

## Inauguration Address

Anne Kerr, Ph.D.  
April 1, 2005

Good afternoon. I extend a warm welcome to the members of the Board of Trustees, students, faculty, alumni, cherished friends, and distinguished delegates. Thank you for honoring Florida Southern College by your attendance today.

I am also deeply touched by the generous greetings and expressions of support.

This traditional event attracts those who care most fervently about this college to join together to reflect on its venerable history and future possibilities.

During my first meeting with our faculty last September, I shared the first line of my favorite poem by Emily Dickinson, which is "I dwell in possibility." The rich history of Florida Southern has been filled with wonderful possibilities, and through their realization, there exists a firm foundation upon which to continue the requisite evolution of this splendid college. Indeed, the progression of any institution of higher education is never complete. The very essence of our charge to educate students necessitates continuous institutional growth.

As I think about our future and the possibilities that lie before us, I am reminded of how blessed I am to be able to build upon the contributions of sixteen previous presidents. During his 1994 inaugural speech, Dr. Thomas Reuschling said "I am humbled by the accomplishments of my predecessors." I, too, share this sentiment. Each of the sixteen labored faithfully for the college, achieved milestones, and brought us to this pivotal point in our history.

Today, we formally mark the beginning of the next era and a quest toward pervasive excellence. Excellence throughout every aspect of the college is required to achieve our mission of preparing this generation of students to make important and positive contributions to society.

The enormity of this challenge compels our pursuit of excellence. Yes, we will be educating this generation to accomplish great feats, including the physicians who will heal us, the ministers who will tend our souls, the artists who will create transcendent experiences, the captains of industry who will impact the world economy, and the scientists who will improve our quality of life through new discoveries.

Our founding principles and institutional character equip us well for this next stage of possibilities in pursuit of excellence. In 1891, President Henry Partridge reminded the college community that Southern was founded on the belief in the power and presence of God, and that it was mandated to be equal to the best colleges in the nation.

Three persistent, unwavering qualities have sustained us in the past and will carry us forward into the future. These qualities – so subtly interwoven in our history as to make them almost invisible in our day to day activities are first, our college’s unshakable commitment to students and learning; second, our ability through the years to adapt as occasions have demanded, and third, our resolute persistence through all circumstances.

Our history is replete with examples of these great intangible assets. Our roots go back to 1885, when a high-spirited Methodist elder, Dr. T.W. Moore implored the annual Methodist conference to start a new school to combine intellect with moral purpose. Methodist leaders enthusiastically responded to his plea first in the small township of Orlando, Florida and later in the “metropolis” of Leesburg. They are credited with establishing the Wesleyan Institute, which 120 years later, is known as Florida Southern College.

From the time of our founding, our college prompted at times by great opportunities, as well as crushing misfortune changed city locations five times. Shifting institutional priorities likewise occasioned seven changes to our institutional name. We also weathered the Great Depression, collapse of the Florida Boom, severe hurricanes, epidemics, and destructive fires. Yet, we hoped, adapted, persisted, and flourished.

These qualities are exhibited in the sterling example of President Ludd Spivey’s vision to move toward national prominence, in the face of what appeared to be imminent financial disaster. He convinced renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1938, to design “the first uniquely American campus.” Students were enlisted as the laborers and the result, of course, is an internationally-acclaimed architectural treasure; the largest single-site collection of Wright structures in the world.

Today, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is incumbent upon us to again assess our possibilities, make the requisite adaptations, and persevere to advance our college to the next level of excellence.

A few fundamental principles will serve as our guideposts on this journey.

Our advancement will be predicated on remaining true to our Christian heritage, which is the essence of our institutional character. This means that we will continue a strong affiliation with the United Methodist Conference and commitment to our students’ academic, spiritual, and social development. We are a community that celebrates each individual, and the welfare of each and every person who studies or works at our college is of paramount importance.

We will pursue excellence in our corporate citizenship in the City of Lakeland, which has supported our progress since 1922. Our location in this thriving city is a distinct advantage, and we will work hard to enrich the quality of life for our community through our educational programs, the arts, sporting events, and volunteer service.

We will remain a comprehensive college, with the attendant complexity that the term suggests. This structure offers the opportunity to coalesce our founding core of arts and sciences, along with strong pre-professional programs that serve the purposeful needs of our students, graduate education, and Orlando/Ocala campuses into an institution of great strength.

We will be persistent in elevating standards throughout every aspect of the college. This means course by course, office by office, hour by hour, and day by day. The continuous effort to infuse elevated standards so that we attain a systemic excellence will require fortitude. This institution and our students deserve nothing less than our best collective efforts.

Our unfettered yearnings for excellence will be translated into audacious goals. Considering our history, this accomplished faculty, talented students, dedicated staff, committed alumni, loyal Board of Trustees, and our campus resources, there is no reason why we cannot be the best small United Methodist college in the nation and among the top 100 private, comprehensive colleges in the United States. There are no challenges before us that are insurmountable in achieving excellence and national prominence.

I have often been asked about my vision for the College's future, and what comes next in this chapter in the College's history. Our advancement to the next level of excellence is being addressed through a strategic planning process that I initiated in September. Trustees, faculty, students, alumni, and staff have all been involved in this important endeavor, and our conversations have been adventuresome, engaging, and full of new ideas.

The best minds in our midst are the authors of this strategic plan that defines our goals for excellence and, the action steps we will take to achieve them, and I will highlight several key points.

**Students are our first and foremost priority, and we will continue to be focused on providing them with extraordinary learning experiences.** We will invigorate our already strong curriculum so that it reflects our deepest learning values, engages our students, and creates an intellectually vibrant learning community. There will be a continuing emphasis on the liberal arts and sciences that has always been a hallmark of our institution. We will make concerted efforts to strengthen signature programs, and to consider the addition of professional schools in the coming years. We will expand upon our burgeoning success in active learning, with a primary emphasis on student-faculty collaborative research and performance. We will not only set the highest standards for knowledge acquisition, but we will encourage critical thinking, questioning, research, experimentation, and communication of results.

Creating an exemplary Honors Program is an important component in our enhancement objectives, and we will establish a dynamic community of student scholars working closely with dedicated faculty in innovative ways so that our Honors Program is worthy of emulation by other colleges.

These approaches will give our students a quality of learning that is often only obtainable in graduate level study.

**Secondly, we will continue to maintain our student-centered environment and the highest standards in student recruitment.** We reaffirm a deep commitment to the academic success of every Florida Southern College student. We will aggressively recruit talented students for whom this college is their first choice for study. We will work diligently to attract gifted students representing a broad panorama of aspirations, from diverse backgrounds, and who desire to make a consequential impact on society.

We anticipate our students achieving life goals they never thought were possible, but which will be attainable because of their preparation at Florida Southern.

**The Florida Southern College faculty is our greatest institutional resource. Our third priority is to find the best ways to retain and recruit gifted faculty who every day make extraordinary contributions through teaching, scholarship, and service to their students and the success of this college. We will do this by** providing competitive salaries, expanding opportunities for faculty development, funding research, and awarding endowed chairs to recognize those professors who attain the highest standards. We want this to be a great place for faculty members to conduct their life's work.

**Fourth, achieving the highest quality of student satisfaction in student life programs is vitally important.** We will pursue enhancements so that Florida Southern student life culminates in wonderful memories that last a lifetime, friendships that bring joy throughout the season's of their lives, a spiritual foundation that will sustain and strengthen them, and skills for fulfilling leadership and service. We will also seek innovative ways to forge stronger linkages between academic and extracurricular programs.

Athletics will continue to play an important role in campus programming. A championship athletic program raises our national visibility and offers an additional avenue for recruiting outstanding students and continuing our momentum toward establishing one of the nation's premier scholar-athlete programs.

**Fifth, our campus is on the brink of a technological revolution.** We will prioritize funding to enhance technology throughout the campus. In the words of our faculty, "technology will enable our mission." Efforts will begin immediately to construct a comprehensive campus technology plan, including the addition of wireless capability. I will be integrally involved in this effort and am committed to ensuring that we obtain the requisite technology to meet the learning needs of our students and faculty, and the professional needs of our staff.

**Sixth, campus appearance and facilities will be transformed.** A master landscape plan has been created that will convert our attractive campus into one of the most beautiful in the nation. This will increase our appeal to prospective students and establish an environment that supports a deepening sense of community among all the college constituencies.

High on our list of facilities improvements is the Roux Library. A library that serves as the heart of our intellectual community is essential for our progress to a new level of academic excellence. Consequently, we will update our catalog system, add a cyber café, expand holdings, and build a wing for archiving treasured materials. We will also build a new residence hall, and evaluate the need for a student center, humanities building, and athletic complex.

**Finally, we must address the state of our college's treasury and move to a new level of financial health.** We have ambitious dreams, exciting plans for progress, and a strategic process to continue our pursuit of excellence in the days and years to come; our only deficit is lack of the necessary financial resources to advance our college to national prominence.

Financial health means a balanced budget and no new debt. The strategic plan clarifies priorities, and will guide the hard financial decisions we must make. We need prudent spending, as well as robust revenue generation through expert enrollment management, auxiliary programs that exceed goals, and unprecedented fundraising success.

External funding is essential for capital improvements and annual operations that will support our move toward pervasive excellence. An endowment of at least \$150 million is essential to provide for our most important needs on a continuing basis. This means that we will launch a major fundraising campaign within the next two years.

Since my arrival, I have been fortunate to have wonderfully generous support from Carol and Barney Barnett who have funded a variety of important projects for their alma mater. Also, I appreciate the significant gift from Mark and Lynn Hollis to establish scholarships for future teachers, from the Darden Restaurants Foundation for support of minority scholarships, from Charles Jenkins, Sr. for funding the largest of our landscaping initiatives, and from Sarah McKay for her unflagging philanthropic support in so many special areas.

I was also gratified to receive a gift of \$1 million dollars from an anonymous donor to endow the college's chaplaincy so that in perpetuity, Florida Southern will have an exemplary chaplain to lead our campus ministries.

And today, I have the distinct pleasure of announcing a **new** gift of \$1 million dollars from James C. France, class of 1968, and CEO of the International Speedway Corporation who has joined our quest for excellence by establishing the Anne and Bill France Endowed Chair in Business in memory of his beloved parents.

I am grateful to each of you who supports this college and hopeful that others will invest in Florida Southern to turn our possibilities into realities.

The attainment of all these ambitious goals will take years, but we have already begun our journey toward pervasive excellence.

I am deeply honored to have been called to serve as president of this remarkable college, and pledge to you today, the best of my intellect, experience, and joyful service. In Matthew 17:20, Jesus states that if you believe through faith, even as small as a mustard seed.. .. nothing will be impossible to you." In 1933, President Spivey solicited members for the Florida Southern Believers Club. On this beautiful day,

63 years later, I echo his invitation and in closing, ask you to join me to believe in this college and that with God's help, Florida Southern College possibilities will be transformed into magnificent realities.

Thank you.