

University of South Carolina Aiken
State of the University
October 5, 2022

Chancellor Daniel Heimmermann

Greetings!

As we launch another academic year and as I begin my second year as chancellor of this great university it is my pleasure to provide this State of the University Address.

First, I would like to thank the dedicated faculty, staff, and students as well as the University of South Carolina Board of Trustees, President Amiridis, the Aiken County Commission on Higher Education, the Aiken Partnership Board, the USC Aiken Alumni Association, Governor McMaster, as well as our state and federal delegations for their support of USC Aiken.

As it enters its seventh decade 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, a laser-focus on student success and increasing post-secondary educational attainment in our state.

We are off to a momentous year! We are grateful that the subsided threat from COVID-19 has permitted us to resume “normal” operations on campus as we achieve many milestones and accomplishments and host impactful events. Indeed, this past weekend we held our 37th Annual Science Education Enrichment Day (SEED), and several weeks ago our Communication and Digital Media Department hosted the 2022 Carolina Communication Conference. Next month, in collaboration with our Student Government Association, the university will hold its very first Student Summit at which current students will share their campus experiences as well as offer recommendations so that we can develop an even greater USC Aiken student experience. Finally, this spring our campus will serve as the venue for the Peach Belt Conference E-Sports Tournament.

A number of exciting initiatives have been launched this year. The first Security Operations Center (SOC) among the USC System universities was established on our campus and opened last month. This summer the USC Board of Trustees approved our Pacer LIFE program—an on-campus program that supports students with intellectual disabilities.

Of course, our strong academic programs remain the university’s crown jewels, and our students continue to shine. This past year, for instance, our nursing students once again outperformed state and national scores on the nursing licensure exam (NCLEX) with a 92 percent pass rate which is higher than the state (89) and national (82) averages.

This past year we have recruited outstanding new faculty, staff, and students. In fact, this Fall our freshmen enrollment has increased 5.1 percent, the number of transfer students has risen by

18.5 percent, and online student numbers are up by 13.3 percent from the previous year. Overall, our enrollment remains steady and is just under 4,000 students.

USC Aiken continues to be recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* as a top school. In fact, this year we marked a historic milestone as USC Aiken has vaulted in the rankings from a “Baccalaureate College,” to a “Master’s College and University.” This anticipated advance in our Carnegie status is attributed to the meteoric increase in the number of awarded graduate (master’s) degrees during the past several years. From 2017-2021 the number of master’s graduates increased nearly six-fold, from 20 to 114. During that same period, the university experienced record increases in undergraduate degree conferrals from 538 to 602. Total degrees awarded rose from 555 to an anticipated 824 by the end of this year.

The reclassification to the “Master’s and College and Universities” status places USC Aiken in a new, more competitive, category of peers of colleges and universities from across the region and nation. We are only school within the USC system to hold this status.

As you know, for the past 24 years USC Aiken consistently has been ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as a top three school in its former “Baccalaureate College” classification. *U.S. News & World Report* for FY23 now ranks USC Aiken #20 in its more advanced category for Regional Master’s Universities. Additionally, the university continues to be highly placed in the categories of Best Value, Social Mobility, Ethnic Diversity, Business, Engineering, and Nursing, and we are ranked in the top ten nationally for our service to veterans.

The most important indicator of our university’s success, however, is the success of our students and alumni. All USC Aiken graduates enter the workforce prepared to meet the job needs of our region, state, and nation. All our academic programs equip students with cutting-edge knowledge and relevant skills that not only prepare them to be career ready upon graduation but make them highly adaptable, life-long learners and, therefore, future proof in the ever-changing job world.

In the past year we have developed and now offer industry-aligned and relevant programs in such areas as Cyber Security, Mechanical Engineering, Emerging Media, Writing, Music Theatre, Spanish translation, Applied Mathematics, and Earth System Science, as well as new minors in Pre-Law and African American Studies.

Additionally, we are expanding the capacity of South Carolina’s workforce by focusing on connectivity between STEM education for K-8th Grades (via the Ruth Patrick Science Education Center), through high school (at our on-campus Scholar’s Academy High School), through the university’s innovative degree offerings, and by connecting to latest research and innovation in partnership with the Savannah River National Laboratory and others industry leaders.

USC Aiken is emerging as the center for innovation in the CSRA. This month we will break ground on the construction of a \$50 million Department of Energy Advanced Manufacturing Collaborative (AMC). This research building will be the home of our cyber security degree programs and other innovative STEM technologies and will support important researching and networking opportunities for our students across a variety of degree programs. In addition to the

AMC, the university, with support from federal and state governments, will be the site of the \$30 million SC National Guard cyber-security headquarters, the Dreamport.

In support of our mission, we are transforming other campus spaces as well. The second floor of the B&E building is being renovated where we will locate the university's first Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning, the Aiken Online Learning office, as well as office spaces for the Chancellor, Provost, Chief Financial Officer, and Human Resources. Additionally, we will establish in the Gregg-Graniteville Library a renovated Pacer Student Success Center which will provide students with a one-stop shop for students' academic needs--academic advising, supplemental instruction, peer mentoring, retention services, registration and financial aid support, veteran student assistance, scholarship resources, transfer student support, career preparation and planning, and time management coaching.

In coordination with the placement and construction of AMC and the Dreamport, we will relocate and construct new softball, soccer, and intramural fields across Robert Bell Parkway and adjacent to the Convocation Center. Finally, this past month, we officially opened the Chalk Mine 9--our new campus golf practice facility that will be the home of USCA golf and the First Tee of Aiken. This beautifully landscaped short course features a driving range, putting green, and club house. Memberships are available to the public!

Speaking of athletics, our five men's and five women's teams continue to compete at a high level. During the coming year we will engage in a study to explore the feasibility of developing additional athletic programs that can engage and attract more students to our campus. We currently are conducting a national search for an Athletic Director who will initiate and lead this review process.

The campus return to "normalcy" also has allowed us to resume our world-class Cultural Series and other signature events at the Etherredge Center as well as our on-campus continuing education programs that offer our community edifying cultural and educational access and opportunities.

The university ended the 2021-2022 fiscal year in a sound financial position. Guided by priorities established by the University Budget and Planning Committee, the Chancellor and Cabinet took this opportunity to recognize and reward the efforts of faculty and staff who weathered the challenges faced during the pandemic years by funding the institutional bonuses paid out earlier this year. The fiscal 2022-2023 budget is an aggressive budget, as it includes investments in faculty and staff salaries, enrollment management, university web page redesign, and other areas focused on assisting us grow enrollment and communicate our impact. Also, the university received an additional \$9 million (in addition to the \$11.7 million received last year) for much needed deferred maintenance and facility upgrades.

Thanks to the support of the Governor, the South Carolina State Legislature, our local legislative delegation, as well as the university's commitment to administrative efficiency and educational access USC Aiken remains affordable for our students and their families. Indeed, almost half (48.6%) of USC Aiken students pay nothing out of pocket for tuition and fees, and nearly three-fourths (72.4 percent) pay less than half of the charged tuition and fees.

In addition to remaining attentive to our students' financial needs USC Aiken continues to be an important economic engine for our region, contributing more than \$350 million annually to our local economy. Our commitment to supporting local economic development is illustrated further by our recently launched Pacer Center for Excellence in Business Research and Entrepreneurship whose mission is to support and promote local entrepreneurs, businesses and industries, non-profits, and governments.

Finally, this past month we launched our university strategic planning process. Together, along with our community stakeholders, we will create a vision statement, review, and revise our mission statement, and determine the priorities, goals, and strategies that will guide our university for the next five years. Please check our website frequently to see how you may be engaged in this exciting process.

In closing, once again, thank you for your commitment to USC Aiken and your faith in its boundless future.

Go Pacers!