
At the Helm: Aug. 12, 2026

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Wed, Aug 12, 2026 at 3:29 PM



Dear Faculty & Staff,

As we begin a new academic year, I am pleased to bring back *At the Helm*. My goal is to keep the community informed, answer your questions, and offer context for the decisions shaping our future. This summer, the faculty's AAUP representative shared several thoughtful questions. In the interest of transparency, the senior staff and I thought our responses would be valuable to share with staff as well.

Years of smaller entering classes and a rising discount rate have reduced our revenues. As a result, we had to cut the budget by approximately \$3.6 million and raise the endowment spending rate to 6.95% for the coming year. Over the past several years, we have already trimmed the operational budget by several million dollars. Even so, during this time, we protected employee benefits, provided wage increases, and preserved student financial aid. We also saw a rise in student retention—a direct result of everyone's work on behalf of our students.

The reduced revenue could not support our previous staffing levels. Each senior staff member made staffing decisions within their own area, and to be clear, none of these changes were related to performance. In total, we reduced staff by 5.6%. These were extremely difficult and unwelcome decisions, but necessary to position Southwestern for a financially sustainable future. Because faculty and staff did not receive salary increases this year, I have reduced my own salary with the Board's approval, consistent with the commitment I made during the spring town halls.

Cutting alone is not the answer. Continued reductions will not lead to success. For Southwestern to thrive over the next 187 years, we must increase enrollment while reducing the discount rate, continue record fundraising, and expand revenue sources. Auxiliary and Conference Sales, now in its third year, experienced staffing reductions this summer, as did other areas. The team continues to bring new dollars to Southwestern through conferences, camps, facility rentals, and events, supporting University operations and easing pressure on the operating budget. The SU 560 represents another source of future revenue. Phase 1 is building a foundation for recurring income that will benefit Southwestern, and it is funded separately from the University's operating budget. The City of Georgetown has committed \$8.5 million in GTEC funds toward Phase 1 infrastructure, and conversations are continuing with the City and Williamson County about additional tools, including a potential TIRZ. There will be a groundbreaking with the City this October, marking the start of infrastructure work. Because the property and the lots across University Ave are already on the tax rolls, future commercial development will not create an additional tax burden.

As counterintuitive as it may sound, given the cuts we have made, we must also invest and think differently if Southwestern is to grow and sustain itself. This means working with the Board of Trustees to fund clearly needed facilities. Our academic program has long been recognized for its excellence, and our buildings should match the quality of the work our faculty and staff do every day. Student-centered spaces such as the Alma Thomas Fine Arts Center, the Robertson Gym, the McCombs Campus Center, and the Smith Library Center all require attention, as do other deferred maintenance projects. We have made major improvements across campus in recent years to help attract and retain students, but much remains to be done. The Clark, Mabree, and Ruter residence halls are no longer part of the campus—and neither is the mold. Thanks to ongoing monitoring by the facilities team, there are currently no known mold issues. A welcoming, attractive, and well-maintained campus is part of creating a place where people want to be. With the opening of Jessie Daniel Ames Hall and Ella

Sedwick Hall, those older residence halls were no longer needed. A new policy is now in place, and first-year through junior students are now required to live on campus. The new facilities give current students far better places to live and support the admissions team in conversations with prospective students and their families. The Clark name is important to our community. Last year, the Commemorative Landscape Task Force developed a comprehensive naming policy, approved by the Board of Trustees, that guided the naming of Jessie Daniel Ames Hall and Ella Sedwick Hall. We will use that same process to determine how best to honor Clark's legacy going forward.

A year has passed since I shared that I moved from the Turner-Fleming house on campus to a home next to the IOOF cemetery, a five-minute walk away. I greatly miss living on campus and hosting students, staff, parents, alumni, and faculty. During my years there, however, the house required repeated mold remediation due to roof leaks. Settling caused cracks in the walls and foundation, which in turn shorted the electrical system, and testing later revealed the presence of asbestos. Restricted endowment funds designated for the President's residence covered the cost of a substitute home.

The Turner-Fleming House is a landmark within the Georgetown historic district, so rather than tearing it down, we will convert it into a multipurpose space for alumni events, student organization meetings, admissions presentations, and other campus gatherings. It will also be available for rentals and special events, creating an additional source of auxiliary revenue. This work will be donor-funded, so the timeline will depend on fundraising.

Scott McLean, Chief Academic Officer and Dean of the Faculty, will work with Academic Affairs' coordinating committees to review policies related to instructional costs. Because any recommendations could affect faculty policy, he will ask the Faculty Steering Committee to evaluate the options and their implications. If those discussions lead to proposed policy changes, they will be brought to the faculty for discussion and, when appropriate, a faculty vote, as outlined in the Faculty Handbook. Dean McLean also intends to lead discussions about workload and related expectations for service, advising, scholarship, course releases, and other responsibilities. There will be no change to the current travel policy; travel decisions should continue to be made in partnership with the Dean, Department Chair, or Senior Staff member.

The Dean is beginning work on a new Academic Strategic Plan, starting with conversations at next week's Fall Faculty Conference. Throughout the fall, faculty

and staff will have opportunities to participate through shared governance committees, department and area meetings, faculty meetings, open listening sessions for faculty and staff, and an anonymous feedback portal. These conversations will identify priorities, explore innovative approaches to the academic mission, and shape a plan that reflects both the needs of our students and the future of the University. The goal is to finalize the new academic strategic plan early in the spring semester.

Students choose a college for many reasons, but one of the most important is whether they can picture themselves belonging there. The friendships they form, the spaces where they gather, and their experiences outside the classroom all influence whether they enroll and whether they stay.

That same thinking drives Pirate Adventures. Two years ago, Student Life began offering a small number of area trips during Welcome Week. They were well-received by students. Thanks to careful planning, about 270 members of this year's incoming class will start building friendships through Pirate Adventures during their first week on campus. Those early connections can make all the difference in helping a new student feel at home.

Over the past five years, amenities have been added where students can connect, including pickleball courts, sand volleyball, and an outdoor basketball court. This fall, a new Pilates studio in Jessie Daniel Ames Hall will open, offering classes for students, faculty, and staff. Outdoor Adventure, now in its third year and staffed by two members, offers students a unique experience. Since its inception, its operating budget, equipment, and one staff position have been funded through donor support rather than the operating budget. A five-year plan for the program is underway. Sweet Surprise is another amenity created during COVID, when opportunities to gather were nearly nonexistent. Rather than spending funds budgeted for dinners and entertaining at the President's House, those funds were redirected to bring students, faculty, and staff together. Enrollment has incorporated Sweet Surprise into its recruitment strategy, and it was a featured experience during Sprog, ranking among the top-rated experiences for students and families this past summer. Given the budget cuts and how much students enjoy it, I will help underwrite its cost this year. Sprog had a reimagined program this summer. While any change in past practice raises questions about how it will be received, student and family feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The Student Life team created an experience that helped students feel welcomed, connected, and excited to begin their

Southwestern journey. Thank you to that team for leading the effort, and to the many faculty and staff who gave their time to make it memorable.

This will be our final year as a member of the Southern Athletic Association (SAA). Next year, we will transition back to the Southern Collegiate Athletic Conference (SCAC). Several factors shaped this decision, including repeated changes in the SAA's participating institutions, a marked increase in travel costs, and questions about the SAA's long-term viability. The move will strengthen our competitiveness and generate substantial budgetary savings.

As of today, the total number of first-year and transfer students is 400. They will arrive on Saturday for move-in. I will be there, along with senior staff, admissions staff, and the Pirate football team, to help move them into the residence halls. Transfer enrollment rose this fall, and although we did not meet the budgetary goal, the shortfall was smaller than we feared. A larger number of students than in previous years will graduate this December. This increase has been built into the budget assumptions. While it is too soon to know whether this reflects a trend, the goal remains to ensure that students enjoy a rich, broad liberal arts and sciences education across all four years.

Over the last few years, more opportunities have been developed to have more direct and candid conversations with each other, including monthly lunches with Faculty Committee chairs, question-and-answer sessions between Senior Staff and the direct reports of senior administrators, and separate faculty and staff budget meetings and town halls each semester. These conversations are now part of institutional practice. I know they do not erase the challenges we face, but I hope they provide context, answer questions, and help us move forward with shared understanding. Even when we do not all agree, I believe it is important that we keep talking to one another.

As we welcome new and returning students, I want to share a few operational updates. Interim Director of Capital Projects, Safety, and Technical Services Arthur Mendoza is currently overseeing campus safety. Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer Ainsley Goulbourne and Dean McLean are working together to transition chemical hygiene officer responsibilities to an existing part-time faculty member, ensuring compliance with all applicable regulations. We also continue to rely on outside contractors for specialized work, including construction management, landscaping, enrollment research, and other technical services. These partnerships supplement our workforce and give us access to

expertise that would be difficult or costly to maintain in-house. Ainsley will share more information about these expenses in a future budget update.

Senior Staff is ready to begin the new academic year, working together to support the mission of the University. In recent years, the team has experienced turnover due to retirements, colleagues stepping away for personal and family reasons, and the passing of two members. Three long-serving members of our community have been promoted to senior staff roles, preserving institutional knowledge while creating opportunities for talented people who already know and love Southwestern. The Senior Staff is committed to addressing difficult challenges fairly, and their care for this institution is evident every day.

Thank you for everything you do for Southwestern. This summer has been difficult—there is no mistaking that. Yet our mission remains strong, and while the work ahead may be hard, it is purposeful. I do not expect this letter to answer every question, and I know more will arise. That is exactly why I am bringing back *At the Helm*. In the meantime, thank you for your commitment to our students, to this University, and to one another.

Sincerely,

Laura Skandera Trombley
President



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