USC Sumter's dean announces retirement

The University of South Carolina Sumter will say goodbye to its third dean on May 31.

C. Leslie Carpenter is retiring.
"I'm in my 19th year, having started in 1993," he said. "To put it in perspective, I'm on my fourth technical college president, my fourth school district superintendent and my third USC president."

He will be missed.

"I'm a little saddened to hear it," said Sen. Phil Leventis, D-Sumter. "He led the university so ably through some difficult times. With his fine staff of administrators and educators, he made USC Sumter a university of distinction that I think is recognized all over the state."

He has known Carpenter and his wife, Margy, since Carpenter came to the university, and considers them personal friends.

"Les and Margy are devoted to the university," Leventis said. "He's been an extraordinary contributor to Sumter ... He's a really dedicated public employee. He's always enjoyable to be with and always very intellectually stimulating."

USC President Harris Pastides also recognized Carpenter's contributions.

"I am most grateful to Dr. Carpenter for his thoughtful leadership and dedicated service as Dean of USC Sumter for the past 18 years," he said in an email. "On behalf of the entire Carolina family, I am pleased to thank him for guiding the progress and growth of our Sumter campus during his long tenure."

FAVORITES AND WISHES

Carpenter said he can't put it under personal pride, but some "neat things happened" while he has served as dean. The college re-instituted intercollegiate athletics and acquired the former Alice Drive Baptist Church property.

"It was a time when the General Assembly was generous with capital appropriations," Carpenter said. "We received money to purchase the property and to renovate it."

It is now the university's Arts and Letters building.

He's been part of two successful capital campaigns and is in the midst of the third, Carolina's Promise.

"The lead gift was from a very, very dear man, Phil Edwards, and his family's foundation," Carpenter said. "I can't take credit for his presence, but I'm very grateful for his support. I would ask his lead gift serve as a challenge to all others to support the campus."

Phil Edwards and the Williams-Brice-Edwards Foundation donated $1 million to USC Sumter, and the administrative building was renamed in their honor last year. The campaign goal is about $4 million just for the local campus, and Carpenter said they are well on their way to half that. It is a system-wide, multi-year campaign.

Becky Bean, director of marketing and public relations, noted in the short time she's been at the university, close to two years, the relationship with other education entities has grown.

"We have established and maintained a really excellent relationship with K-12 and the post-secondary institutes in town," Carpenter said.
The university has also seen expansions in academics. When Carpenter started, the school offered two bachelor degrees through other colleges that students could earn while on the USC Sumter campus. They now have five.

"As a community campus, our goal is to make it possible for residents here to attend a state-supported university without leaving town," Carpenter said.

He said the continuing education courses, enrichment programs that are not for accreditation, have also expanded under the leadership of Susan Brabham, the director of continuing education.

"Amongst my favorite memories is all the wonderful people I have worked with at USC Sumter and all the simply outstanding students we've had," Carpenter said. "We've had some alumni who go on to do really, really great things. I am very proud of that."

His main regret is not something he could affect personally, but one that has affected the university as well as the community as a whole - the current recession.

"We're in the deepest and longest recession in the United States and the state of South Carolina since the Great Depression in the 1930s," Carpenter said. "As a state-supported agency, that has severely affected our funding."

On July 1 of 2008, the local university received about $9.2 million in state funds. As of this month, it's about $6.8 million.

"We've lost approximately $2.5 million in state funding alone," Carpenter said. "On one level it isn't catastrophic because we're still open, but on another level it is catastrophic because all these wonderful people we've hired have had no pay raises since then."

The college has managed to save about $50,000 a year by adjusting its utilities and keep the tuition from climbing too high.

This year, tuition is about $2,850 a semester for Sumter courses.

"It's gratifying that of all the state-supported schools in South Carolina, and I'm not talking about the technical colleges, we have the lowest tuition in the state," Carpenter said. "We're still a great bargain."

The recession has also meant there has been no increase in enrollment.

"A lot of prospective students come from family with two incomes, but with this recession, a lot of such family units have lost an income or the second person may be underemployed," Carpenter said. "With house payments, car payments and putting food on the table, that has an impact on our prospective students. Students that last year or the year before were planning to go to college are not going. That is not good for our community or our society."

So the goal has been to "hold our own" or maintain enrollment, he said.

WHAT'S TO COME

Carpenter said it was time to retire.
"It's a lot of stress and a lot of pressure keeping this place on track as it should be in these recessionary
times," he said.

His wife retired from public education in Sumter School District 17 last year. Financially, he is able to do it.
He survived cancer a little more than five years ago. He retired with 21 years in active and reserve service to
the Army.

He wants to travel, read, golf and spend time with his grandchildren.

"For a lot of personal and professional reasons, now is the right time," Carpenter said. "When you get to 65,
you start wondering how many years you have left. I'm in relatively good health and I want to do some
things."

He turns 65 in April.

He said it won't be easy to move forward.

"For 19 years, my personal ego, my success and my regrets have been tied to the university," Carpenter
said. "I'll have to learn in retirement how to unplug, as Senator Leventis put it."

That doesn't mean he will no longer be involved with USC Sumter.

"I plan to continue to volunteer with the capital campaign," Carpenter said. "I'm committed to seeing it
through to a successful completion."

He has no doubt about USC Sumter's staying power.

"USC Sumter will continue to be here," Carpenter said. "It is vital to the university and it is vital to this
community. We will participate fully in the Palmetto College."

The Palmetto College will make more bachelor degrees available online, which he said is a good thing.

"For a lot of people it's hard to attend college with job and family responsibilities," Carpenter said. "The only
way they can do it is when the kids are in bed and the dishes are washed, taking one course at a time
online."

Most people will need at least two years of entry level education to take full advantage of the Palmetto
College program, and that is where regional campuses such as USC Sumter come in, he said.

"Palmetto College will be no different than entry to any other degree granting school in the USC system,"
Carpenter said. "Palmetto College is a really good because it will give citizens access to bachelor degrees in
addition to the five offered here. The intent is to serve the needs of citizens who can't access a bachelor
degree any other way."

Pastides agreed in his email.

"I believe USC Sumter's greatest days lie ahead, and it is my hope that you will share my excitement and
enthusiasm for USC Sumter, Palmetto College and the entire university system," he said. "We have a
wonderful new opportunity to increase affordability, access and opportunity for the citizens of the state of South Carolina, and USC Sumter will play a large role in that plan.

"USC Provost Michael Amiridis will visit the Sumter campus within a week to meet with faculty and staff to seek their counsel in the matters of short- and long-term needs. We anticipate appointing interim leadership as we conduct a national search, and we will keep you informed of that process as it develops."

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