

State of the University Address
Dan Heimmermann
October 6, 2023

Good morning. It is with immense pride and a sense of shared purpose that I stand before you today to reflect on the state of our university. After two years as chancellor, I remain honored to be a part of a community that constantly strives for (and achieves) excellence, innovation, and progress in our mission to cultivate the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and doers.

In reviewing the past year, we have seen both triumphs and challenges, but through it all, one thing remains clear: the strength and resilience of the Pacer family is unparalleled.

Offering our students a personalized and engaging academic experience always has been the hallmark of this institution. This year, we have further augmented our commitment to world-class education by launching new programs, expanding our faculty and support for their work, and enhancing opportunities for scholarship and service to our community. It is heartening to see that our students are not just graduating—they are launching into careers, postgraduate studies, or community involvement with a solid foundation that only a USC Aiken education can provide.

That momentum was especially apparent in undergraduate admissions. We received 4,000 undergraduate applications this past fall, the highest number of applications in university history; and witnessed a near record freshman class. We also awarded \$34 million in financial aid and added a new focus on admissions communications and campus visits. That work will pay dividends as we finalize our university's recruitment and enrollment management plan for the coming years.

But work in our enrollment management division does not stop there. This year we also inked a new articulation agreement with Aiken Technical College for the seamless transfer of students from Aiken Tech to USC Aiken to receive their bachelor's degree in a STEM-related field along with a new reverse transfer agreement that allows USC Aiken students formerly enrolled at Aiken Tech or another technical college to receive an associate's degree once they've met all degree requirements, even after they are no longer enrolled in the technical college.

We also continue to develop cutting edge academic programs in response to our region's current and anticipate workforce needs. Seven new programs are on the cusp of final approval, including a master's program in Computer and Information Systems, a bachelor's program in Public Health, as well as certificate programs in Network Security and Information Technology, Cyber Security, Cloud Security, and Data Science.

USC Aiken graduates are workforce ready. An integral reason for this is that many of our students are engaged in internships. In fact, we are ramping up our support of internships and co-ops in high-demand industries. Thanks to the support from the Legislature, USC Aiken students completing an in-person internship or co-op opportunity at a South Carolina employer in high-demand areas will receive a \$3,000 stipend in addition to any earned salary.

Yet, USC Aiken is more than just a center for academics. We continue to be a campus of community, collaboration and unity. The personal connections students make at our university is a strength unmatched by many of our peers. Thanks to the collective endeavors of our faculty, staff, and students, we have fostered a campus climate that celebrates the individual, ensuring that every Pacer feels welcomed and at home.

Many of these endeavors are sponsored by our Division of Student Affairs which offers a robust array of activities that engage our resident and commuter student populations. Among exciting on campus initiatives and programs we recently hosted six leadership exchange trips including alternative fall / spring breaks, and trips to Washington D.C., Denver, Boston, and Walt Disney World.

To our more than 90 student organizations, I extend my gratitude. Your events, service projects, and initiatives enliven our campus, and the leadership skills you are cultivating will serve you and our world well in the years to come.

Pivotal to our student experience is athletics, and I am pleased that Todd Wilkinson has joined us as our athletic director this year. His teams have performed exceptionally well in and out of the classroom, with the average GPA for all athletics teams at 3.2.

Our teams also have excelled on the field and court. Women's Soccer had their first overall winning season in nine years and the first conference winning season in 16 years. Four programs including volleyball, golf, and men's and women's basketball were selected for the NCAA championship competition. In addition, baseball had an 11-win improvement from 2022 to 2023.

These victories do not happen without the hard work of both our athletes and coaches. We are honored to recognize Coach Vanderslice, who was named Peach Belt Tournament Coach of the Year, and the many other coaches who produce athletes and leaders on and off the field.

Of course, as you all know, this past May the USC Aiken Eventing team edged out Auburn University to win the USEA Intercollegiate National Championship which we celebrated last month.

We are also proud of our commitment to enhancing the student athlete experience and have hired a new deputy athletic director to oversee compliance and gameday experience. Further, we have revived our Pacer Booster Club whose members will provide enthusiastic support for our programs and athletes.

In addition to the aforementioned developments, you could not help but notice our physical campus is undergoing dramatic transformations. Indeed, construction of the Department of Energy's Advanced Manufacturing Collaborative continues as builders currently are in the process of erecting the steel framing which should be completed by the end of the year. This project soon will be followed by South Carolina National Guards' Cyber Innovation Center (which will be located in the same vicinity) as well as the National Guard Readiness Center which will be located across the highway. It goes without saying that this \$100 million of federal and state investments on our campus will be transformative for our institution and our region.

Elsewhere on campus, thanks to the generous support from our state, we completed more than 30 renovation and construction projects in buildings across campus this past year. Additional upgrades that occurred this year include replacing the roof on Pacer Commons and the HVAC in Pacer Downs. We also initiated construction on the new B&E Gym space, where we will locate our Center for Teaching and Learning, the USC Aiken Online Office, opened our new disc golf course, and began design work for our new softball facility and the Pacer Academic Resource (Student Success) Center (PARC) in the library.

As part of our infrastructure upgrades, the Division of Technology Services has also been hard at work on systems integrations and networking upgrades. That work has resulted in improved wi-fi in residence halls, the library, SAC, and Science Building. We've also made audiovisual upgrades in the Convocation Center, in classrooms, and in the production studio.

In addition, we also launched a student-run Security Operations Center, which we are planning to expand into a Regional Security Operations Center in 2024 to support the cybersecurity needs of local municipalities, school districts, and other small businesses. We have also planned to build a Communications Media Lab, and upgrade technologies in classrooms, the B&E Gym, and the Conference Center.

These accomplishments, let alone our mission, could not be accomplished without the hard work of our dedicated staff. We also are doing what we must to retain high performing employees. This year, we implemented a new salary market plan for staff to address compression issues. In addition, we have offered six LEAD training courses for supervisors and implemented an annual training calendar for faculty and staff.

Knowing where we need to go is often a product of knowing where we have been. That is why we completed a strategic planning process that provided clarity around our new strategic priorities that focus on delivering flexible and relevant curricula, addressing the most pressing needs of our region, reimagining the composition of our student body (student success), enhancing the campus experience, and bolstering a sustainable foundation to support our mission.

One key focus will be our brand and how we market ourselves to prospective students and parents, prospective faculty and staff, donors, alumni, and community members.

That is why we were pleased to welcome Christen Engel as our new vice chancellor of marketing and communication this year. Christen and her team are working to build a new university brand platform that will help us tell the USC Aiken story now and into the future through external marketing channels, social media, and internal communications.

I also look forward to the anticipated launch of our new university website. As the front door to our university, our new website will serve as a recruitment tool and resource for prospective students and their parents. It will help guide them on their journey of selecting USC Aiken as their university of choice and seamlessly guide them to the right answers and resources.

Before I conclude, let me emphasize the importance of alumni engagement and philanthropy. The support from our alumni, both in terms of mentorship and resources, is the bedrock on which our future successes will be built.

This year, our foundation allocated more than \$2 million in foundation funds to support student and faculty initiatives campuswide. We also allocated nearly \$1 million in student scholarships. Additionally, we increased our Family Fund from 86 to 90% participation and established a giving baseline for Giving Tuesday.

Much of our work cannot be done without philanthropy, which is why I am pleased to report we received major gifts this year in support of a new School of Nursing lab, scholarships, Pacer Life, military and veteran students, music, athletics, and more.

In terms of our alumni, we have a new alumni director familiar to us all (Carmen Williams) who will work to steer us toward higher levels of alumni engagement, giving, and participation. We look forward to telling our alumni stories in hopes that students can connect with our alums in new ways to understand the career pathways available to them. We are also hopeful we can forge meaningful connections between alums and students, including mentorships, internships, and others.

Lastly, to our students, always remember that you are the heart of this institution. Everything we do is geared towards ensuring that you have the best possible environment to learn, grow, and thrive.

Thank you, everyone, for your continued faith in USC Aiken, and for your dedication to its continued success. Together, we will ensure that our university continues to shine as a beacon of excellence, community, and hope.

Thank you and,

Go Pacers!