Reflections at the End of the Academic Term: For the Good of the Order

Dear Colleagues,

This is the time of year when I review all that our academic community has been able to accomplish over the past 12 months. During this period of reflection, I’m reminded anew that it is an awesome privilege to commit to work that is both meaningful and important. English poet, John Masefield, wrote, “There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university, a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see.” Others have referenced the university as a source of guidance and hope when they refer to it as a “shining beacon on the hill.” They are right. Universities are special places. Across the campus, we endeavor to create and sustain an environment where people and ideas can flourish.

Each office contributes to this “shining beacon”...whether it is the police or housing who provide a safe space to come mingle; the building and grounds professionals who create pleasant micro-environments for study and reflection; the office staff in business, computer services or admissions who freely dispense nonjudgmental smiles and encouragement; the student life pros who provide leadership and personal growth opportunities; coaches and librarians who value their roles as mentors; the offices who support our alumni, community, and life-long learning; or in the classroom where professors challenge and shape minds, and where students explore their potential.

When thinking about the learning endeavor, I’m often reminded of the writings of Israel’s pioneering educational psychologist, Haim Ginott, who wrote about his role as a teacher, “I’ve come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It’s my personal approach that creates the climate. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a (student’s) life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal.” While it is a privilege to be a part of a university, we all know that it is also very hard work. It can be a fragile environment and one easily tarnished when we fail to embrace collegiality or recognize that...
we each have equally vital and cherished roles to play to accomplish our mission. To borrow shamelessly from the Peace Corps tag line, “it’s the hardest work you’ll ever love.”

How wonderful it is to celebrate with colleagues who reach a milestone in their years of employment, have just published a new article, or received tenure and promotion. How nourishing to work where individuals are recognized for going the extra mile and “thank you” is as common as “good morning.” How lucky we are to work with students, come to know them and to truly care for them as individuals. Naturally, some students are easier to like than others, but that does not diminish the fact that it is a remarkable honor to be in a position to help transform lives, to work in fellowship with our colleagues, and to be the source of inspiration and support. And, we do inspire.

One of the things I’ve found (to my delight) is that, as Chancellor, I often hear from students who seek me out or write to tell me about what this place means to them. They speak of USC Aiken being the right place at the right time in their life. They regale me with stories about how someone stepped in at just the right moment to offer encouragement, to tell them they could succeed, to provide sage advice, or to just stand beside them during a disappointment or tragedy. Students have shared with me some heart-wrenching stories of parents who abandoned them at a tender age, of growing up in crushing poverty, of living 10 months in a car with two siblings when their mother was out of work, of high school teachers or fathers who told them that they would not amount to anything. Each of those stories ended with, “If it hadn’t been for …..” and they mention someone at USC Aiken who encouraged, helped, guided, and inspired them. As we go about our daily work, the truth is that we never know which lives we influence, or when, or why. But these students who share their stories with me know with absolute certainty that this is a special place and know that their futures are brighter because of their interactions with you. Not every story is as dramatic as the ones I share here, and not every student is as equally grateful for the USC Aiken experience.

My hope is that we who have the privilege to diligently labor here can find a private moment to recommit to the purpose, passion, honor, and work that creates this splendid universe of opportunity and hope that we call the University. I know that I feel incredibly lucky to be part of something much more important than myself. And, to work with you and for you is my great pleasure. For, this work, focused on tending to the “we”…also nourishes me.

I hope you have a rich and fruitful summer with time for renewal. I look forward to seeing you again next fall, if not sooner.

Sincerely,

Sandra Jordan
Chancellor