southern community members who contributed to a successful Admitted Student Day a few weeks ago.

So far, about 70% of visitors that day have committed to Southern.

You'll notice, however, that I mentioned the word "stable" when it comes to undergraduate enrollment.

The potential growth areas are in non-traditional students; online or hybrid offerings and early college for high school students – all of which we are actively pursuing and will need to do more extensively.

For example, recently we have moved a number of previously on-ground degree programs to either hybrid or online (including our MSW, MFT, MSN, MS degrees in Computer Science and School Psychology and our doctorate in Educational Leadership).

Moving forward, it is also 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.

For example, our student to faculty ration is 11.4 to 1 and our cost per degree is \$30,000 higher than our peers and is higher than Central and Eastern. Yet, our student success rates do not reflect that level of investment.

It is time for some serious self-reflection and a new strategic path.

I have talked for some time about the need to right-size Southern – that time is now. The days of 12,000-plus students will never return. In fact, returning to 10,000 students will be a challenge.

Given this new reality, it is critical that we begin to plan and act now to ensure Southern's immediate and long-term future.

I've previously shared with you a set of priorities that I developed with my leadership team to help the university move forward in the short-term.

Again, these fell under the general themes of stabilizing our fiscal position, managing enrollment, ensuring student success, advancing social justice and anti-racism on campus and beyond, and expanding our community engagement.

These priorities will help us set the stage for our new five-year strategic plan, with the current plan concluding at the end of the next academic year (22/23).

As you know, the previous plan was intended to be 10 years in duration, but we have elected to retire it early, in order to adjust and adapt to the post-COVID landscape.

Details about the structure and process for developing this document will be released during the summer.

So, as you can hear, there are new challenges and new opportunities – and we need to address the former before we can fully seize the latter.

Last week, many of you took the opportunity to attend one of the forums moderated by Dr. Matthew Ceppi, an AASCU consultant who has been working with the extended President's Leadership Council, which assists me in shaping strategy to move the university forward.

The purpose of these forums was to help us operationalize the priorities that I mentioned above – an essential precursor to building a new strategic plan.

After the forums, a number of key points emerged. Several, you'll note, are a familiar refrain:

- The critical need for data and analytics to inform decision making.
- Defining social justice and anti-racism and embedding it into our curriculum and campus culture.
- Expanding internship and co-op opportunities to fully prepare students to enter the workforce
- Pursuing course transferability and dual admission with the community colleges, such as the partnership we recently established at Housatonic.
- Growing programs that cater to working adults and their time constraints and career needs.
- Offering more hybrid, accelerated programs – building on the more than 20 accelerated bachelor’s programs we have developed recently.

During the summer, this input will be further developed by the President’s Leadership Council, and early in the new academic year I will update you on where we stand, given the circumstances at the time and current challenges we may be facing.

Before I take your questions, I want to leave you with a short excerpt from an excellent book called: “The Great Upheaval: Higher Education’s Past, Present and Uncertain Future,” By Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt.

I’m very familiar with the work of Arthur Levine, who is a distinguished scholar of higher education at New York University.

The pandemic, the authors argue, provides an opportunity for institutions to ask not simply how they can restore what existed prior to COVID-19, but what they want and need to become in the global, digital, knowledge economy.

But looking forward rather than backward will require institutions to confront five forces that drive them to focus on the past rather than the future. See if any of these are familiar:

- One is magical thinking, a belief that the challenges facing their institution will somehow vanish or fail to materialize.
- A second is complacency – an “it couldn’t happen here” mentality, in our case based on a history of state support.

- Third is short-term rather than long-term vision and planning, which discourages creative thinking and investing in the future.
- Fourth is a tendency to view failed attempts at innovation to be an affirmation of current practices – we cannot afford to jog in place.
- And last, but certainly not least, campus politics and divides between administration, faculty and leadership are exacerbated when there is talk of the need for significant change. We need to think – and respond – collectively.

The future of Southern, and every similar institution depends on removing these barriers.

In my six years as president, I have never doubted that we have the talent, creativity and dedication to overcome any obstacle - and our SouthernStrong response to the challenges and stress of COVID-19 reinforced that view.

I ask you to join me again now as we turn obstacles into opportunities and work together for a revitalized Southern, for ourselves, our institution and most importantly, our students.

Thank you again for all that you do – and have an enjoyable and rewarding close to the spring semester.