



The State of the University Address
Chancellor Al M. Panu, Ph.D.
November 18, 2020

Good afternoon, fellow Sand Sharks. Every year, at this time, I have the privilege to address you – not only to provide an analysis of the state of the University of South Carolina Beaufort but also to provide a vision and to open a dialogue for how we move forward as a university community. Last year, we discussed our plans for qualitative and quantitative growth; our financial outlook and spending priorities; and ways in which you and I could come together more often to support greater transparency and greater bonds of collegiality. I believe, in the first months of 2020, we were able to establish greater lines of communication – through our monthly *Conversations with the Chancellor* and more frequent Town Hall meetings. Your calls for increased communication did not fall on deaf ears, and I believe we turned a corner and forged stronger connections with each other. How could we know just how much we would need them?

The last 9 months have been... in a word: surreal. A period that so challenged our orientation to logic, reason, and norms that it feels possible only in our dreams – or perhaps our nightmares. The global pandemic has fundamentally changed human experience. We are distanced, masked, and faced with sobering existential realities. Yet, we are also realizing what really matters: the precious value in a handshake, a pat on the back, a hug, or a smile not covered by three layers of cloth. My dear Sand Sharks, this period of our history is not a reckoning; it is a reawakening. It is the nightmare giving way to our most fervent dreams of kindness, cooperation, connectivity, and empathy.

It is isolation and uncertainty overwhelmed by community and faith. These last months have been humbling – for me and perhaps for all of us. But, ultimately, I believe that we will remember them more for what they have given us than for what they have taken.

We have come together in unprecedented ways. We have discovered in ourselves and in each other new levels of courage, ingenuity, and capability. We have tested the limits of human endurance, determination, and... likely caffeine consumption to re-engineer this institution – first in 7 days in March then again as summer evaporated into a blur of meetings on Microsoft Teams. We have supported each other in the trenches and formed stronger collegial bonds. We have worked successfully in committees,

teams, and task forces to elevate both USCB and our entire profession. In short, We – Have – Grown. Last year, at this time, we talked about growth. This year, we are living it.

I will share with you that I have had some low moments during the pandemic. Like many of you, Judith and I have lost some friends to COVID-19. And, like all of you, I have stared into darkness, searching for the light at the end of this tunnel. Here's what I found. We are our own light. 2020 is not simply the year everything changed. It is the year WE CHANGED EVERYTHING.

Like superheroes – no, like Sand Sharks – you sprang into action, lighting a torch in the darkness that will see us through to brighter days ahead. Our capacity to offer multiple instructional modalities will help us to recruit and retain students more successfully than before. Our adherence to belt-tightening, has meant that no USCB employee has been laid off or furloughed – even as both are happening at institutions all around us. I must share that we are not out of the woods. But I am optimistic.

We do not yet know what cuts the state will make. But we will plan as though these will be substantial. CARES Act funding has softened the blow of having to close our campuses last spring, refund \$2 million in housing and dining contracts, upgrade technologies, purchase COVID-related equipment and supplies, and pay for testing. In the short run, these one-time government allocations have been a strong bridge. But they cannot sustain us long term. We must remain fully operational, increase enrollment, and restore housing and dining revenues to avoid further stress on our finances.

You have my word on two things: first, that we are prioritizing strategic investments in enrollment management in order to restore our financial health. And, second, that I will do everything in my power to avoid financial strategies that effect individual employees. There are no furloughs or lay-offs planned for USCB, and I will work diligently to keep it that way.

In the wake of COVID-19, it is sometimes difficult to remember the many wonderful things that happened before the pandemic or since. But I want us to recall that in 2020: USCB was recognized as a top-producer of Fulbright Scholars, including Dr. Kim Cavanah, Dr. Babet Alvarez, yours truly, and our first student Fulbright, Theodora Light. We held our first spring Homecoming and had an enthusiastic alumni turnout. We celebrated the 40th Anniversary of USCB Chamber Music. We brought the founders of Helenski's Hope to campus. And we cheered as Sand Shark baseball opened with a 6 – 0 shutout of Mid-Atlantic Christian. USCB student Carlos Millen made the U.S. Olympic weightlifting team. We launched the USCB Education Foundation Board, an enviable list of Lowcountry power-brokers. We are launching a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiative. We've celebrated 302 graduates – including the largest cohort of BSNs in our history. Recent graduates Alex Rendon Jonguitud and Shae Gantt started graduate studies at Johns Hopkins and Harvard respectively. Alumna Alexis Henderson published a debut novel, *The Year*

of the Witching. Alumnus Justin Vaughn, husband to Abby, published a novel, *Room At The Table*. Senior Lincoln Fuller joined an OCEARCH shark expedition. SGA Vice President Antonia Quintero started the South Carolina Washington Semester. Dr. Timothy “Mac” James won the Carolina Trustees Professorship Award. Dr. Deborah Cohen published a memoir, *Welcome to Wherever We Are*. Drs. Eric Montie, Mercer Brugler, Swati Debroy, Keri Olivetti, Charlie Calvert, Bonnie Hargrove, Kim Ritchie, Mac James, Kishwar Ahmed, Caroline Sawyer, James Sidletsky, Kim Cavanagh, Joe Iglesias, Diana Reindl, Rena Lewis-Kratky, Sarah Swofford, Mollie Barnes, Elizabeth Serieux, and Serhahn Catma earned new grants. Dr. Caroline Sawyer was named Freshley Outstanding New Teacher by the Southern States Communication Association. And Dr. Xiaomei Zhang’s cloud computing project was listed by Germany’s Fulbright equivalent, the DAAD.

We’ve got a new Staff Advisory Note – from which I learned that: Libby Fillmore makes aromatherapy candles; Brian Mallory loves kayaking; Justin Shelley loves mid-day workouts; Deidre Miller repurposes old furniture; Erica Martin loves the Smokey Mountains; Mack Palmour loves cooking shows; Laura Tyndall hangs out on her hammock; John Leadem walks five miles a day; Sandy Randall loves the movies; Anna Roberts is a self-taught auto mechanic; Jackie Holmes loves spoiling his grandchildren; and Joshua Lockhart was nominated for a Grammy Award.

And then the happiest news of all: Gary Sutton married Candice. And Alexandria Simmons will walk down the aisle day after tomorrow. Karristen Gonzalez welcomed Korri Ella-Grace; Sarah Turrubiate welcomed Oliver Lucas Lee; Mercer Brugler welcomed Chloe Lucille; Alyssa Mayer welcomed Delilah James; Summer Roberts welcomed John Walter; Jenna Chojnowski welcomed Viviana Marie; Beth Patrick has a week-old grandson, Brooks Taylor; and pretty soon Deonne Yeager will welcome not one but two little Sand Sharks to the world.

I say again that we will remember this time more for what it has given us than for what it has taken.

I want to recognize remarkable efforts and successes from the last 9 months. First, to our faculty. What you have accomplished defies even the laws of gravity. As the world turned upside down, you learned – in one week’s time – to stand on the sky without falling. Through your ingenuity and unwavering dedication to students, you delivered excellence through the spring of 2020 and unselfishly forfeited the summer to ensure that we might excel into spring 2021 and beyond. I thank you, and I applaud you. I give special thanks to our Academic and Campus Deans and to our Department Chairs for your incomparable leadership. To Dr. Jayne Violette and the full Faculty Senate for your steadfast advocacy and leadership, which ensure that voices are heard and critical issues are addressed. And to our wonderful university

Library staff for maintaining the highest caliber of service and support. Another bright light... Prof. Lori Vargo and her course, *Getting Ready to Teach Online*. Prof. Vargo, your patience, good humor, and support of your colleagues has been extraordinary and is a meaningful and greatly-appreciated part of our current success. Finally, to our provost and his Academic Task Force, I offer my highest congratulations. Dr. Skipper, you have shown exceptional leadership – forging new pathways with absolutely no road map. Your work has been exemplary as well as thoughtful, patient, and kind. Thank you.

To our IT team, there can be no limit on our debt of gratitude. What you have accomplished is truly epic. You were Atlas carrying the world on your shoulders, and you never buckled under the weight. In these last months, you have carried this institution – made it possible for us to continue our mission. Your work is quiet, sometimes even invisible, but so worthy of cheering and applause. So, I ask all Sand Sharks to join me now in letting you know how much you are appreciated. Thank you.

To Enrollment Management, led by the one-and-only Mack Palmour. Not to steal any thunder from Athletics, but... you guys are the whole ballgame. Across the country, college and university enrollments are down on average 16%. When budgeting for fall semester, we prepared for USCB's enrollment to be down 10%. We are down only 5%. In the months of March and April, Mack and his team reinvented admissions, taking everything virtual. Their professionalism and warmth with anxious parents and students went a long way towards building the Class of 2024. Further, they pulled off a virtual commencement and drive-thru celebration for the Class of 2020. Deep into the work of building next fall's freshman class, we have thus far 1,023 applications submitted – nearly 300 this month alone. And we've admitted 577 students already, which is nearly double the number of admits we had in November 2019. That is great news! Thank you, Mack and team, for all you have done to keep us in the game.

To the Public Health and Risk Management Task Force, led so brilliantly by Dr. Kimberly Dudas and Dr. Angela Simmons, your tireless work paved the way for everything we have been able to accomplish this fall. The success of our mitigation strategies is your triumph. Thank you for building expertise quickly and, more importantly, in ways that instilled confidence and desperately-needed comfort to those around you. Dr. Dudas, you are and will remain the Queen of COVID – a legend in your own time, a hero for ages to come. Dr. Simmons, your warmth and empathy have helped us to create community for students even in isolation. We are so lucky to have found the right person at the right time to steer our students through this crisis.

To the Budget Task Force, Business and Operations teams, and to our priceless CFO Beth Patrick, I say: there but by the grace... goes USCB. Employment across higher education has decreased 10% since

the pandemic began. More than 600,000 people have lost jobs. Others furloughed. And... by grace and **A LOT** of hard work, we have not followed. Thank you to this amazing team and to you, Beth, for your leadership, your commitment to transparency, your composure under immense pressure, and for always being “on the money.”

To our Facilities team and point person Mike Parrott, thank you for every table, desk, and chair moved to a safe distance – indoors and out, for every plexiglass shield and air filtration system installed, and every square inch of campus that is routinely sanitized. Our COVID protocols would not work without your efforts. You have taken on new duties without complaint and worked diligently to keep all of us healthy and safe. Thank you.

To the Communications Task Force, the Advancement team, and their Vice Chancellor, Dr. Anna Ponder, I say... there are no words to convey the full measure of my appreciation for every word you have written in the last 9 months. The emails, video messages, social media posts, letters of support, letters to elected officials, messages to donors, articles in local publications, COVID webpages, materials, and FAQs, and SO MUCH more. These almost never bear your signatures or your likenesses, but you are behind every one of them like a translucent watermark. Thank you to Advancement for maintaining communications, launching our new Board, liaising with elected officials, keeping our relationships with alumni and donors, placing stories with local press, working to launch our new website, and raising more than \$400,000 year-to-date – with more expected before year end through USCBEF Board giving, the Family Fund, and the Annual Campaign, which went out this week.

A special thanks to Tim Devine, an incredibly talented graphic designer. Your contributions far too often go unrecognized but please know that they are never unappreciated. And to videographer, Mahogany Hickman – your talent is matched only by your positivity and work ethic. Thank you for capturing the spirit of USCB so magically.

To Sand Shark Athletics and true team captain Quin Monahan, I’m not certain I would have thought it possible for you to raise the game on your mission to generate student-athletes of the highest character. But, in these last months, I think you have. Athletics is a huge part of campus culture and therefore a meaningful contributor to student satisfaction and retention. Keeping teams in competition during this pandemic is challenging – mostly because it requires willful commitment more than discipline or compulsion. You cannot demand or suddenly create this level of cooperative spirit among students. It is a seed planted day one by an incredibly talented and dedicated staff. It is an ethos taught by example – learned by watching the man at the top of the leaderboard. Quin, we thank you. Please know how much your work both on and off the fields is valued by this institution.

To Student Development, you are the glue that holds our student community together, and we are in awe of you. Student Life, Student Success, and Housing... you flow through every aspect of their lives, filling in the cracks, and putting the pieces back together. Our students' overall wellbeing is largely in your very capable hands. Orchestrating their moves in and out, overseeing their quarantine and isolation periods during COVID, calming their general fears and anxieties, course correcting their missteps, supporting their academic and career aspirations, and most importantly building an enduring sense of community... these are your victories. When our students overwhelmingly told us that they wanted to return to campus, there were jokes about how they simply did not want to live with their parents any longer. But those jokes miss the obvious: that the campus culture you nurture and guard so brilliantly is their affirmative choice. Because of you, USCB is home. That is not a small accomplishment. It is major, and we thank you.

To the always cheerful Heidi Herrin, the ever-gracious Twyla Reynolds, and to all amazing support professionals across USCB... you are our Rocks of Gibraltar. Stability, clarity, and continuity in the midst of a raging and often chaotic sea. Your work is demanding, never ending, and still, each day, you greet us and all who visit or call our offices with smiles and good humor. Somehow, you make it look easy. Like the pillars of Beaufort College – deceptively picturesque, leaving the uninformed and unobservant to miss the fundamental fact: without your strength, character, commitment, and capacity, Beaufort College does not stand. Thank you for holding us up.

To Andrea Sisino and the full OLLI team, one word: WOW! When life gave you lemons, you did not make lemonade. You built a citrus empire. Through your transition to virtual learning, you have expanded OLLI's reach exponentially. You are an incredible asset and partner for USCB. We applaud you and thank you for the positive impact you have here in the Lowcountry and now across the country – if not the globe.

To Bonnie Hargrove and Deon Furman at the CFA, you are a bedrock of Beaufort culture. Through your continued programming – particularly Art Speaks – you give us all a beautiful alternative to the morass of news that confronts us each day. Thank you. And to anyone who has not yet seen the CFA's seat fillers, run don't walk. You'll want to buddy up with your favorite for performances of *Little Women*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *The Nutcracker* this holiday season.

To our friends and partners, Chartwells and Barnes and Noble, who so ably and cheerfully run campus dining and our bookstore. You have helped us maintain a sense of normalcy. Thank you, Julie, Brian, Jason, Chef Paul, and the full teams for making the USCB experience warm, inviting, convenient, stylish, and delicious.

To Chief Henry Garbade and our full team of DPS officers, it is not easy to make people feel safe when everything seems off-kilter. But, as always, you get the job done. Your integrity and steady presence inspire great confidence. Thank you.

And, finally, to all USCB students, I applaud you and thank you for your sense of responsibility and compliance with our academic and social “new normal.” Thank you for your compassion and concern for each other. And to the Student Government Association and President Drew Boutilier, you have demonstrated superb leadership in difficult times. I am both thankful and incredibly proud of you.

Every member of this university family has been integral to our successful return to full operations, paving the way for exciting developments for 2021 and beyond. For instance, our prospective move from the Sun conference and the NAIA to the Peach Belt conference and NCAA Division 2. I am enthusiastic about NCAA membership because it would raise USCB’s profile as it puts us in competition with our peers, absolutely making us more attractive to prospective students, faculty, and staff. Being able to develop new athletic programs, like basketball, would further broaden our appeal. After last week’s evaluation visit by a delegation from the Peach Belt, next steps include work with a consultant to determine our state of readiness then a formal application, which we plan to submit either in February 2021 or February 2022.

I am also excited about our USCB Education Foundation Board of Directors, which had its third meeting last week. This group of community leaders will help us fundraise for USCB, use their influence to drive support for university initiatives and priorities, and help us to position the university strategically to maximize regional impact and student success. In addition to their personal gifts, the Board has voted to undertake a \$200,000 fundraising campaign to ensure our ability to continue critical work with our enrollment management initiative.

Next, I am encouraged that President Bob Caslen truly supports the USC system – fostering increased communication, cooperation, and efficiencies that are relevant to our full family of institutions. The creation of the System Leadership Council to govern system-related policies and procedures has a unique feature. Columbia’s provost takes the role of chancellor while Gen. Caslen presides. Thus, Columbia has a seat beside sister institutions, Aiken, Upstate, Palmetto College, and USCB. This may sound like a small matter, but it represents a seismic shift in perspective. It is a new recognition of both our individuality and our collective strength. And, believe me, this new outlook has served us well since March and will continue to foster opportunities and improvements across the system for years to come.

Finally, I want to tell you that am uplifted by a lesson I have learned. In these last 9 months, I have spent a lot of time alone in prayer, coming to painful terms with the enormity of factors beyond my control

and the magnitude of dire risk. A bit like David against a COVID Goliath. But, actually, I was never really alone – because my prayers were answered in the courage, commitment, compassion, and wisdom received from all of you and from my loving wife Judith. With my deepest gratitude, I thank her for being a rock of unwavering support not only to me but also to the entire Panu family as we traverse these deep waters.

Many traditions teach that faith finds abundance in a grateful heart. Well, my dear Sand Sharks, my faith – in this institution and in you – has never been stronger, and my heart has never been so full. I look out at you, and I see a mighty army of Davids ready for any Goliath that may come.

I am profoundly grateful for all you have done to bring us to this moment. Each day, it is my privilege to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you and I wish you and your families good health and great joy for this holiday season.