

State of the Student Body - March 21st, 2018

Good afternoon and welcome to the 2018 State of the Student Body Address. It is an honor to stand before you and join in celebrating the talent and achievement of the over thirty-four thousand students who alongside me call the University of South Carolina their home.

To begin, I want to offer my gratitude to all those joining us at this annual address - those here in this room and those tuning in online. I'd also like to welcome and say thank you to the faculty, staff, and administrators who are here, offering time out of their day in support of our student body. Your passion for us, the students, makes this Carolina experience one that may never be forgotten.

To this community's leader - Dr. Pastides, you are a resolute advocate for students every day, and twice on Saturdays. I can never adequately express my gratitude for your generous support, mentorship, and friendship through what we know has been an extraordinary year for Carolina.

To our First Lady, Mrs. Moore-Pastides, thank you for being a mentor for us all in your tireless dedication to students, and for teaching me to make one heck of a tzatziki sauce in your Mediterranean cooking class. The personal touch you bring to our campus and the love you both cultivate for Carolina traditions and family spirit make a difference in all our lives.

We are also fortunate enough to have members of our Board of Trustees here with us. I'd like to recognize Mr. Tommy Cofield and Mr. Thad Westbrook, and other members in attendance - your commitment to students is what has made the University of South Carolina the growing and vibrant campus we find ourselves in today.

I'd also like to recognize my fellow Student Government executive officers - Student Body Treasurer Merritt Francis and Vice President Joseph Bass - my Executive Cabinet, Student Senators, Freshman Council, our Graduate Assistants Marissa and Peyton, Student Government Coordinator Theresa Sexton, and our Advisor - Associate Vice President for Student Life, Dr. Anna Edwards. Your steadfast support and guidance throughout the year has been integral to our progress and success. To my girlfriend Emily and roommate Nick – you have been there from the beginning, allowing me to take off my President hat as we joined in many laughs and adventures, and that will always mean more than you could know. To my parents here today - thank you for not only your constant love, but for raising me to stand up to the challenges life brings and pursue every dream of mine, even this crazy one allowing me to stand here this afternoon.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to recognize my fellow students. YOU are the heart and soul of this University. Today, we celebrate you, we celebrate us, and we celebrate our pursuit of excellence.

One year ago, I took office. I will confess - I was a bit more rested and had a little more hair. Over the past year, the University of South Carolina and its students have seen tremendous growth, welcoming the largest freshman class in history - over 5,800 students. I too have had the opportunity to grow, from dancing at half time in Williams-Brice to regrettably deciding to give my telephone number out to the entire freshman class. Our Gamecock family grows each day. The new students we admit are smarter, more creative, and higher achieving than ever before. So it is no surprise that our students continue to push the boundaries of achievement in every facet of student life.

The University of South Carolina's future, *our future*, will be shaped by all of you - by successive generations of student leaders within and outside of student government. But part of knowing where you're going is recognizing where you've been. Our community is rich with leadership and shines with pure intention. We are compassionate, intelligent, driven and resourceful. But like any community, we are imperfect, striving each day to put unity over divisiveness, and empathy over apathy. When I first took office, I asked myself a simple but powerful question that each of us faces: what kind of Carolina can I leave for the next generation? It is to that profound question that I respond with the current state of the student body.

As Student Body President, I am often regarded as the face of student government. Despite this, I stand here today to clearly say that it's all of you, the over one hundred hard-working members of student government who collaborated, researched, tabled, and often fought tooth and nail to achieve all that we have this term. To all of you who worked so tirelessly - thank you for bringing your time, talents, and energy to student government. We are stronger for having you.

While it would be impossible to list all of Student Government's achievements this year, I have great pride in joining you to celebrate the impact this group of dedicated students had in furthering our campus in three distinct areas: student life, advocacy, and investing in the future.

One of the main pillars of Student Government is to pursue an improved student experience for everyone here at Carolina. That mission has remained at the core of a number of important projects that student government has undertaken.

When I first took office, I desired for Student Government to dream bigger than it had ever before - to truly believe in the power of the student voice. For nearly a year now, we have tirelessly advocated for the need for more student space to accommodate our increase in enrollment, pushing for one of the most monumental projects that students and perhaps this university has undertaken. Standing here, I am proud to say - with the support of our Board of Trustees, President, and administration - that the University of South Carolina is moving forward in a renovation of the Carolina Coliseum to incorporate a new student union. With the help of individuals like Kim McMahon, Ryan Gross, Derek Gruener, Anna Edwards, Ambra Hiott, Kathryn Stoudemire, and so many others, we have taken a tremendous step forward by recently welcoming WTW Architects to campus to conduct an extensive programmatic study that will ensure our new student union is a staple of our future campus. In coordination with the Department of Student Life, we have established the New Union Steering Committee, staffed by an exceptionally diverse group of students who will ensure that our new student union will provide the space and services for ALL students to be succeed. When our community comes together to open our new hub for campus life, they will look back on this group of students, whose foresight and research laid the groundwork for a bigger and brighter space for our future.

Though Student Government has invested time carefully planning how to best serve future Carolinians, we have dedicated ourselves to improving student life for our fellow peers. This fall, with the collaboration of our Secretary of Student Services Jack Gabel, the Carolina Card Office, Helen Ziegler, and our Aramark partners led by Clete Meyers, Student Government unveiled Digital Carolina Cards to the student body. This new technology now allows students

to use the GET app on their phones to make dining purchases, deposit and check the balance of their Carolina Cash, and even utilize it to check-in at intramural sports games. Together, we continue to explore new and innovative ways to strategically implement technology for a superior student experience. Today, I am happy to announce the latest achievement in our collaboration with our University partners. With the help of our Athletics Department and Student Ticketing, led by Patrick Flynn, Student Government made a critical investment. By reallocating money from student fees, students will soon be able to utilize their cell phone to gain entry into athletic events, as well have the future potential of purchasing guest tickets through the same software.

Continuing in our strong partnership with our Athletics Department, our team, along with Athletics Director Ray Tanner and his staff, were able to arrange for \$1 bottled water to be sold in the student section at football games beginning at halftime, improving and building upon a deal generated by my predecessor, Michael Parks. Just this fall, Student Government and Athletics installed a memorial POW/MIA chair in Colonial Life Arena, honoring all those that are still prisoners of war or missing in action, symbolizing that there will always be a place in the arena for them. Beyond our work with athletics, is the incredible success of our beloved student athletes that makes this student body so notable. I think it's important to point out that under this administration, we are celebrating our University's first men's basketball final four appearance and women's basketball national championship. Coincidence? I think not. The fact that we share sidewalks and classrooms with ESPN Player of the Year A'ja Wilson along with many other distinguished student athletes baffles me every day. Thank you to the players, our peers, who wear our name well and give their best effort in all their endeavors. The

achievements of our student athletes, who balance challenging schoolwork with grueling practice and competition schedules, is a source of pride for our university and surrounding community - and this past year has been no exception.

Embracing a call-to-action in working to improve student life here at the University of South Carolina, Student Government has consistently devoted itself to our students' wellbeing. Under the leadership of Katie Cohen, Secretary of Health and Wellness, Student Government has relentlessly fought to break down the stigma associated mental health. In the ups and downs of the college experience, self-care is essential and finding comfort in talking about mental health is the first step in improving it. In our first ever "Stigma Free USC Week", in collaboration with Student Health Services, Katie and her team hosted a full week filled with events. From hosting healthy cooking classes with Ms. Pastides, to self-care stations, and even using social media to promote awareness efforts across campus, we started a needed but often marginalized dialogue. Together, we sparked an important conversation about mental health and interacted with thousands of students, faculty, and staff to let them know that every person matters and with the resources at UofSC, one can live a happier, healthier life.

Advocating for important causes has become a mainstay of Student Government's mission.

This year in particular saw three main groups take advocacy to an unprecedented level.

Making a return for its second year, USC It's On Us, a program devoted to raising awareness surrounding campus sexual assault, brought our campus a phenomenal It's On Us Week of Action. There is no greater cause than ensuring that every student can and will feel safe both on and off campus. In another jam-packed week of events, Student Government's It's On Us initiative conducted grassroots and peer advocacy awareness campaigns, hosted self-defense classes, hosted the second annual candlelight vigil for survivors of sexual assault, and even collaborated with Leadership and Service Center to feature a compelling performance of "The Haze" - a one-woman show that works to change the public dialogue and the culture around sexual assault. In its biggest year yet, Student Government It's On Us reaffirmed our stance: It is on us to stop sexual assault - a message that must continue to resonate throughout our entire community.

Another successful feat were our efforts to advocate for a more "green" campus community. This would not have been possible without Jenna Allen, our Secretary of Environmental Affairs who is a powerhouse in Student Government, alongside her deputy Rebecca Early. Under their leadership, a project worked on for eight years has finally become a reality. The Student Sustainability Fund will soon begin to allocate money for sustainability programming and green improvements to our campus. Designed to empower students with the resources to pursue sustainable and societal solutions on our campus, the Sustainability Fund will be able to do all of this *without raising a single dollar in student fees*. I am proud to announce that through Student Government's efforts, thousands of dollars will soon be reallocated in keeping our University green year round, even if the Five Points fountain won't be.

Additionally, Student Government has seen its most active engagement ever in our government advocacy efforts. Under the leadership of Nick Santamaria, Taylor Bradley, Abby Nugent, and Jay Selesky, our student government has had a strong presence at both the state house and in Washington, D.C. for the first time. At the very start of our term, our team authored a joint letter to South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster, alongside Clemson University and the College of Charleston, to support a bond bill to provide vital funding to public universities - an act which garnered 14 independent press articles. Building off this success, we hosted South Carolina's inaugural Student Body President Summit, where we welcomed 18 different SC University student body presidents or their representative to Columbia to discuss the need for a coordinated approach to government advocacy and lobbying for our students. At the conclusion of this meeting, we signed a joint proclamation of our shared values and goals for all to see, sent to our elected officials throughout the state.

At the federal level, our Congressional Advisory Board (CAB) researched and composed a forty page federal policy proposal, advocating for a more affordable and accessible college education, mental health resources, Title IX (nine) reform, and improved foreign language learning opportunities. This board then travelled to Washington, D.C. just last month and met with our South Carolina delegation, the Department of Education's Civil Rights Office, and the White House Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney.

On the state level, we have been equally successful. Under Nick's guidance, USC Student Government has initiated a fledgling program called the South Carolina Student Collaborative - a group of over 14 colleges in South Carolina who are now collaborating to advocate for and against policies impacting college students through published press releases and public letters. The Legislative Action Network has most recently taken meetings to add a polling location to campus, a change that will allow our students to more easily take part in the democratic process. It is also my pleasure to announce that members of our Legislative Action Network initiated the introduction of H.4078 - a bill that brings all other public universities in South Carolina up to our standard at the University of South Carolina in rightfully providing veterans and active duty military members priority class registration. H.4078 is now sitting in the hands of Senator Harvey Peeler, Chairman of the Senate Education Committee, after passing the South Carolina House of Representatives by a vote of 107-2. Additionally, even I have had the opportunity to lobby the state house. Together with research and formal speeches in tow, Nick and I testified before the House Higher Education Subcommittee last month to advocate for a student vote on our Board of Trustees. In fact, Student Government members have testified publicly at **five** different hearings or press conferences this year in support or opposition to legislation.

What is clear to me is that Student Government is a group of students bursting with opinions and motivated by a common conviction to change the world around them. Together, we have been unstoppable in terms of harnessing that power, amplifying the student voice, and advocating for the important causes that we all care about.

Across this campus, our students are out-performing and out-achieving generations before us. In support of thousands of students in the over 500 student organizations, the Treasurer's office has allocated over \$170,000 to support student programming, events, and conference and competition travel. In this way, Student Government is continuing to empower our students to succeed in every facet of campus life. Student Government has had a hand in supporting a number of mainstays on campus. Working alongside our Entrepreneurship Club, led by Nick Hayden, we were able to foster innovation – bringing to campus world class talent from across industry and business. We hosted our second annual Cockstock Concert during Homecoming alongside Carolina Productions and Athletics, boasting an attendance of over 7,000 students as it was expanded to the Colonial Life Arena to include alumni, the surrounding community, and even a homecoming festival outside. We funded dozens of cultural, professional, and philanthropic organizations. Partnering as a fundraising team in Dance Marathon, the main event raised over \$1 million dollars For the Kids at Palmetto Health Childrens' Hospital here in downtown Columbia. For the first time in a long time, Student Government and our OMSA organizations were regular partners in programming and philanthropy. Such accomplishments demonstrate the quality of leadership that lies in all of our students and the immense charity, compassion, and community service to which our students dedicate themselves.

Importantly, our students this year have kept an eye towards the future: its importance, and its potential. Our Freshman Council welcomed thirty outstanding freshmen into Student Government from over 200 applicants. Our Greek Affairs team, Luke Rankin and Annie Guttman, working with the Leadership and Service Center and the Office of Fraternity and

Sorority Life, helped develop and execute a new leadership development program specifically for our Greek students called the Close Family Emerging Leaders Program, inspiring leadership development and comradery among students early in their undergraduate careers. This fall, the program graduated its first class of 22 emerging Greek leaders. Paving a way for a brighter future, our student senate passed over 90 pieces of legislation, including a complete rewrite of the student government codes governing the executive positions to create a structure for the first ever Speaker of the Student Senate. To fill that role, along with the other executive positions, our Elections Commission, led by Erin Brown, achieved incredible success. Their marketing and outreach, alongside the work of our candidates, helped produce record turnout with over 8,500 votes cast, breaking new boundaries in voter turnout. Through their efforts, the next generation of leaders will build upon these successes and I have absolute faith they will do so with drive, compassion, and unrelenting service to our students.

Our student body and student government have enjoyed many successes over the past year. However, this does not mean we were without our low points. We remember vividly the repugnant flyers that were hung on campus right after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Our values are often challenged by the ugliness of hatred, of division, and of racism. For our community, those confrontations which are so painful for so many are tests for us. However, both our student leaders and student body have responded to those tests of our character and our humanity with grace, unity, and solidarity. While a vocal, cowardly, and ignorant few seek to raise up hatred, our student body seeks to raise up statues and plaques - to recognize and celebrate the impact of diversity on our campus. Though we may have been tested from time

to time, our student body has shown its unity, inclusivity, and character when tested. We speak out when we see hate and we fight to right wrong. Despite the lows that have punctuated the past year, we have emerged stronger and more unified together.

In reflection, this year seems to have flown by. With each day, I have been inspired by all of you, my fellow students - by your passion, ingenuity, and dedication to the things you care about. This institution, this city, and this state are better off having such a capable and vibrant community thriving here. Though our time at the University of South Carolina is short in the grand scheme of things, I ask each of you to answer that question: what Carolina am I leaving behind? I hope that today I have answered that question. It is been the honor of my life to serve as your student body president. In my last official address, I can think of nothing better than celebrating that the state of our student body is stronger than ever.

As the next set of leaders are poised to take over, Taylor, Mills, Patrick, and Emerson - I have the utmost confidence you will continue to raise the bar in student government, and that our students at-large will do the same. My only advice - though *A Surge* might be coming, do not make it a flash in the pan - ALWAYS remember there is stability, progress, and achievement in *Momentum*.