



## **The State of the University Address**

**Chancellor Al M. Panu, Ph.D.**

November 10, 2021

Good afternoon, dear 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 your heroic actions after the onset of COVID-19. I think back on the spring, summer, and fall of 2020, and I cannot imagine making it through such an ordeal with any other group of faculty, staff, and students. Your work, your dedication, your unparalleled ingenuity, your love for this institution, and your compassion for one another brought us through. One year later, still amid COVID, we are seasoned, resolute, and somewhat adapted to our “new normal.” It is living in – and perhaps through – this “new normal” on which I would like to focus this year.

We all know the maxim: “Good fortune happens where opportunity meets preparation.” In the last year, since we welcomed students back to campus, we have held our highest weekly number of COVID cases to 17. Think about that for a moment... 17... in a three-campus community of more than 3,000 people – students, faculty, staff, and lifelong learners regularly coming and going. Our average number of cases is 4.4; our median rests at 3. And, thankfully, we have not lost a single Sand Shark to COVID since the pandemic began. That does make us fortunate. But what seems like luck, in fact, has grown out of unparalleled preparation and hard work – particularly by Kimberly Dudas and the Public Health team. I thank them and all of you. Our numbers are a testament to the levels of our cognition, commitment, and compassion. The suffering behind even a single case of COVID is often devastating. Thus, holding our total number of cases to 225 must be acknowledged and appreciated because of the potential illness, hardship, and grief that such vigilance has prevented. Again, I give you my sincere appreciation.

Together, we have been courageous, quick, resourceful, and resilient. Twenty long months ago, we sprang out of the gates like thoroughbreds at Churchill Downs. And we have been charging around the track ever since – with no finish line in sight. There have been times when the end appeared to be around the next corner. But, instead, we have met disappointment repeatedly. And we are left with questions. Where are we? How does this end? How long can we run at this pace? We are exhausted – physically, mentally, and emotionally. When will we be able to get off this track and into the winner’s circle?

My dear Sand Sharks, there are no clear answers. But I suggest to you that there is something of extraordinary power within our grasp today and every day – if we are brave enough to reach for it. That something is hope.

Through the pandemic, we have carried the heavy weight of uncertainty – like Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders. Under that burden, it is often difficult to look up. Further, we are taught – perhaps conditioned – in threatening times to keep our heads down, to keep our noses to the grindstone. Positions that prevent us from looking up and out – like thoroughbred horses with blinders on. But what happens

when we dare to lift our gaze – when we dare look up? I suggest to you that it is when we find agency. It is when we find our way forward. It is when we find... hope.

Too many disappointments have resulted from false hope – from rosy and arguably random pronouncements like: “We’ll all be back to normal by Easter.” And, for many of us, when Easter becomes Hanukkah then Easter again, the disappointment is beyond disheartening. It is *heartbreaking* – a confrontation with inescapable, sobering reality. However, as Arthur Brooks writes in *The Atlantic*, “There’s a word for believing you can make things better without distorting reality...” That word is “not *optimism*, but *hope*.”

Optimism is the belief that everything will be OK. Hope is the belief that, even when everything is not OK, you can do something to make it better. Hope is an active engagement that not only reinforces but also necessitates both agency and ability.

Dear colleagues, in hope, we are not victims. We are heroes. With hope, we find the strength and the courage to look up and to remove our blinders. We muster the will to see beyond our expectations of what others might do in order to find the realities of what we can do for ourselves and for each other.

Hope is not hollow. It does not rest on promises we cannot keep. So, I will not tell you today that there are no dark clouds ahead of us. But I will tell you with complete conviction that the state of our university is **STRONG** – because, together, **WE HAVE MADE IT SO**.

Over the last year, thanks to incredibly hard work by our CFO, Beth Patrick, and the full business operations team as well as the Office of Financial Aid we have continued to process federal and state relief funding – \$5.4 million distributed directly to students and \$8.2 million for USCB as an institution, which has provided substantial relief from the unexpected costs and revenue losses related to the pandemic. Further, liquidation of more than \$1 million of surplus property on the Beaufort campus combined with this year’s increased allocations from the state, including a one-time tuition-mitigation allotment of \$555,000, an increase in recurring funding of \$1.5 million, and \$8.8 million in deferred maintenance funding, have supported our university balance sheet, which I am proud to tell you remains in the black. Further, capitalizing on record-low interest rates, we completed a restructuring and consolidation of \$32.5 million of debt held by the Beaufort-Jasper Higher Education Commission for Bluffton campus residence halls, therefore, decreasing risk and improving cash flows going forward.

We concluded a bid process and contracted with Aramark to provide dining, catering, and conference-management services for all campuses – inclusive of \$8 million in facilities upgrades as well as the eagerly-anticipated opening of Chick-fil-A on the Bluffton campus. I want to thank Beth and her team along with the Financial Aid team for their diligence, hard work, and expertise, which have paid real dividends for all of us.

Last year, we suffered a precipitous decline in first-year students, which reflected students’ and families’ lingering COVID-related uncertainties. This year, that enrollment drop has been offset meaningfully by increases in first-year and transfer students. In fact, USCB is the only 4-year institution in the USC System to increase total student head count year-over-year. Our investments in enrollment management strategies, particularly with our outside consulting partner Encoura, have resulted in sufficient growth to flatten total enrollment year-over-year – with a very promising outlook moving forward.

To date, we have 1,312 applications submitted for Fall 2022 – 259 more than at this time last year. Our numbers each month since August have bested those of our strongest year: 2019. And, although there are no guarantees for where we will be one year from now, we have every reason to be encouraged and every reason to give our sincere thanks to Mack Palmour and his team for their great work and tireless commitment.

We are often told: “Where there’s a will; there’s a way.” Dear Sand Sharks, in hope, we find that will, and we LEAD the way. Hope is the crucible of our determination and our unbridled grit meeting our passion and our faith. Hope depends on each of these elements. And each of these elements – determination, strength, passion, and faith – is restored and fortified by hope.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Book of Job teaches that “Having hope will give you courage. You will be protected and will rest in safety. You will lie down unafraid, and many will look to you for help.” The Prophet Isaiah tells us that “...those who hope... will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.”

Hope inspires. Hope builds. It lifts, and it leads. But it also tests – pushes us to our limits then brings us to the realization that, ultimately, we are not limited; that, deep down, we do possess all that is required to find the way forward.

My vision for USCB’s enrollment – and, therefore, for USCB’s business model – is 2,500 to 3,000 students by 2026. While we can realistically anticipate continued enrollment growth, retention will be the key to our success. Right now, improving student retention rates is a strategic priority for USCB. While retention rates have fluctuated over the last several years, our current rates fall below 60 percent for first-year students and below 50 percent for all students. In concert with Angela Simmons and the Student Development team and with the provost and the faculty, we have established an ambitious but fully achievable initial goal of 71 percent first-year student retention by 2029.

Reaching this marker will require the collective understanding that student success is absolutely a collective undertaking. Every member of USCB’s faculty and staff plays a crucial part in ensuring that students complete their degree programs and reach their full potential. Successfully raising first-year retention rates means a focus across all years of study, looking holistically at students and the student experience. Faculty and staff accessibility, cutting through institutional bureaucracy and red tape, strengthening academic advising and other supports, increasing student-engagement opportunities and social connectedness, and enhancing student life through co-curricular and extra-curricular offerings – these are the strategies that will guide our work inside and beyond the classroom.

I am excited about new programming that has started already – like our enhanced New-Student Orientation Week, the Family Newsletter, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiative, the Mentorship Program, and the Sand Shark Shuttle. And there is more to come – like a \$2 million investment in technology infrastructure, the likely launch of a campus makerspace by the USCB Education Foundation Board of Directors, enhanced marketing approaches, and our move to NCAA Division II.

I thank Eric Skipper and the faculty, Angela Simmons and her team, Quin Monahan and his team, Beth Patrick and her team, Mack Palmour and his team, Anna Ponder and her team, and all serving on related committees for your leadership as well as for your understanding that each of us is on the frontlines of the retention battle and that victory will belong to all of us... equally.

ALL of us. Community. That is where hope finds its most fertile yet, sometimes, most elusive ground. Hope requires partnership – a willful trust placed not only in yourself but also in many of those

around you. We are absolutely our own catalysts in hope. But we find our greatest strength in numbers – in collaboration, in community.

In times when we are anxious, fearful, stressed out, and exhausted, trusting others – depending on them – is a true leap of faith. It is an act of bravery because we open up – extend ourselves – when every instinct would have us retract into the turtle shell. My dear Sand Sharks, we may find hope in small things. But we will never find it in smallness or insularity. Hope is expansive. And, at its most powerful, it brings us together.

Last year, I shared with you that I believe “this period in our history is not a reckoning; it is a reawakening.” “It is a nightmare giving way to our most fervent dreams of kindness, cooperation, connectivity, and empathy. It is isolation and uncertainty overwhelmed by community and faith.” I still believe this. Moreover, I continue to believe that “we will remember this period more for what it has given us than for what it has taken.” That we will remember our accomplishments – the incredible opportunities and outcomes we have created – because they have been forged in a fire of unprecedented challenge.

At this juncture of this address, I say, with humor, that I now give you fair warning. Your accomplishments are many, and it will take some time to recount them. But I am truly humbled and proud, and it means a great deal to me to be able to recognize all of you.

Over the last 12 months, Cindy Lahar and Angela Simmons were accepted into AASCU’s American Democracy Project’s Global Civic Literacy Initiative to help students understand their roles as global citizens. Eric Skipper was invited to serve as a panelist to discuss “Regional Public Universities After 2020” during AASCU’s 2021 Academic Affairs Summer Meeting. Anna Ponder was selected as a protégé for AASCU’s Millennium Leadership Initiative. And I was appointed to that initiative’s Executive Steering Council. Further, I am pleased to share that I was elected chair of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education’s Council of Presidents and will serve until June of 2022.

Thanks to Babet Alvarez and her committee, we celebrated an amazing virtual International Week with exciting cooking demonstrations, films, food trucks, and more. And, next week, we will celebrate again face-to-face with an international dance party and foods from around the world offered each day by Dining Services. Further, Babet stepped up to fill the gap in study abroad experiences by teaming up with a professor at L’Université Paris-Nanterre. Using Teams, they created an exchange that had students chatting in French and English about school, culture, and life both during and beyond class times.

Additionally, USCB was one of only 6 institutions in the U.S. selected for the French Embassy’s prestigious 2021 Transatlantic Mobility Program, which seeks to double the numbers of French and American students studying abroad in each country by 2025.

USCB was recognized again as a Top Fulbright Producer in this 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary year for the Fulbright program. Mac James was awarded the Fulbright-Hays to Mexico for the study of Afro-Mexican culture. Babet Alvarez was added to the roster of official Fulbright Specialists for a 4-year term. And – sharing our growing expertise – Cindy Lahar presented at Coastal Carolina University’s Virtual Fulbright Event, giving tips for designing strong applications and managing the Fulbright experience.

Our faculty also shared expertise through numerous publications. Nancy Hritz published in the *Journal of Tourism Insights* and Tye Pettay in *Estuarine, Coastal & Shelf Sciences*. Brent Morris coauthored *A South Carolina Chronology* and wrote the lead chapter for the edited volume: *Maroons and the Marooned*.

Sue Gibson wrote a chapter for an open-source textbook titled *Hospitality & Tourism Information Technology*. Ann Holderfield published in the *Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* and Xiomei Zhang in *Computer Communications*.

Rick Heiens published in the *International Journal of Services, Economics and Management* as well as the *International Journal of Electronic Commerce Studies* and presented at the Association of Marketing Theory and Practice's Annual Meeting. Eric Montie's work appeared in *Marine Mammal Science DOI* and *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, and he presented during a webinar sponsored by the South Carolina Chapter of the American Fisheries Society. Deb Cohan published in *Psychology Today*, *Ms. Magazine*, and the highly acclaimed "Modern Love" column in *The New York Times*, which accepts less than 1 percent of submissions. Further, she presented at the Southeastern Women's Studies Association, the Institute on Research on Women at Rutgers University, and for the Sociology departments at Randolph Macon College, Central Connecticut State University, and Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan.

Eric Skipper published in *Inside Higher Education*. Erin McCoy published in *Oh, The Humanities!* and presented at the Annual Conferences for the Institute for Peace & Conflict at Texas Tech and for the Humanities Education and Research Association. Then Erin and Libby Ricardo won a South Carolina Humanities Mini-Grant, which was used to produce the Interdisciplinary Studies program's first conference: "Race, Identity & Equality." Gloria Holmes delivered a keynote address at that conference. And Jana Wheeler and Libby Ricardo offered astute observations, research, and guidance on building patient advocacy while navigating implicit bias.

Libby Ricardo performed the lead role of Jesse in Lean Ensemble Theater's production of *Cry It Out* and presented at the 2021 South Carolina Arts in Higher Education Forum. Ken Brandt joined a panel of fellow experts to discuss NASA helicopter test flights on MSNBC. USCB OLLI was one of only 2 OLLI programs selected – from the 125 programs around the country – to be highlighted in a *CBS Inside Edition Digital* story on bridging the gap between seniors and technology – expertise they have demonstrated with aplomb, having supported and retained 1,200 OLLI members through the lockdown-propelled transition to distance learning.

*The Travel Channel* filmed segments on USCB's Beaufort and Bluffton campuses and asked Larry Rowland to provide historical context for Beaufort and Colleton Counties. Joe Staton has been asked to provide evolutionary genetics expertise for a documentary by writer, activist, and award-winning filmmaker Byron Hurt about his family's history in Savannah. And, with great pride and admiration, I am pleased to tell you that Caroline Sawyer's award-winning "By The River" for South Carolina ETV is under review to become a national show for PBS.

Brian Canada was selected to moderate a cybersecurity panel during a USA-India Business Summit hosted by Georgia Tech. Lynne Hutchison presented at the South Carolina Nurses Association 2021 Fall Convention as well as Women's Health Week in Beaufort. And Brian Cudahy presented at two international conferences: the Annual Meeting of the American Conference for Irish Studies and a joint conference of St. Bonaventure University in upstate New York and Tilburg University in the Netherlands. His paper from the latter will be part of a conference-related book.

Chad Penner had a solo exhibit at the Kresge Gallery at Lyon College in Batesville, Arkansas. Joanna Angell was awarded "Best In Show" for her ceramic sculpture "Listen" during the 2021 South Carolina Palmetto Hands Exhibition. Additionally, her ceramic cups were accepted into two national

exhibitions. And she contributed ceramic bowls to the *Empty Bowls Project* – which is an international initiative to fight hunger.

Brent Morris and Brian Canada are working with Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park, looking for ways to tell the town’s story through interactive technologies. And Brent, through the Institute for the Study of the Reconstruction Era, consulted on a new app called “Free & Equal,” which guides walkers and drivers through historic sites in Beaufort, Port Royal, and St. Helena Island.

Over the summer, USCB’s mathematics faculty – spearheaded by Volkan Sevim, Morgin Jones Williams, and Davide Fusi – launched two 2-week math-skills bootcamps for Ridgeland-Hardeeville High School students. The biology faculty – spearheaded by Jena Chojnowski – hosted the “Mad Scientists” Day Camp with the Beaufort-Jasper YMCA. For the 4<sup>th</sup> year, teachers from across the country convened for a 3-week summer institute – spearheaded by Brent Morris – called “America’s Reconstruction: The Untold Story.” Their collaboration this year was virtual with interactive technologies and VR headsets to keep it fun and engaging. And Academic Affairs – spearheaded by the provost and Babet Alvarez – launched the Summer Research Experience, which gave 25 student scholars the opportunity for paid summer research working directly with faculty mentors.

Academic Affairs launched the M.Ed. in Literacy as well as a cybersecurity concentration and a cybersecurity continuing education course for members of the business community – spearheaded by Beth Hammond, Renarta Tompkins, Brian Canada, and Dean Bushey respectively. Quin Monahan announced USCB’s move to the Peach Belt Conference, a step towards the NCAA. And Sand Shark baseball – led by Coach Ted Faulkner – made it to the Sun Conference Championship game, which qualified them for the opening round of Nationals for the first time in five years.

The “Think Big” Campaign, spearheaded in the beginning by Donna Sprout and Tom Henz and now carried forward by Beth Patrick, elicited 111 unduplicated, amazing ideas for building USCB’s capacity for student, employee, and community service. Your innovative ideas give us the opportunity to vie for one-time federal funding to finance projects that improve student outcomes, enhance operating effectiveness and efficiency, and increase our regional impact. Thank you for being the fuel for such an important campaign.

The Advancement team secured major gifts, including six-figure investments from individual donors, USCB Education Foundation Board members, and Coca-Cola Consolidated, which will provide both scholarships and paid internships for USCB students. And the web team – spearheaded by Carol Weir – launched more than 50 percent of the new and fantastically-improved USCB.edu.

Student researchers – overseen by Tye Pettay – analyzed wastewater, looking for signs of COVID – a process which may help public health officials pinpoint outbreak locations and contain the virus. And 32 volunteer vaccinators and 29 volunteer assistants from USCB helped to operate two Mass Vaccination Clinics for the public on March 5<sup>th</sup> and April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Thank you for that service to support the health and well-being of our neighbors here in the Lowcountry.

USCB faculty brought a record \$2.8 million in grants to fund amazing projects and initiatives – like a U.S. Department of Defense grant to develop programs at the new South Coast Cyber Center. Our grants success is a credit to ideas, ingenuity, and hard work. I want to acknowledge Kishwar Ahmed, Mercer Brugler, Charlie Calvert, Kim Cavanaugh, Edward D’Antonio, Swati DebRoy, Rick Hines, Erin McCoy, Eric Montie, Brent Morris, Keri Olivetti, Tye Pettay, Libby Ricardo, Kim Ritchie, Caroline Sawyer, Volkan Sevim, Eric Skipper, Najmah Thomas, and Alan Warren. You bring honor to our institution. And we are honored

each day by your affirmative choice to share your energies and talents to enrich our university community, the many communities around us, and, indeed, the entire world.

Further, I want to give a special thanks to USCB's incredible administrative support staff and amazing facilities staff. You are at the heart of all we do, and you are never acknowledged sufficiently. On behalf of the full university community and all in the region who benefit from and enjoy our campus environment and services, I thank you for your hard work and your commitment to USCB.

USCB faculty and staff have garnered many honors and milestones over the last year. Eric Montie won the South Carolina Governor's Award for Excellence in Scientific Research. Bruce Marlowe earned the 2021 Carolina Trustees Professorship Award for his work with aspiring teachers. Genia Montford was selected as the Charles Morris Administrator of the Year by the Sun Conference. Laura Tyndall served as Vice President of Registrars for the Carolinas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. Lynne Hutchison was elected Chair of the Nurse Educators Chapter of the South Carolina Nurses Association. Deb Cohan was promoted to full professor. Amber Wing was promoted to Assistant Director of Housing and Student Conduct. Jerry Chastain won USCB's Vincent P. Mesaric Award for commitment to student service. Gia Fazio won Adjunct Professor of the Year. Lynne Hutchinson won the Academic Advisor Award. And Kim Dudas was named USCB Professor of the Year.

Sandy Randall's son, Gregory, is stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, where he works for NATO and where he was recently promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army. Michelene Seabrook earned a master's degree in Leadership and Management. Anna Ponder's sister, Cheryl, earned a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration. And, with her 5-year-old son Bertie now in Kindergarten, Su Gibson has entered a Ph.D. program in Hospitality Management through the Employee Tuition Assistance Program.

Libby Fillmore's 10-year-old son, Austin, was one of 7 children nationwide – and the only South Carolinian – to win the Continental Mathematics League Award. Deonne Yaeger welcomed twin girls: Emerson and Annalise. Laura and Kevin Bessent welcomed son Kai Moffett. Sandy Randall, Beth Patrick, and Kim Dudas welcomed granddaughters Sadie, Audrey, and Isla Marie. Jerry Chastain welcomed grandson Brantley. And Kat Duncan and Abby Vaughn will welcome new little Sand Sharks to our waters in December and April respectively.

Lynne Hutchison's daughter Emily got engaged to Eric Fuchs. Melissa Jacobs married Sean Connell. Candace and Gary Sutton celebrated their first wedding anniversary while Mary Lou and Brian Cudahy were overjoyed to mark their 61<sup>st</sup>. Bill Neville's daughter Jessica married Michael Tinetti 572 days after their original wedding date. Because of COVID, their celebration was rescheduled three times. I can imagine their frustration, dismay, and disappointment. I think we all can because of our own experiences, frustrations, disappointments, and grief. Life has been forever disrupted. That is true. And we have all suffered. But, like Jessica and Michael's celebration of marriage that finally happened 4 weeks ago, life does move forward – even if not at our desired pace or with our desired levels of certainty. We smile and laugh again. We celebrate. We strive. We encourage. We grow. We discover. We innovate. We share. We build. We triumph – because we have the courage to hope.

Mercy Health, a medical group in Kentucky and Ohio, collected poetry and other writings from staff members as they grappled with working on the frontlines of the pandemic. One has really stayed with me. It is titled: "Not Everything is Cancelled."

“Not everything is cancelled...  
Sun is not cancelled  
Spring is not cancelled  
Relationships are not cancelled  
Love is not cancelled  
Reading is not cancelled  
Devotion is not cancelled  
Music is not cancelled  
Imagination is not cancelled  
Kindness is not cancelled  
Conversations are not cancelled  
Hope is not cancelled...”

We need hope – to propel us forward. It will not cure all ills nor magically dispel our fears and uncertainty. But hope gives us opportunity because it is an affirmative choice. Hope is our decision – our determination – to look up, to remove our blinders, to face our realities, and to do something to improve them. Hope is our refusal to acquiesce.

In conclusion, I know how hard you have worked. I know how tired you are. I know how difficult it is to push forward – to take even one step more at this pace. We do not know when it will end. But we are certain of this one thing at this point: we have successfully outpaced disaster – together. And, together, we will continue to find our way.

My dear Sand Sharks, we are not victims. We are heroes. And as Superman himself – actor and activist Christopher Reeves – once said and certainly demonstrated throughout his life: “Once you choose hope, anything’s possible.”

Let’s make 2022 USCB’s greatest year!! I thank you from the bottom of my heart for USCB’s ever-expanding possibilities. And I wish you and your families a wonderful holiday season.