

## **State of the University Address September 18, 2020**

Thank you for joining me for the annual State of the University Address. We celebrate the 134<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our university this Founders' Day.

COVID-19 may not be the biggest challenge our institution has ever faced, but it has been the most challenging issue facing UTC during my seven years as chancellor. The global pandemic forced us to make difficult decisions that, while disruptive, were essential. We acted quickly, and within seven days UTC faculty and staff made changes to course delivery and scheduling that would have taken years to do under normal circumstances. Our students were adaptable and made the best of a truly difficult situation. As a campus community, our response to COVID-19 demonstrated our character and the value we place on education.

Two guiding principles underscored our commitment to “existing for students”: (1) protect the health and safety of the campus community, and (2) ensure we maintain a high-quality educational experience.

Our focus was on being true to our core values, expressing who we are, what we do, and why it matters. Our decisions impacted the UTC experience, but not its value.

The swift move to online teaching reflected our ability to quickly adjust. The gauge of success, however, is more than speed. It is about quality and impact on our students and our community. Chattanooga's economic and social future is connected with UTC's support of a comprehensive approach for student preparedness, achievement, discovery and innovation.

In assessing 2020 and the State of the University, we are hybrid, flexible, adaptable and resilient. We remain stronger than ever, particularly in our belief that we are on the right path for this university, for this community, and for the State of Tennessee.

In Fall 2019, 13% of our classes were offered in an on-line format. For Fall 2020, 63% of our courses are on-line. Even with the increase in online teaching, we continue to connect our students with outside-the-classroom experiential learning opportunities like internships, research, scholarship and creative activities, as well as opportunities to serve the greater Chattanooga community as volunteers at Habitat for Humanity, the Bessie Smith Cultural Center, the Chattanooga Area Food Bank, and many more worthwhile organizations.

Several academic programs, like nursing, chemistry and art, require hands-on clinical, laboratory and studio experiences. The quality of the overall learning experience, not the method of delivery, is our measure of impact and success. During this global pandemic, we are doing the best we possibly can. Thank you to everyone who has worked so hard.

Learning comes from subject matter in a classroom-type setting and also from extracurricular and experiential opportunities that grow students emotionally, socially and intellectually. The UTC experience helps students mature, learn skills and appreciate the creative ideas that come from engaging with people from different backgrounds and talents.

Despite the pandemic, when you examine student success metrics, UTC is doing incredibly well. Our first-to-second year retention is 77%, a one-year increase of 4%. Our four-year graduation rate is 36% and the six-year rate is 50% - a 13% increase in seven years! Enrollment is up 0.5% in spite of COVID-19. The positive growth in these numbers is due

to the hard work of UTC faculty and staff who have focused on our students. The success is yours!

The retention, graduation and enrollment numbers relate our academic progress, but there is more we can achieve for our students. The window of opportunity is open, and now is the time to act. This campus has shown it can react at warp speed during the COVID crisis; how do we use what we have learned to move forward campus priorities with the same quick action?

I believe there are two areas for us to concentrate on in the coming year.

First, we must address the student experience. For students, the transition from high school to college is important. College is challenging, new, scary and invigorating all at the same time. Building on the model of our Honors College, we will expand programs that bring together groups of incoming students in cohort experiences. Students will engage in learning communities, living-learning communities, and residential colleges that facilitate the formation of relationships and interactions with other students, allow them to learn about themselves and create a sense of place. We have set an aggressive goal to offer every incoming student such an experience beginning Fall 2021. Vice Chancellor Freeman is leading this important initiative.

Second, we must focus on General Education, our single common graduation requirement for all students. It is the foundation of a UTC degree and must be among our strongest programs.

We are a teaching institution, but research, scholarship and creative activities are an integral part of the UTC experience. There is something exciting about learning from a scholar who is enthusiastic

and passionate about their subject matter. Enthusiasm is contagious and engages students.

Our General Education committee was charged by Provost Jerold Hale and is chaired by Dr. Lauren Ingram. In the words of the committee, “the revised UTC General Education program will inspire students to develop skills, habits of mind and ways of being in the world that foster the intellectual dexterity and thoughtful action needed to address challenges and opportunities in their local and global communities. Students will accomplish this through an array of active learning experiences, including stimulating coursework, civic engagement and meaningful problem solving.”

Our General Education committee is looking at General Education as a program, not as a menu of courses but as an integrated, connected experience.

We must spend as much time on structuring an engaging general education curriculum as we do on our academic majors. For example, we might look at connecting fundamental parts of the human experience in a specific area like the environment to look at the history, literature, art, science, ethics, economics, communication and more. Can our general education program be an exhilarating and even more meaningful part of the UTC experience? Yes, it can, and we will do it.

As a public institution serving all Tennesseans, we help people find and open the door of opportunity. We influence the quality of life for Tennesseans by applying social justice and racial balance. We provide equal access to and define the value of education.

We must recruit and graduate more students of color. We must also build a more diverse faculty that will help us connect with these students. Our faculty work on an individual level to challenge,

encourage and provide the venue for students to mature as people and as scholars. We expose students to multiple ideas and concepts, encouraging them to learn more and make the world a better place for all. We help students capitalize on opportunity. This happens when students see themselves as part of our university.

When you assess the overall value of a UTC degree, in addition to classroom teaching, it is learning to get along with people, developing a sense of empathy for others, and learning to stand on your own.

As a student, I had the opportunity to work with people from all over the world: Asia, Europe, Africa, South America, Mexico, Canada and Australia. While learning about chemistry, I also learned about the world and different cultures and religions. Those interactions were invaluable to my education and growth as a person. In a similar way, a UTC education must provide a realization of how much we have in common as global citizens and the need to work together.

Over the next 30 years, I believe students will say that, even though some things changed and adjustments in 2020 were necessary, our values remained consistent, leading to greater respect for others and actions resulting in greater equity and social justice.

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga supports diversity, inclusion and engagement in our strategic direction and in our campus actions. We are committed to wisely invest in diversity and inclusion curricular and co-curricular programs to enhance the knowledge and experience of UTC students, faculty and staff as well as the Chattanooga community at large.

Several months ago, the executive leadership of UTC committed to a series of actions including: open forums, an equity culture scan across our campus and assuring that our instruction and curriculum mirrors

our words. As we develop a new Strategic Plan, there will be clear, measurable and actionable steps. We will drive significant change and hold ourselves accountable.

As educators we are always looking for “teachable moments,” and our history provides many. Even when the lessons are painful and take decades to learn.

Chattanooga takes pride in the “Chattanooga Renaissance” and the impressive redevelopment along the riverfront. The community took risks and held its head high.

The Walnut Street Bridge is an example of how Chattanooga took what could have been a physical eyesore and turned it into a source of pride. But we failed to address the painful history of the lynching of 24-year-old Ed Johnson by a white mob on that bridge in 1906. A monument is being constructed to ensure we never forget what happened and we never repeat the past. The Walnut Street Bridge provides an opportunity for a teachable moment.

Styles Hutchins was Mr. Johnson’s lawyer. Knowing the history, City of Chattanooga Mayor Andy Berke, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Urban League created the Styles Hutchins Fellowship, mobilizing UTC students of color to develop ideas that will inspire diverse talent to live and work in Chattanooga.

An unimaginable horror paves the way for education and opening the of door of opportunity for those who have been excluded from the “Chattanooga Renaissance.”

Chattanooga and UTC are together as one, and our successes are linked. The work of equity and inclusion will not be done until every

member of our community enjoys the full benefits of this amazing place.

At UTC we are doubling down on who we are and will continue to be relevant because our students and our community need us. We provide outstanding educational opportunities for all people of Tennessee. That is who we are.

The true value of education, whether calibrated through challenging times or exploring new, unimagined opportunities, is the difference between knowing how to do something and understanding why you are doing it. There must be equal opportunity and access on the front end. We need to be part of advocating an independent thought process to assure multiple points of view are being heard and given equal respect.

The investments in physical structures like Lupton Hall, the Fine Arts Center, Fletcher Hall, Holt Hall, the Guerry Center and the recently upgraded outside spaces stand as symbols of our solid foundation. These projects have transformed our campus. Lupton Hall is simply incredible. What a transformation.

But it is the important lessons learned in these physical spaces that say everything about us. It is all about the people who are the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

As I look at the State of the University in the midst of this global health crisis, I am certain we are doing well. We will emerge from the pandemic stronger, united in our values and goals, and more connected to our community.

We have faced huge challenges and come through stronger than ever. COVID-19 has not destroyed us. It has strengthened our resolve and determination.

Disruptions are not new. In the past 134 years, our university has seen many. We will continue doing what we do—education—because we exist for students and our community. Winston Churchill said: “This is not the end; it is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”