September 1, 2015

Dear Colleagues,

The University of South Carolina Aiken...when our name is heard, what comes to mind? Among the many ways our university is known and distinguished include our curricula and programs offered; our expertise and teaching prowess of our faculty; the experience and helpfulness of our staff; the support provided to and success of our students; institutional responsiveness and relevance; the impact we have on our community and region; accessibility and affordability; and the generation of new knowledge and opportunities. Even this general and abbreviated list demonstrates that the work engaged by USC Aiken is complex and crosses many domains. It is driven by the fact that much is expected of us.

One of the ways USC Aiken distinguishes itself as a “University of Choice” is through our mission. USC Aiken is distinctive in the USC system because our mission reinforces our commitment to the values, content, and outcomes of a liberal arts education. Further, USC Aiken is the only institution that is a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) in the state of South Carolina, a distinction formally held by the College of Charleston.

Last year, Dr. Steven Millies and Dr. Michele Harmon engaged faculty in conversations about how we might better support the institution’s COPLAC designation and liberal arts mission. They accomplished this project throughout the spring semester, forming a committee and organizing discussions with faculty from across the institution and engaging in an exchange of ideas around the question, “What distinguishes USC Aiken as a public liberal arts university?” The committee members included: Julia Ball, Nursing; Tim Lintner, Education; Anne Ellison, Psychology; Steven Millies, Political Science; Andrew Geyer, English; Brian Parr, Exercise Science; Michele Harmon, Biology; Mike Ritchie, Business; and Elizabeth Webb, Communications.

Through these discussions, it became clear that USC Aiken reflects the mission well by placing significant prominence on the centrality of learning and discovery through exemplary teaching, innovative scholarship, creative expression, co-curricular activities, undergraduate research, engaged service, and practical experience. Thus, the advice from the committee was that we should provide more targeted institutional support to enhance the work currently undertaken by many of our faculty.

This year we plan to launch three initiatives to help us more clearly articulate our mission and support the creative and high impact teaching practices our faculty currently use to reinforce deep learning.

The three initiatives to be launched Fall Semester, 2015 include:
1. Organize the first annual symposium through the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) designed to renew focus on our liberal arts mission by spotlighting practices that reinforce engaged learning and discovery.

2. Create an innovation fund, managed by CTE, to help support exploration and implementation of those practices in and beyond the classroom.

3. Launch a series of more formal focus-group discussions around the question, “What does it mean to be a relevant, public, comprehensive, liberal arts, and science university in the 21st Century?”

As these initiatives are rolled out this semester, I hope you will find time to participate in these sessions and to find them helpful and supportive of your work.

Best regards,

Sandra J. Jordan
Chancellor