Florida Southern: A College in Action

A Response to U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon's National Call to Action to University Presidents and Governing Boards Issued on August 3, 2026

Florida Southern, whose antecedents place the College as the oldest private institution of higher education in the state, rightfully takes great pride in our ongoing leadership in the City of Lakeland, Polk County, the State of Florida, and indeed the country. We remain committed to our mission "to equip students for lives of positive and consequential impact on society through dynamic, engaged learning in our iconic setting and beyond."

We appreciate this nationwide call to action as an opportunity for Florida Southern to reaffirm our long-standing institutional commitments, drawn from our vision, mission, and Cornerstone values statements, and further advanced through our *Excel 2030* framework.

In May 2026, aligned with the College's vision, mission, and Cornerstone values, the Board of Trustees approved a refined strategic plan, *Excel 2030*, built around four key imperatives:

- **Enroll**: We will recruit and retain talented students in robust programs aligning our academic strengths with market demand.
- **Educate**: We will deliver dynamic, engaged learning in distinctive academic coursework and degree programs resulting in exceptional student outcomes.
- **Employ**: We will graduate individuals prepared to thrive personally and professionally in a global society as they lead lives of positive and consequential impact.
- **Engage**: We will deepen connection within our community, extending the impact of our transformative education and securing the enduring relationships vital to our future.

We recognize and wholeheartedly embrace that, in guiding our students along their enrollment-to-employment journey, the College has an obligation to provide a powerful education as preparation for them to make a positive and consequential impact on society. Our enduring vision propels the College continually forward as we strive:

> To be nationally distinguished for the exceptional outcomes of our transformative model of engaged learning, producing graduates prepared to thrive personally and professionally in a global society. Through sustained affiliation with The United Methodist Church and situated on the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright campus, the College will continue to be grounded in Judeo-Christian ethical principles and inspired by visionary innovation.

Florida Southern is and will proudly remain "a college in action."

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Responses to Sec. McMahon's call, all based within our mission-driven focus, are provided below.

1. **Transparent, Merit-Based Admission of Talented Students**

   The College's admission criteria are publicly available through that Office's website. In short, as expressed in *Excel 2030*, we seek to recruit and retain talented students.

   Per the Academic Catalog:

   > *Admissions decisions are based on academic achievement, aptitude, personal character, and performance in general citizenship or leadership activities within the school and community.*
   >
   > *…Admissions decisions are made without regard to race, color, religion, gender, gender identity, age, national origin, mental or physical disability, marital status, medical condition, veteran status, sexual orientation, citizenship, or any other characteristic protected under federal law or local ordinance.* (see "Admissions," p. 13)

   As shared on the website, the 25th-75th interquartile range (i.e., "the middle half") for admitted students typically have a 3.4 – 4.1 GPA. Within a comprehensive review of each applicant, standardized test scores are optional as one component of the College's review. For those reporting test scores, the SAT range is 1170 – 1320 and the ACT range is 24 – 30.

   Florida Southern College is indeed committed to serving the State of Florida and the United States through the dynamic, engaged learning that equips our students for lives of positive and consequential impact. We recognize the special responsibility we hold to the surrounding localities, state, and nation, even as we welcome students from around the world, many of whom go on to lives of impact in the U.S. On average in recent years, roughly 60% of enrolling undergraduates come from Florida with 40% enrolling from beyond the Sunshine State, of whom 2%-3% are international students.

2. **Open Inquiry and the Free Exchange of Ideas**

   Fulfilling our mission, both in (a) equipping students for lives of positive and consequential impact and (b) providing dynamic, engaged learning, requires open inquiry and honest debate, which are embraced at Florida Southern College.

   In welcoming free speech as the basis of the free exchange of ideas, we share the expectation that ideas once introduced may then be robustly evaluated based on their merits. Our Cornerstone Values expressly state that a Florida Southern Scholar will "honor the dignity, value, and worth of all persons while learning from the differences in others' backgrounds, heritage, ideas, thoughts, and opinions."

   Additional institutional policies, partially quoted below, include:

- Academic Catalog (see p. 7):
  In keeping with our Cornerstone values, Florida Southern College promotes intellectual curiosity and self-expression and strives for all faculty, students, and staff to feel a part of the community with excitement and inclusivity – and without fear of reprisal for being true to themselves.
- Student Handbook (see II. Student Rights and Responsibilities, p. 5):
  Every student may also expect free expression and inquiry, exercised responsibly and enriched by the differences in others' backgrounds, heritage, ideas, and opinions, along with a safe living and learning environment where personal rights and property are protected. In turn, every student is expected to practice personal integrity and excellence of character in both academic and personal conduct, and to treat all members of the College community with respect and civility, honoring the dignity of others even amid disagreement.
- Student Handbook (see IV.D. Free Speech and Free Expression, p. 9):
  The College respects the free speech and free expression rights of all members of the College community, while at the same time creating an environment of civility that fosters tolerance and mutual respect, and which allows all members of the College community to participate meaningfully in campus life without being subject to discrimination or harassment. All members of the College community are free to examine, discuss, and express their opinions publicly or privately within these guidelines.

The College is committed to ensuring all persons are respected in expressing their ideas, ideas that once espoused may then be evaluated upon their merits. The Student Handbook expressly addresses student-led activism and demonstrations (Section IV.N, p. 18), with which all such activities must comply, to ensure we maintain a campus environment in which all members may participate meaningfully without being subject to discrimination or harassment and that the College's educational or business activities are not disrupted.

3. Academic Vitality, Intellectual Pluralism, and the Advancement of Knowledge

Academic freedom, a vital component of the advancement of knowledge, draws from and exists within the freedom of expression. We welcome the free exchange of ideas alongside the expectation that ideas introduced may then be evaluated based on their merits. Through that evaluation, ideas are refined – and knowledge advanced.

The "marketplace of ideas," a term introduced by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in a 1919 dissenting opinion, encapsulates well the concepts of academic vitality and intellectual pluralism – all toward the advancement of knowledge. Holmes famously stated, "The ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas …the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the

competition of the market." The foundation of an open marketplace of ideas is academic freedom.

The College continues to draw upon the foundational guidance from the American Association of University Professors' "Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom," originally published in 1940 with interpretive comments added in 1970.

Built upon that guidance, the College's Faculty Handbook makes clear:

- *Faculty are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matters which are not related to their teaching.* [The 1970 interpretive comments by the AAUP clarifies the need to avoid persistently introducing material unrelated to the subject being taught, recognizing that some relevant materials to the subject at hand may be controversial.]
- *Faculty are entitled to freedom in terms of research and in the publication of said research, as long as said research and publication does not interfere with the performance of their other academic duties.*
- *Faculty are citizens and members of a learned profession. When Faculty speak, write, or act as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position as employees of Florida Southern College imposes special obligations as scholars and educators. Faculty should remember that the public may judge their profession and Florida Southern College by their utterances and actions. Hence, Faculty should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking or acting for or on behalf of Florida Southern College.*

In order for academic freedom, as a component of free expression, to thrive in our intellectual community, faculty members must abide by the expectation to "at all times be accurate" with the expectation that any idea introduced may then be evaluated on its merits. Evaluation based upon the merits, including the peer review and verification processes involved in research publication, is a hallmark of the pursuit of the advancement of knowledge.

Hiring talented faculty members to join our academic community is among the most critical decisions made at Florida Southern College. In identifying such individuals, our search process is guided by the *Faculty Handbook*, which explicitly includes as a criterion to be considered within teaching excellence, "modeling critical thinking, as opposed to simply conveying information" (p. 28). We seek out and welcome new scholars, who join a faculty community carefully cultivated over decades, that embody the critical thinking that undergirds the College's academic vitality.

4. Affordability, Lifelong Value, and Student Outcomes

Our strategic plan, *Excel 2030*, explicitly recognizes the College's role and responsibility on our students' enrollment-to-employment journey. We recognize that our students and their families consider, "Is a Florida Southern education a good value for the price?"

We can confidently respond, "Yes, it is."

- 99% of our students receive institutional grants, averaging more than $28,000 per student in 2026-27 and reducing a family's out-of-pocket expense.

  To be clear, that is the average amount of aid received from Florida Southern and does not include federal, state or other sources of support. Among Florida's private colleges and universities, Florida Southern's institutional grant aid provided per undergraduate ranked at the 84th percentile, exceeding the average institutional grant for this group of institutions by more than $10,500 per student.[1]

- 100% of graduates participate in at least three high-impact educational practices in completing their degree. These practices, which produce the critical thinking skills applicable throughout a graduate's lifetime, include first year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, global learning, service/community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects.

- At Florida Southern, we expect every student to graduate with at least two applied learning experiences, which are primarily achieved through professional internships. Mentored research with a faculty member is another pathway for students anticipating graduate study to fulfill this expectation.

- The Florida Southern College Career Guarantee, provides a structured roadmap for students to follow during their undergraduate studies through career-focused activities, personalized coaching, and applied learning. The College guarantees every graduate completing the program employment or graduate school placement within six months of completing their FSC degree. We stand behind that guarantee. Though exceedingly rare, the College provides loan assistance or a graduate tuition waiver to any graduate completing the program who does not achieve one of those outcomes.

- 99.1% of graduates achieve a successful outcome within six months of receiving their degree, which includes professional employment, enrolling in a graduate degree program, or a military commission. This percentage was true for the

[1] Calculated from data reported to the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Dataset (IPEDS) for 2023-24, the most recent data year available.

Class of 2024 and Class of 2025. We anticipate a comparable success rate for the Class of 2026 and are actively compiling post-graduate outcomes for that cohort.

- Florida Southern had no (i.e., zero) graduates with student loans who were in default on their payments from the FY2021, FY2022, or FY2023 cohorts as of September 30, 2026. This stands in sharp contrast to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid's finding that approximately 1,800 institutions nationwide with nonrepayment rates at or above 25% as of that date.[2]

Florida Southern is committed to cost discipline and affordability as part of our commitment to serving our students and their families. As a private institution, the College must be sensitive to the demands of the market in order to flourish, which we have done for more than 140 years. We take pride in balancing the necessary costs to deliver the dynamic, engaged learning and associated post-graduation success that our students and their families value alongside the affordability that keeps a Florida Southern education within reach.

5. Academic Excellence and Rigor in the Age of AI

Lives of positive and consequential impact at the core of Florida Southern's mission are built upon integrity. The first of our five Cornerstone values is to "practice personal integrity and excellence of character in all areas, expecting the same from others." That foundational value of personal integrity and excellence of character forms the basis of our academic community of scholars at Florida Southern College. From it, we derive our Honor Code, the requirements of which are fully conveyed in the Academic Catalog.

Expecting personal integrity and excellence of character in others includes accurate assessment of performance. Assessing student performance – and avoiding grade inflation without the commensurate demonstration of excellence – is a topic regularly engaged by the Florida Southern faculty. At present, artificial intelligence is the most pressing issue in regard to accurate assessment of performance.

AI and its impact on education are multifaceted:

- AI is a tool with which our students must be equipped to be career-ready and thrive in the modern workplace. Employers expect it; therefore, we must serve our students well in meeting that expectation.
- AI, when misused or overused, may inhibit a student's intellectual growth, the precise purpose of the dynamic, engaged learning so prized at Florida Southern.

[2] Office of Federal Student Aid. (2026, September 30). FY 2023 Official National Student Loan Cohort Default Rate Briefing.

At Florida Southern, we are fortunate to have a faculty committed to navigating AI thoughtfully while prioritizing both the student's intellectual growth and their professional preparation. Our Faculty Senate brought forward in November 2024 a recommendation, since adopted by the College, that every syllabus must state the course's AI policy, making clear the expectation for and allowed use of AI in each course, frequently on an assignment-by-assignment basis. The inclusion of these statements provides a multifaceted approach by incorporating the practical experience with AI necessary for career preparation as well as making clear the integrity with which assignments are to be completed in pursuit of intellectual growth. The Faculty Senate also formed an AI Advisory Subcommittee for further evaluation of topics in this space relevant to our faculty members.

Our faculty have also been engaging in their own professional development to stay at the leading edge of AI and its role in instruction. One day prior to the start of the fall and spring semesters, our faculty gathers for professional development, a day which often includes external experts. In recent years, faculty development days have been focused on a range of AI related topics, from incorporating the technologies to personalize instruction alongside approaches to maintain academic integrity alongside students' use of AI. Our faculty are actively implementing assignments and evaluations in various modes to ensure they are a student's original work reflecting the desired intellectual growth through a course.

Just as the landscape surrounding AI is rapidly evolving, so, too, is Florida Southern's adaptation to the technology's relevance to our work. We do so to sustain the dynamic, engaged learning of our institutional mission alongside the personal integrity and excellence of character foundational to our Cornerstone values.

6. Research Integrity

Florida Southern's faculty are active scholars and contributors to their respective fields. Their scholarship is integral to our teaching mission. Active engagement by faculty members within their disciplines strengthens them as educators while creating opportunities for students, primarily undergraduates, to participate directly in scholarly inquiry.

Those mentored research opportunities allow students to apply what they learn in the classroom, develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and experience firsthand how knowledge is created, tested, and advanced. These experiences reflect Florida Southern's commitment to dynamic, engaged learning and prepare students for graduate study and professional practice.

The College's commitment to scholarship is accompanied by a responsibility to pursue those activities with integrity and careful stewardship. Research conducted under the auspices of the College is subject to appropriate institutional oversight. External

partnerships, including funding, are evaluated within institutional policies and applicable requirements.

While Florida Southern is primarily a teaching-focused institution rather than a research-intensive university, faculty projects are often funded by federal, state, and local agencies as well as foundations and philanthropic organizations. We remain committed to ensuring those activities advance knowledge, enrich student learning, and uphold the integrity of the College and its mission.

7. Honoring the Public Investment

Fulfilling Florida Southern's mission to "equip students for lives of positive and consequential impact on society through dynamic, engaged learning in our iconic setting and beyond" is the primary means through which we honor the public investment in the College. Now in our 142nd year, generations of graduates have gone on to positive and consequential lives in a host of fields, including agriculture, business, education, medicine, ministry, and public service to name a few. We are honored by the testament that each alumna or alumnus provides to the dynamic, engaged education they received while students at the College.

Two-thirds of Florida Southern students enroll pursuing a STEM-H (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Health Sciences) or Business degree. The College awards the highest percentage of STEM-H degrees of any private institution in Florida without an engineering program, even as we maintain strong programs and post-graduation outcomes in the social sciences and humanities.

As we look to the future, we will sustain that virtuous cycle of providing an education with transformative outcomes leading to impactful alumni in Lakeland, Polk County, Florida, the United States, and the world.

As the largest residential higher education institution in Polk County, Florida Southern has a critical role to play in the public-private educational partnership that will provide the vital workforce needs of the county, region, and state. With more than 144,000 new residents arriving since 2020, Polk County's growth rate of 19.8% more than doubled the statewide rate (8.7%). That growth continues here, even as the rate slows elsewhere in Florida. Since 2024, Polk County added nearly 24,000 new residents as its one-year growth rate of 2.7% more than tripled the statewide rate (0.8%).[3]

As Florida Southern embraces our role to educate career-ready graduates alongside meeting the needs of the region's citizens, we actively consider fields that are in high demand. The Central Florida Development Council (CFDC) has identified targeted areas, which align directly with the Florida Chamber of Commerce's opportunity clusters identified in *Florida Jobs 2030*. Supported by funding from the State of Florida, the College is exploring aviation degree programs, including concentrations in aviation

[3] U.S. Census Bureau. (2026, March). *County Population Totals and Components of Change: 2020-2025*.

management, planning, and safety, aligned with workforce priorities identified by the Chamber and CFDC. This effort will identify opportunities for the College to partner with stakeholders to prepare professionals for high-demand aviation and aerospace careers.

Targeted Areas	Central Florida Development Council	Florida Chamber of Commerce	FSC Programs Offered?
Agribusiness & Agritechnology	•		✓
Aviation & Aerospace	•	•	Exploring
Business Services	•	•	✓
Health Sciences	•	•	✓
Logistics, Supply Chain & Distribution	•	•	✓
Technology & Innovation	•	•	✓

Notes: Central Florida Development Council's targeted areas as reported on www.cfdc.org. Florida Chamber of Commerce's opportunity clusters taken from *Florida Jobs 2030*, including aerospace and aviation, logistics and distribution, health care and life sciences, and finance and professional services. The CFDC's targeted area titles are used in this table, which reflects the overlap with the Chamber's clusters. Cybersecurity, within CFDC's "Technology & Innovation" targeted area, was among the emerging essential skills in *Florida Jobs 2030*.

At Florida Southern College, we appreciate this nationwide call to action as an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to transparent, merit-based admission of talented students; open inquiry and the free expression of ideas; academic vitality, intellectual pluralism, and advancing knowledge through teaching and scholarship; affordability, lifelong value, and student outcomes; academic excellence and rigor in the age of AI; research integrity; and honoring the public investment. These reflect long-standing Florida Southern commitments, drawn from our vision, mission, and Cornerstone values, and further advanced through our *Excel 2030* framework.

Sincerely,

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President