

State of the University Address
University of South Carolina Aiken
October 8, 2024

Chancellor Daniel Heimmermann, PhD

Good afternoon. It is my privilege to be with you this afternoon as we reflect on the incredible successes we have had during the past year and look at our exciting path forward. The University of South Carolina Aiken continues to intrepidly pursue its noble mission of supporting high-quality academics and engaged teaching and learning, impactful research, and service to our community, which was most obviously on display during the aftermath of the recent hurricane.

Before I begin, I would like to welcome some of our distinguished guests: Representatives from the Aiken County Commission on Higher Education, the Aiken Partnership Board, well as our elected public officials, faculty, staff, alumni, students, and others who are with us today. Thank you!

I also would like to make a few introductions of persons new to their leadership roles here at USCA. First, I wish to welcome someone *in absentia*, Dr. Phil Bridgmon, who is attending a conference in Denver. As you know, Phil joined us this past July to become our new Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Dr. Katie Chargualaf, of course a familiar face, recently assumed a new position as dean of the School of Nursing. Other persons well known to us who have assumed new roles are Dr. Katie Smith and Dr. Tim Linter took on new roles in the provost's office leading our efforts in student success and faculty support. Finally, as you know, Carmen Williams, my former assistant, became the Director of Alumni Affairs. Also, we are pleased to have welcomed 21 new faculty and 34 staff to our campus this year across various disciplines and departments this past year.

Challenges and Path Forward

As I mentioned nearly four years ago at my interview and have repeated many times since: the greatest challenge and responsibility for universities today is to ensure that they remain responsive and relevant to the people and communities they serve. Universities must never take for granted public support for or trust in higher education. This support and trust must be continuously earned. Like the pursuit of excellence, it is not once achieved and then can be forgotten; it must be striven for, intentionally, and relentlessly.

Our fidelity to these principles has been reaffirmed during the past year as we charted our course forward with the completion of our Strategic Plan, 2030 (*Educate. Innovate. Inspire*). Our plan calls for reaffirming and supporting the primacy of our academic mission by the development of high-quality academic programs that respond to current and future workforce needs, an enhanced institutional focus and support for improving student success outcomes, engaging teaching and learning, enhancing the campus experience, addressing regional needs, and bolstering a sustainable institutional foundation. As you will hear in the minutes that follow, during the past year, we have made substantial progress in realizing these strategic pillars.

Pillar 1: Deliver a Flexible and Relevant Curriculum

USCA remains committed to delivering a flexible and relevant curriculum that prepares our graduates to meet South Carolina's current and future workforce needs. We have responded with flexible, industry-aligned degree and certification offerings not only in technical and business-related fields but also in the liberal arts, social sciences, and humanities whose imparted transferable skills not only well-prepare graduates to be career ready upon graduation but make them highly adaptable, employable--indeed "future proof" in the ever-changing job world. This past year USCA faculty developed new graduate degrees in Computer and Informational Science and Educator Leadership--as well as new bachelor's degree programs in public health and software engineering, and certificate programs in data science, cyber security, network security and IT, strategic communication, real estate, and Spanish for the Clinical Encounter. I would like to extend my thanks the faculty, chairs, and deans for their leadership in these efforts

Internships and Experiential Learning

All our academic programs prepare our graduates to hit the ground running in their chosen field as most of our programs include out-of-class learning experiences such as internships, undergraduate research, study abroad, and other experiential learning which provide our students with a deeper, applied, real-world learning experience making them job-ready on day one. Many of these out-of-class experiences are done in partnership with local industries and organizations like SRS, SRMC, SRNL and other agencies and businesses, schools, and health care organizations which support our science, business, education and nursing students' capstone and internship experiences. Experiential learning, including undergraduate research, also takes place in the social sciences and the arts and humanities as well. For example, Assistant Professor of History Dr. Sarah King and Dr. David Morris, Associate Professor of Communication and Emerging Media are working with USCA student history major Luke Aldridge on a Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project to conduct interviews and preserve the stories of more than twenty US veterans of the Vietnam War.

Grants, Research, and Creative Performance

The oral history project, just mentioned, was supported by generous local donors, and increasingly external funding support has and will become even more important as we pursue and achieve our mission and goals. During the past eighteen months we have reorganized and optimized our research/external sponsored programs office and capabilities under the leadership of Science and Engineering dean Dr. Scott McKay, who has assumed an additional role as the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Research. During the past year, USC Aiken researchers secured nearly \$4 million in external grants from agencies such as the National Institute of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), US Department of Commerce, and the Department of Energy, as well as other national, state, and local agencies/organizations. Illustrative of our success is the work of Associate Professor of Biology Dr. April DeLaurier who recently was awarded an NIH grant of nearly \$700,000 to study protein expressions studies as it relates to human diseases.

USCA scholars in education, the social sciences, humanities, nursing and business also have distinguished themselves in the areas of research and creativity. In the Department of Languages and Literature, Amanda Warren recently produced her first full-length poetry book; Assistant Professor of Marketing Julie Steen published in one of AACSB's highest ranking journals; finally,

English Professor Drew Geyer and Professor Emeritus Tom Mack recently edited a collection of creative works by 50 southern writers. Be on the lookout for a future publication from academic affairs that will provide a more comprehensive look at the intellectual contributions of our faculty.

Pillar 2: Reimagine the Composition of the Student Body (Student Success)

USCA students represent the diversity of South Carolina. Nearly nine of ten USCA students hail from the Palmetto State with nearly three-quarters of our alumni remaining in South Carolina after graduation. USCA remains committed to responding to the changing nature and evolving needs of our students to support them on their educational journey.

Affordability and Access

In support of students and families we continue to expand educational access to qualified students by maintaining reasonable tuition rates at levels that are attentive to students' ability to pay. Indeed, USCA has not increased tuition for seven years; taking into account inflation during this period, this amounts to over a 25 percent reduction in tuition during the past few years. Half of our students pay nothing out of pocket for tuition and fees and nearly three-fourths pay less than half. Further, in order to moderate educational costs for students as well as to facilitate progression to an academic degree, we have created seamless pathways from community and technical colleges, such as Aiken Tech, to four-year USCA degrees.

Enrollment Management

In our commitment to increasing post-secondary educational attainment in our state and region we have enhanced our focus on strategic student recruitment, retention, and student success. During the past year we developed USCA's first strategic enrollment management plan to identify and attract the best and brightest students including a personalized approach and additional resources to ensure their success. I would like to thank our enrollment management team for their tremendous effort during the past year.

Once enrolled in our university, we accept the responsibility to do all we can to see them graduate. Under the leadership of Dr. Katie Smith, we have begun to develop and implement a robust student success strategy and a coordinated framework that promotes high-quality academic experiences, including engaged, high-impact teaching and learning experiences. We have ensured that students have a supportive path to graduation with world-class academic advising and mentoring, and effective academic and non-academic support services that respond to students' holistic needs.

More specifically, this past fall we dedicated the Callen Center for Engaged Teaching that offers support for faculty on new teaching and learning methodologies, advisement and engagement approaches, and assistance with systems integration in the classroom. I want to thank Dr. Tim Lintner for his leadership and willingness to champion this important effort.

Further, we enhanced our student support services with the expansion of the Student Success Center on the first floor in the Gregg-Graniteville Library. The Student Success Center serves as a central access point for student success support, including library services, academic advising, supplemental instruction, academic coaching and mentoring, computer and technology support, the math lab, as well as a one-stop-shop help desk that can support and triage any question about the university's academic and non-academic services or with help just navigating the university. I would like to thank Robert Murphy, the Director of the Student Success Center, and Lisa Ennis, Dean of the Gregg-Graniteville Library and their staffs for their collaborative leadership on this crucial initiative.

Based partly on feedback we received from students at last November's Student Summit, we have enhanced institutional support for academic advising and mentoring which are vital for student success and overall wellbeing. This fall we launched a Faculty Advising Academy to ensure all students have access to effective holistic advising. Finally, we are in the process of reimagining the first-year freshmen experience (which, as we know, often is the most perilous year for students) in order to promote retention and student satisfaction with their academic experience. Thanks to Dean Forrest Anderson for leading this important effort.

Our newly implemented recruitment strategies and student retention initiatives already have produced dividends; indeed, our first-year retention rate has increased seven percent during the past two years (and a total of eight percent from the past three years), which in no small part contributed to this fall's record enrollment to include nearly 4,000 students.

Pillar 3: Enhance the Campus Experience

A supportive and engaging campus environment is integral not only to attracting more students and providing them with holistic, enhanced educational experiences but in instilling in students a sense of belonging and pride in their university resulting in higher persistence levels and overall satisfaction. USCA has over 75 active organizations ranging from intramurals to Greek life. During the past year, the campus hosted over 920 student events. Additionally, this past year we launched our Aiken Abroad initiative, which included four new faculty-led study abroad programs. I would like to thank Vice Chancellor Ahmed Samaha and his staff as well as faculty for their leadership providing our students with these robust campus experiences.

Athletics is a major contributor to the USCA campus experience. Three of our ten men's and women's NCAA programs (Volleyball, Men's Basketball, Golf) were selected for NCAA championship competition. The USCA Eventing Team captured the National Championship, and our Polo team finished fourth in the nation this past year--narrowly bowing to the University of Virginia. Our student athletes also serve as role models for our students on campus and in the community; our athletes generally post a higher point average than non-athletes. Pacer athletes and student organizations also serve our community through volunteerism, service, and local appearances at a variety of events and venues in and around town. Student athletes and organizations especially distinguished themselves during the recent clean-up activities of our campus after the devastating effects of last month's hurricane. I would like to thank Athletic

Director Todd Wilkinson and his coaches and staff for leading a program that creates winners both on and off the court/field.

New and Improved Campus Facilities/Infrastructure

In support of our student athletes and others, the past year witnessed investments in our physical campus, ensuring they are provided with best-in-class facilities such as the new softball field, currently in progress, and the soon-to-be constructed soccer field. In addition to these upgrades, during the past year the Wellness Center, Pacer Commons and the Housing Pool were renovated to better serve our students, faculty, staff, and our community. Providing students with more dining options was another cited request learned from last November's Student Summit. Accordingly, this fall you will notice on campus more dining options, in particular, a Dining Services Food Truck that will provide students and others with convenient access to a more diverse array of food choices. I would be remiss if I did not thank our food service provider Aramark for its heroic service ensuring our students, faculty, and staff were well-fed in the aftermath of the recent storm.

Other physical improvements to campus this past year included renovations to the second floor of the B&E Building which now include not only the Callen Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning, but Aiken Online Office, as well as offices of the Chancellor, Chief of Staff, Provost, Vice Chancellor for Finance, and Human Resources. Further, in support of our engineering programs, we completed construction on a makerspace and machine shop that will allow our students and faculty to collaborate with engineering professionals for prototyping and other real-world applications. I would especially like to thank the Aiken County Commission on Higher Education for their generous support for this project. These initiatives do not even take into account the numerous deferred maintenance upgrades that took place in multiple buildings during the year. A special thanks goes out to Brian Enter and his hardworking staff for their great work in maintaining our physical campus during "normal" times and, again, especially in the aftermath of hurricane Helene.

We also invested over \$2 million in its technology infrastructure. In addition to supporting the recently completed new RSOC, the Callen Center, and the Student Success Center, the university committed over \$1 million in new computers and instructional technology upgrades for faculty and staff. A more robust Wi-Fi system, additional surveillance cameras and other technological upgrades in the library and Etherredge Center were introduced this past year. I would like to thank Vice Chancellor Ernest Pringle and his team for their work on these projects.

Finally, we also are planning for future campus space and infrastructure needs. A facilities master planning process was launched this fall, and this plan will serve as a comprehensive guide for campus growth, facility improvements, and sustainability efforts. The core focus of this plan is to plan for intentional growth and transition our physical footprint from a commuter to a residential campus through the creation of gathering spaces, including more green spaces, wayfinding/signage, and improving student amenities like outdoors performance space, dining halls, and other recreation areas. Additional academic buildings are also included in the plan to accommodate future program growth. Campus and community members can expect to hear more about this master planning process and have an opportunity to be involved in the shaping of our plan and future campus.

Pillar 4: Address the Pressing Needs of the Region

USCA's commitment to solving our regions' more pressing needs and its impact on our community cannot be overstated. Once again, this was most recently manifest during USCA's response to Hurricane Helene as we hosted hundreds of Dominion Energy workers as they restored power to our beleaguered community.

No less dramatic is USCA's economic impact. Indeed, as you may know, the university contributes annually \$350 million to our local economy and supports more than 1,500 jobs, and it serves the region in many other ways. The mission of our Security Operations Center to a Regional Security Operations Center (RSOC) is one of many examples. The student-operated RSOC, one of only several in our state, provides cybersecurity services not only to the university but also to local, regional, and other partners to support and protect their cybersecurity and network assets and infrastructure.

The Department of Energy and the South Carolina National Guard represent two important partners with whom the university is engaged to solve our region's and nation's most pressing challenges. As you undoubtedly noticed, significant progress has been made on the Department of Energy's Advanced Manufacturing Collaborative (AMC). Scheduled for completion in June, the AMC will serve as a vital partnership between the university, industry, and government, conducting research and equipping students with skills needed to excel in high-demand fields such as engineering, virtual and augmented reality, robotics and automation, additive manufacturing, computational chemistry, smart manufacturing, cybersecurity, and other areas vital to our region's and nation's economic development and security. The AMC soon will be joined by the South Carolina National Guard Cyber Integration Center and Readiness Center which are scheduled to break ground in early 2025 and completed two years later. Further, long an aspiration of the University, USCA will bring its educational enterprise to downtown Aiken in a first-class way as we will have a prominent place in the DOE's soon-to-be constructed Workforce Development Building where we will showcase how our the university is inspiring, supporting, and educating the next generation of STEM professionals throughout the educational continuum from kindergarten through graduate school via the Ruth Patrick Science Education Center, the campus-based Aiken Scholar's Academy, and of course through USCA's undergraduate and graduate programs.

USCA also has remained faithful to its commitment to the educational and cultural enrichment of our wider community. Our Cultural Series programs, which bring the arts and letters to our community, are renowned. This past year the university renewed its commitment to Center for Lifelong Learning (CLL) which provides residents with diverse continuing educational programs. Not surprisingly, they tell me that history courses are the most popular ones offered by the Center. Incidentally, this morning, I began instructing my CLL course on the early-modern European criminal justice system. Thank you to Paul Crook, his staff, and the legion of volunteers who make the Cultural Series and the Center for Lifelong Learning program a tremendous success and asset to our community.

A final example of our commitment to our region and educational access is our celebrated USCA Life Program, a transformative two-year program serving students with intellectual disabilities,

entered its second year this fall. This comprehensive program integrates individual support services, focuses on academic and social inclusion, provides access and skills for gainful employment, and offers a meaningful credential, all aimed at fostering a vibrant campus culture where every student can thrive. I want to thank Dr. Melissa Martin and her team and the School of Education for their vision and the devotional work they invest in this special program.

Pillar 5: Bolster a Sustainable Foundation

As I mentioned at the start of my address, universities must never take for granted public trust or support for higher education. Accordingly, our strategic plan calls for strengthening those areas that bolster the university's noble mission and maintain public awareness and confidence in our university. Fulfilling the university mission, including increasing the number of graduates, supporting high-quality academics, impactful research and service, as well as inspiring confidence and pride in the university, and raising external funds hinges on the ability of the university to effectively and consistently tell its story in the most compelling light. During the past year we have made significant progress in creating and designing and executing a bold integrative marketing and communication plan and system, including a new university webpage to ensure transparency and accountability. Further, in the coming year we will roll out of new brand materials including new athletic logos and dynamic, high-quality apparel. Thanks to Vice Chancellor Christen Engel and her staff for making USCA no longer our region's "best kept secret."

Nor can the university take for granted the financial support we receive from our state. Accordingly, our new plan calls for an aggressive approach to seek additional, diversified revenue streams from external grants and private giving to support our mission. In addition to the aforementioned received grant funding, this past year we have raised over \$2.1 million in private donations during the FY24 fiscal year, and the Aiken Partnership Board and the USC Foundation supplemented USCA's budget by over \$2.5 million--over \$1 million of which was allocated to student scholarships and the remainder to 29 endowed chair positions and assisting faculty, staff, and student initiatives. I would like to thank Vice Chancellor Mary Driscoll and her Advancement staff for their good work this past year.

The Advancement and Alumni Offices also have increased efforts to more effectively engage with our alumni--many of whom contribute to the university their talent, time, and treasure. During the past year we have collected over 800 alumni stories and have initiated new alumni engagement events such as our upcoming All Schools Gala and our Banksia (the university's initial location) alumni reunion. A special thanks goes to Carmen Williams, Alumni Director, for her tremendous initiative this past year.

Finally, it goes without saying that the foundation of this or any other organization is its people: our devoted faculty and staff. In order to retain and reward the best and brightest faculty and staff this past year the university invested over \$1 million to address faculty and staff salary compression and inequities. This investment in our hard-working and loyal employees amounted to the largest single-time investment in salary increases in the history of our university. Over 200 of our faculty and staff (over 60 percent) were impacted by these long-overdue salary COLA adjustments. This stands as a testament to USCA's commitment to our faculty and staff and the

confidence and support that the university has in their noble work of educating and supporting the next generation of professionals and leaders in our state, region, and nation. I would like to thank Vice Chancellor of Finance Cam Reagin and Human Resource Director Carla Hayes and their staff for their work on this important project.

To close, as I mentioned at the start of this presentation—and again, echoing words from my investiture address from over three years ago—while the world of higher education continues to be fraught with daunting uncertainties and challenges (including occasional inclement weather) what remains assured and proven is this university’s resolve and ability to faithfully and intrepidly carry out its noble mission. With your continued support, building upon our tremendous legacy, USCA will continue its responsive and impactful service to its students and our community in fulfillment of its original promise made over six decades ago. Again, I express my heartfelt appreciation for all of those in attendance this afternoon (faculty, staff, students, and supporters) who have enabled our fulfillment of this sacred vow to serve our region, state, and nation.

Thank you and, as always, Go Pacers!