

Hello everyone.

I'm pleased to see all of you in person again.

I have to say that one of the things that has energized me most about this semester is reconnecting with many people who I hadn't seen in a long while.

There's a quality to personal connections that can't be replicated virtually. And so today I welcome the opportunity get back to in-person dialogue, even as we continue to adhere to the health and safety requirements that we must pursue at this time. (We also have folks joining us virtually)

I do feel there is light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, and that light is getting stronger every day.

It's motivating to see our students back on campus, and engaging in a range of outdoor activities. And it's exciting to see the progress of our two major construction projects: the Health and Human Services Building, due to open next spring, and the new home for the School of Business, set for completion in 2023.

Our facilities team has done an incredible job leading these major initiatives, in addition to meeting all the additional demands of health and safety during the pandemic – let's give them all a round of applause!

We are finally able to host major events on campus! – a wonderful array of Homecoming activities this past weekend (amazing – Owl Town), and our Faculty Celebration of Excellence the previous week, where we honored the accomplishments of many faculty, including our newest Connecticut State University Professor, Dr. Troy Paddock – congratulations, Troy.

These events, along with the array of student activities and the return of our athletic teams – where new athletics director Chris Barker is leading “The Owl Way” – are reviving the sense of vibrant community that is Southern.

Our high level of COVID vaccination – over 88 percent communitywide have received their shots, which is outstanding – and a resulting very low positivity rate of around a quarter of a percent, have given us a wonderful platform for a successful academic year.

(And by the way – COVID Pfizer booster shots are now available for faculty/staff and residential students aged 18 and over at the Schwartz Hall Programming Space Wednesday through Friday – please take advantage of this opportunity!)

I thank all of those who worked hard and long to prepare campus for the start of the fall semester, as well as everyone who has stepped up to help ensure that Southern is a safe environment in which to live, learn and work.

I couldn't be prouder of the way that our community has responded during this global crisis: Southern Strong is more than a tagline, it's the truth.

Even as the overall outlook appears promising, however, I think it's important to step back and recognize that life may never be quite back to what we once would have called normal.

COVID-19 and the ongoing repercussions of the pandemic are likely going to impact us for some time, and – as individuals and as a campus community - we need to acknowledge that we are going to have to work and live in a changed environment.

It's understandable to be concerned that COVID and its offshoots are still with us – but that does not mean that we cannot make progress. So, we are going to focus on what is going well and how to move forward.

In short – it's time for us to look ahead.

Essentially, much of the work we need to do doesn't change, but we must focus on how we do that work in a way that is student-centered, supportive of coworkers across the university, and focused on building community.

It's critical that we learn how to work in this “new normal,” and do it well, because our student population expects to be here and benefit from all the rich academic and personal growth opportunities that campus life provides.

I've said before and will state it again: there are many things that we can learn from this pandemic experience – not least, the need to be flexible and think in new, innovative ways.

These are qualities that we will need in the days to come, as we address a longstanding enrollment downturn that has been exacerbated by the events of the last 18 months.

At Southern and many institutions across the state and beyond, it's abundantly clear that a substantial number of students who would normally have attended college stayed away last fall and continued to do so this time around.

In many cases, this has been fueled by financial instability or continued concerns over health, but also there is a continuing national trend of disenchantment with the quality and cost of higher education – even at relatively moderately priced institutions such as Southern.

And with the population of Connecticut high school students projected to decline as much as 18 percent by 2037, many institutions in this state will be faced with a permanently reduced enrollment.

None of this should hide the fact that our enrollment at Southern has been steadily on the decline for some time now – by more than 30 percent in the last 12 to 15 years.

And for us, this may mean enrollments of 8,500 to 9,000 moving forward, with all the implications that implies.

Innovation, flexibility, efficiency, nimble thinking – expect these to be our campus buzzwords from now on.

As you will hear in a few minutes, when I review our priorities for the coming year, there are critical areas that we also must address now to stabilize enrollment and move the institution forward.

Before we do that, I want to take a minute to re-emphasize that ensuring everyone's health and safety remains a shared responsibility.

While the trends on our campus and statewide appear promising, for the continued good of our community, I ask you to continue wearing masks and observing social distancing.

I know that the past 18 months have been a strain for many of you. The pandemic and related issues of economic hardship and racial inequities have tested our resolve and our collective character.

We've all worked so hard to make this semester a reality, and it's important to remind ourselves to take care of one another...

to be compassionate, patient and flexible, and ensure that we model for our students and each other our social justice values of dignity, respect, kindness, compassion and civility.

I am asking all of us, to begin our conversations and carry out our work together, by assuming the best of one another, by giving each other the benefit of the doubt, by being empathetic and by focusing on realistic solutions.

Again, I have been so impressed by the commitment, creativity and nimble thinking of our campus team during such a stressful period.

Those qualities, and more, are going to be needed for the rest of this semester and into the months ahead.

As we move forward into the academic year, we have a very important visit on the agenda next week.

As the provost reported recently, our NECHE reaccreditation site visit will be taking place October 23 to 26. The visiting team members will be, literally all over campus looking at each program, probing our teaching prowess, our financial stability, our scholarly activities, our student success, and our ability to move successfully into the future.

There will be opportunities for "showing-off" and opportunities for sharing aspirations.

This accreditation visit comes on the heels of an exhaustive self-study that says so much about what we have accomplished and what a strong and resilient institution we are.

And in that sense, it is a reflection of all that you have done.

Preparation for this has been led by the excellent work of Trudy Milburn, associate vice president of academic affairs, and Tess Marchant-Shapiro, associate professor in political science. We owe them a huge acknowledgement for the countless hours they have invested to help us be ready for this visit.

And because of the many, many individuals and teams involved in compiling our NECHE report, we are well poised for successful reaccreditation. My thanks to you all.

Speaking of accreditation, the School of Business has moved into the candidacy stage with AACSB for accreditation, a premier mark of quality that is held by only five percent of schools worldwide.

This comes at a red-letter time for business at Southern, with the appointment of a new Dean – welcome to Jennifer Robin – new, innovative partnerships with the corporate sector and successful fundraising (more on this later).

And in Health and Human Services, the department of Recreation, Tourism & Sport Management had several of its programs accredited for the first time, even as it launches a new bachelor's degree in Tourism and Hospitality and its first completely online undergraduate program in sport management.

In another piece of exciting news “hot off the press” we have learned that Southern has been granted an observer designation at the United Nations International Conference on Climate Change, based on our sustainability efforts and 2019 commitment to declaring a climate emergency.

A team led by one of our Blue Economy faculty cluster hires, Dr. Miriah Kelly, will be heading to the conference in Glasgow, Scotland in November.

Observer status is a highly prestigious designation for the university to hold, and looking forward this will provide wonderful opportunities for our students to participate in meaningful dialogue about global climate change.

I also want to alert you to the news that CSCU System President Terrence Cheng will be on campus Nov. 30 and planning to hold group meetings for students, faculty and staff.

There are obviously many pressing issues to be discussed, and this is a great opportunity to do so in person with our new system leader. More to come on when and where these meetings will be held.

And now, to our priorities for the next year and beyond.

During the past few months, I and the members of the President's leadership team have been working to assemble a list of key priorities that will carry us forward both in the short- and long-term.

As you know, our aspirational goal is to be the Social Justice and Anti-Racist Public University of Connecticut...

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

During the coming months, we will strive to address these challenges, while continuing to offer exceptional education, advancing our mission of access and affordability, and ensuring student success.

Our first priority is to prepare Southern for the future.

In doing so, it is vital that we stabilize the University's fiscal position.

This year we have a balanced budget, largely due to multi-million dollar injections of state and federal support and the hard work of our finance team, (my thanks to Mark, Barbara Malick and Loren) but this source of funding will not be available in future years.

Indeed, the CSCU System as a whole is looking at a projected deficit of more than \$100 million in fiscal year 2023, largely as a result of sharply declining enrollment systemwide.

As a result, it is critical that we develop new revenue streams, including external grants, corporate partnerships and contracts.

These will in turn enhance our financial aid and scholarship funding, research/creative activity and program development.

A great example of this was the recent \$500,000 gift to the School of Business by Foundation Board member Lindy Gold, through her Amour Propre (AHMORE PROPRA) Fund.

The largest gift in the school's history, it will enhance and expand programs offered through the school's Leadership Center.

As I mentioned earlier, if the pandemic taught us one major lesson, it is the importance of versatility and nimble thinking – indeed it is what the next generations of students will demand and expect.

So, we must continue to work to create maximum flexibility in both curriculum and services.

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 be new avenues to explore in academic programming, as the fall-out from COVID-19 creates new areas of workforce emphasis and opportunities for private-public partnership.

Virtual learning is also clearly here to stay. This fall, around 69 percent of classes are being offered on-ground, with 20 percent fully online.

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

We now need to move forward from virtual course offerings to online degree programs that respond to the needs of our state.

We all know that driving enrollment is key to our continued fiscal health, and this is our next priority.

Before the onset of COVID, our entering classes were reasonably strong, but dipped drastically during the first year of the pandemic and have continued to do so.

As of census week, our undergraduate population stood at 6800, down 8.6 percent from the previous year. Buoyed by a 5 percent increase in graduate students – which reflects some excellent strategic work by the graduate school and Dean Manohar Singh – our overall total stood at 8,788, for a decline of 5.8 percent.

Just five years ago, we stood at 10,320 students and while simple demographics alone mean we may not see those numbers again, our task is to stabilize and then rebuild as best we can.

Our inventive enrollment management team, boosted by the arrival of new admissions director Nilvio Perez – welcome Nilvio – is hosting two undergraduate open houses on October 24 and November 13.

You can do your part by talking up the value of a Southern education and encouraging prospective students to attend. We can also use some volunteer help on these days if your schedule allows.

To become a university of choice, we must be distinctive and we must be the institution that prospective students turn to when they are thinking about their career choices.

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.

At the graduate level, where we have now returned to being the largest such entity in the CSCU system, we had a host of new programs approved for this 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 an array of 4+1 programs – allowing students to earn a graduate degree in just five years – cutting edge certificate programs in data science and cybersecurity. All geared toward current trends and marketplace needs.

The bottom line is – students and their parents are hyper-focused on outcomes, so we must take every step to ensure career readiness, preparation and employability.

As well as meeting workforce needs, we must take a closer look at the populations we are serving, particularly at the undergraduate level.

In this regard, we must focus on our third priority: ensuring student success.

As part of our focus on transitions to college and college preparation, we must continue to examine basic barriers to access through the perspectives of first generation, low income, international, rural, and BIPOC student populations.

We need to develop a clear, intentional, and personalized outreach strategy that makes Southern a first choice for diverse students by engaging with community and support networks.

For example, recently we gave a welcome return to ConnCAP, a \$327,000 grant-funded program that supports high school students in their readiness for college. We greeted 50, 10<sup>th</sup> grade New Haven students and their parents to campus.

For the next three years we'll be providing them with academic skills development and career counseling, while assisting with college preparation and introducing them to campus life.

The hope is that these students will identify with Southern and want to attend here in three years' time.

While we look outside, we must also look inwardly: enhancing retention by listening to, understanding, and addressing the needs of our students from the time they apply through to graduation.

A key part of this will be using data-informed decision making to enhance retention and graduation rates, which both lag behind those of our peers. This year alone, our first year retention dropped 6%.

Simply put: No amount of success in recruiting new students will make a significant difference if we continue to hemorrhage from within.

We have talked at length about the need to remove obstacles to graduation in our curriculum and our institutional bureaucracy, and we have made good strides in both areas.

However, providing quality service must also come with an ethic of care – we must promote student well-being in all its forms while creating a culture of engagement and belonging for each and every student.

Creating this culture is a key component of our fourth priority: Advancing Social Justice and Anti-Racism on Campus and Beyond.

As an institution committed to the values of social justice, there must be an emphasis on addressing the systemic racism laid bare nationwide during the pandemic.

We must acknowledge that racism and bias exist in our own campus community, and we must work tirelessly to identify and eradicate them.

As you know, Diane Ariza joined us in the summer of 2020 as our first Vice president for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to help us create a community and culture of accountability committed to social justice and anti-racism.

Progress is already being made, and in a few weeks, the DEI Advisory Council overseen by Diane will be sending a draft document outlining top DEI priorities and recommendations for your input.

Another initiative called the 360-Degree Student Equity Audit has just kicked off, reviewing our institution's existing strategies to promote student equity, and recommending how to implement equity initiatives moving forward.

As part of this process, we will look to build diversity and equity into relevant content for our curriculum, while making data-informed decisions to review and realign policies and procedures that perpetuate inequity, racism, and bias.

And we will also reinforce our efforts to recruit and retain more faculty and staff of color to better reflect the diversity of the student population and broaden our educational programming.

As we move closer to being a minority-serving institution demographically (we are currently at 46%), it's vital that our students have more teachers and mentors whom they can identify with and model.



As Southern continues to build upon our equity and social justice work, I am excited to launch a new endeavor for the university—The Integrated Justice and Social Change Collaborative.

Housed under DEI, this will be an interdisciplinary hub and umbrella for coalition-building and action to dismantle systemic and structural barriers to equity on campus and beyond.

The collaborative will be co-directed by Dr. Sousan Arafeh, Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, and Dr. Kelvin Rutledge, Director of Career & Professional Development.

The Co-Directors will host a launch event on Friday, November 5 at 1:00 pm here in the ballroom where they will share the vision and explain the many ways to connect, participate, and engage. We hope you can make plans to attend.

As a public institution with a time-honored tradition of community engagement, we must continue look for ways to expand our reach and impact – our fifth priority.

We must expand opportunities for experiential learning, internships and off-campus employment and create new partnerships with area schools, non-profits and the corporate sector.

Two excellent examples of this are BIOPATH – our longstanding collaboration with the City of New Haven and its burgeoning bioscience industry – and the Obama Magnet University School, both of which offer wonderful hands-on learning for our budding bio-scientists and teachers in training.

And there is also our CARE program, which has made significant inroads in public health awareness in the local community and is drawing wide attention...

...most notably this past week when staff and public health faculty had their research on vaccine hesitancy among Black and LatinX communities published online in JAMA, one of the most prestigious journals in the country. Congratulations to Director Alysia Santilli and all involved.

We must continue to create and or grow significant, self-supported Centers and Institutes in areas of high reputational value (such as Social Justice, Sustainability, Autism, Assessment and our newly approved Center for Teaching and Learning): helping to raise both the university's visibility and impact.

And we will look to expand the university's donor base and enhance connections with a diverse range of alumni, with renewed focus on promoting alumni success stories that will motivate and inspire our students.

During the pandemic, our advancement team has already been making great strides in this regard connecting with alumni and donors through virtual workshops, concerts and more. And

the seeds have been sown for even greater levels of engagement as we transition back to on-ground activities.

Expect to have more conversations in the months ahead about critical topics that will influence our evolution as an institution.

In the wake of a crisis, strong communities work together to find positive ways to move ahead, and I am confident that we will do just that.

We certainly have much to build on, starting with the talents and dedication of our faculty and staff, and their compassion and support for their fellow employees and our students.

This is an appropriate moment, then, to recognize the recipients of our annual Staff Recognition of Excellence Award for outstanding service to the university community. They are:

- Lisa Horelick, Administrative Assistant in the Adanti Student Center
- Paulina Ogibowski, Assistant Bursar
- Esteban Garcia, Associate Bursar (Awarded especially for his work with Dreamers and DEI initiatives)
- Matt Letkowski, Senior Athletics Director
- Curtis Minggia, Facilities HVAC
- Sgt. Kim Clare, SCSU Police Department
- Bogdan Zamfir, Director Center for Educational & Assistive Technology
- Sheila Magnotti, Secretary - Department of Philosophy
- Jules Tetreault, Dean of Student Affairs
- Lisa Kortfelt, Facilities Operations
- Erin Duff, COVID Coordinator
- Trever Brolliar, Director of Academic Technology

Congratulations to all of these recipients for their exemplary contributions to our university.

And the work goes on...and we have a lot to accomplish.

Clearly, it's essential that we retain and grow our Southern edge, as our world of higher education continues to change, resources grow tighter, student recruitment pools shrink, and competition grows.

As I stated earlier, there will be no going back to the sense of "normalcy" that we experienced for much of our institution's history.

Instead, we must move ahead and make changes in our disciplines that reflect a post-pandemic world and the evolving needs of our students and the economy. As mentioned earlier, I will host a series of

“campus conversations,” that will focus on our future and create a path to long term institution success.

For now, our immediate goals are – everyone’s safety, the success of our students, delivering a quality education, the advancement of our mission, and ultimately, a return to stability.

We will get through this transitional time, together.

And when we do, we will emerge from it all the stronger, with new insights, new skills and new ways to cope with adversity.

Have a productive and rewarding semester.

Stay well – and stay Southern Strong.