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Greetings Southern University System Community,

Welcome to the 2016 Fall Semester at Southern University. The summer of 2016 is one for the books, and not a moment too soon. I, therefore take this opportunity to wholeheartedly receive our returning students, faculty, and staff, while offering this special note of appreciation and acknowledgment to the newest members of the Southern University family -- our freshman classes. Thanks to all of you for choosing SU, and for being part of a long-standing tradition of academic excellence.

The 2016-2017 academic year begins in the shadow of a challenging summer that included widespread flooding for much of Baton Rouge and many areas in South Louisiana. We continue to pray for our faculty, staff, and students, along with thousands of our citizens who were affected, many experiencing total devastation and loss.

In true Southern spirit, support from SU alumni, employees, sponsors, companies, and friends have been tremendous. Compassionate efforts of donations, volunteering, and goodwill; have provided much-needed assistance to many in need during and since this disaster. We appreciate your generosity and engagement to date. However, we continue to seek your kind gifts as the Southern University System Foundation, in cooperation with the University administration, maintains the Southern University Flood Relief Fund to provide assistance to University employees that have been significantly impacted by historic area flooding. Donations may be made here: https://netcommunity.sus.edu/pages/flood-relief-fund. We expect to have a final determination soon on the impact of flooding on University personnel and will begin to disburse available funds to those affected.

As we approach the Fall, we do so with the ever present ring of news depicting financial challenges and uncertainties the University is experiencing. In brief, these challenges are the result of the operational budget for the System being decreased by 54 percent in eight years. Campuses then are challenged to retain or attract faculty and staff in critical roles and it has become an increasing test to maintain the accreditation of academic programs with fewer financial resources to support them, and even a greater test to ensure that the academic environment is conducive to learning.

Further, there have been measureable costs to campuses that used state general funds to advance construction projects including SUNO rebuilding from Hurricane Katrina. And, instances where our revenue was significantly impacted by declines in enrollment due in large part to increased GRAD ACT admission standards and the inability to raise tuition.

Nevertheless, please be assured that Southern University has a tradition of strength to prevail and survive in the wake of hard times and adversity. And, our aim is to lessen the effects of continued reductions to our operational budget on our core mission of providing opportunities to a diverse population of students and professionals.

To respond to the fiscal environment and prepare for the future, earlier this year, we established **A Pathway Forward** to remain competitive and viable as we advance our aim to serve the State, nation, and global markets. The SU System has been instrumental in engaging in efforts to stabilize the University System and advance a culture of institutional excellence.

The appointment of three ably prepared administrators to bring leadership to Southern University Shreveport, the Southern University Law Center, and the SU Agricultural Research and Extension Center, goes a long way in fulfilling that goal. We anticipate an equally successful chancellor search for Southern University at New Orleans, which is currently in progress.

Working to stabilize our enrollment, we are investing more resources to enhance our recruitment efforts, along with establishing creative partnerships with alumni and supporters.

With the goal of realizing greater efficiencies, enabling growth, and promoting excellence, the SUBR Division of Academic Affairs advanced an Academic Stabilization Initiative that serves to provide a framework designed to reduce administrative duplication, stimulate innovative collaboration, and encourage cost-savings. And, recently, the SU Board of Supervisors approved a retention initiative for the School of Nursing to address nursing faculty turnover mostly due to factors related to competitive salaries hampered by budget cuts. This action will go a long way in the University's efforts to recruit and maintain qualified nursing faculty to stay in compliance with the required Louisiana State Board of Nursing's faculty-student ratio.

The administration recognized that the SU Ag Center presented an excellent foundation upon which an alignment of academic land-grant programs could be formalized to function "seamlessly" with research and extension. Therein, we sought approval from the Board of Supervisors to merge the Ag Center with the newly established College of Agriculture.

As such, the alignment will allow for the creation of innovative ways to optimize efficiency and maximize the existing number of faculty members by providing additional joint teaching, research and extension appointments.

Moreover, the System Division of Information Technology has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the current infrastructure of the SU System, which not only revealed many areas of needed improvement, but also led to embarking on a comprehensive slate of technological activities to revamp and refresh the campus infrastructure. Such activities include the deployment of enterprise solutions to automate certain business processes, the implementation of MOODLE applications for online learning, and strategies that sought ways to improve student-centered services.

These achievements represent some first steps of a strategy that serves to preserve and sustain the University System. And, while many other milestones are on the horizon, we thank the many Southernites who have invested in the work to ensure that SU advances its role, scope, and mission. Let's continue to work together and join us on this *Pathway Forward* as we forge ahead in making sure that our constituents are afforded the promise of the Southern University System.

Have a productive and rewarding academic year!

Ray L. Belton, Ph.D.
President-Chancellor
Southern University System