



Student Affairs and
Academic Support
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

ASPIRE & ADVANCE

CONNECTION THROUGH CURIOSITY

3rd Annual

ASPIRE & ADVANCE Conference

Thursday, July 23rd & Friday, July 24th

Idea Center at Gateway 737

737 Gadsden Street

Columbia, SC 29201

WELCOME!

Greetings,

Welcome to Aspire & Advance 2026 hosted by Student Affairs and Academic Support! This year marks an exciting first as we welcome higher education partners from across the University of South Carolina systems as well as our Student Affairs staff from across the state.

My personal challenge to you during this conference is to continue leveraging the power of curiosity. Ask bold questions, push past the familiar and open your mind to new ideas. Growth begins not only with what we know, but with what we are willing to discover.

Aspire & Advance was created to bring together professionals who are committed to strengthening their practice and advancing the student experience.

Thank you for joining us for this meaningful time of learning, connection and growth by taking part of this year's conference.

I hope you leave inspired, encouraged and ready to continue asking the questions that help our students, our teams and our collective impact move forward.

Forever to Thee!



J. Rex Tolliver

Vice President
Student Affairs and Academic Support





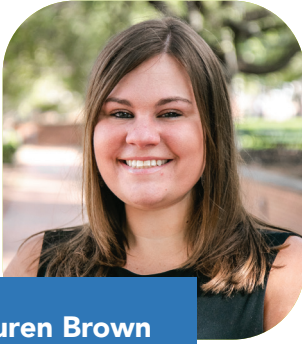
STUDENT AFFAIRS AT USC

The Division of Student Affairs and Academic Support at the University of South Carolina is dedicated to enhancing student learning, development, well-being and success from a students' first day on campus to their first destination post-graduation.

Through more than two dozen departments and programs, the division is guided by a student-centered approach providing comprehensive support in areas including student engagement, leadership development, health and wellness, residential learning and experiences, academic success, career readiness and student advocacy.

The Aspire & Advance Annual Conference is a reflection of our commitment to innovation, assessment and continuous improvement by bringing together higher education professionals from across South Carolina to share promising practices, strengthen partnerships and explore emerging strategies that support student achievement and institutional excellence.

2026 PLANNING COMMITTEE



Lauren Brown

Director of Professional Development,
Student Affairs and Academic Support



Melody Boland

Associate Director of Student Advocacy,
Student Affairs and Academic Support



Sean Cleary

Assistant Director for Resources
and External Relations, NRC



Caroline Elliott

Program Coordinator for Peer Leadership,
University 101 Programs



Dr. Tripp Harris

Associate Director of Community Growth,
Office of Fraternity & Sorority Life



Alexandra Lord

Technologies Platform Manager,
Carolina Experience



Erin McDonald

Director of Public Relations and Digital
Strategy, Student Affairs and Academic Support



**Brandon Moores-
Mandigo**

Associate Director of Faculty-Led Living Learning
Community Programs, University Housing



Autumn Colter

Financial Analyst,
Student Affairs and Academic Support



**Jessica Wright-
Wilkins**

Event Coordinator,
Russell House

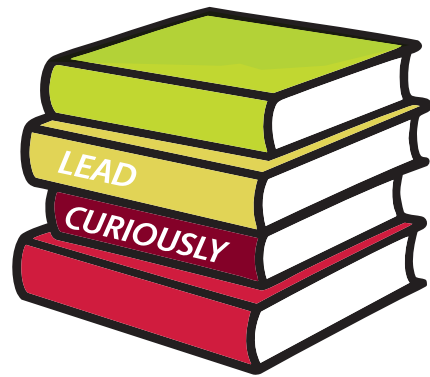
CURIOSITY IN ACTION

Centering Curiosity in Our Work

Curiosity is the foundation of our work in student affairs. It inspires us to ask thoughtful questions, embrace challenges with an open mind, and deepen the ways we support our colleagues and students.

By fostering a culture of curiosity, we strengthen collaboration across the division and create meaningful impact throughout our campus community.

CURIOSITY IS THE
SPARK
THAT IGNITES CHANGE.



QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

1. With curiosity in mind, what questions can I ask, or what information can I seek, to better understand this student's needs and improve their experience?
2. What is one specific action I can take to improve the student experience in my next interaction?
3. Did this student feel seen, heard and understood during their interaction with us? Why or why not?
4. If this student were my child, family member, or close friend, would I be satisfied with the experience they received? What would I want to be different?
5. How might this interaction have influenced the student's sense of belonging and their decision to continue their educational journey with us?

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

DAY 1: THURSDAY, JULY 23

TIME	EVENT/ACTIVITY	LOCATION
8:00 AM - 9:00 AM	Check-In & Breakfast	Ground Level & Congaree Room
9:00 AM - 10:15 AM	Opening Remarks & Keynote	Congaree Room
10:15 AM - 10:30 AM	Break	
10:30 AM - 10:50 AM	Lightning Session 1	Various Locations
10:50 AM - 11:00 AM	Break	
11:00 AM - 11:45 AM	Breakout Session 1	Various Locations
11:45 AM - 12:45 PM	Lunch	Congaree Room
12:45 PM - 12:55 PM	Break	
12:55 PM - 1:40 PM	Breakout Session 2	Various Locations
1:40 PM - 1:55 PM	Break	
1:55 PM - 2:40 PM	Breakout Session 3	Various Locations
2:40 PM - 3:05 PM	Bites & Insights: A Curious Exchange	Ground Level & Congaree Room
3:05 PM - 3:25 PM	Lightning Session 2	Various Locations
3:25 PM - 4:00 PM	Wrap Up & Door Prizes	Congaree Room



Garnet AI Foundry Team | Collaboration Room 21

The Garnet AI Foundry Team is on site throughout the conference to host their AI Work Lab. The AI Work Lab operationalizes Connection Through Curiosity by engaging participants in hands-on, inquiry-driven work with AI. Conference attendees are encouraged to bring authentic academic, research, or administrative tasks and collaborate with the AI Educators to explore, test, and refine solutions. Emphasizing responsible use and practical application, the AI Work Lab prioritizes iterative experimentation, peer exchange, and the production of tangible outputs that extend beyond the conference context.

SESSIONS AT A GLANCE

THURSDAY,
JULY 23

10:30 AM - 10:50 AM | Lightning Session 1

-  **Magnolia Suite:** “From Idea to Insight: What Happens When an Initiative Falls Flat?”
-  **Carolina Boardroom:** “The Psychology of Curiosity in Design”
-  **Craft Room:** “Feed Your Starter, Not Your Stress”
-  **Pee Dee Room:** “Curiosity Over Crisis: Navigating High Stakes Problems & Calls with Upset Students & Families”
-  **Upstate Room:** “A Seat at the Table: Involving Students in Staff Hiring”
-  **Lowcountry Room:** “From Chaos to Clarity: Using Microsoft Loop & Planner”

11:00 AM - 11:45 AM | Breakout Session 1

-  **Magnolia Suite:** “The Hiring Lens: What Today’s Employers Value Most”
-  **Carolina Boardroom:** “Turning Content into Connection: The @UofSCStudents Playbook”
-  **Craft Room:** “Sparkling Students’ Curiosity: Small Changes, Big Engagement”
-  **Pee Dee Room:** “From Curiosity to Creation: Turning AI Basics into a Custom GPT”
-  **Upstate Room:** “Connecting the Dots: From Curiosity to Strategic Investment”
-  **Lowcountry Room:** “The Power of Connection: What Great Relational Leaders do Differently”

12:55 PM - 1:40 PM | Breakout Session 2

-  **Magnolia Suite:** “Columbia Area Schools Panel: Aspire for Further Collaboration and Advance Student Services”
-  **Craft Room:** “The Curious Conference Attendee: From Discovery to Departmental Impact”
-  **Pee Dee Room:** “Roots & Wings: Advancing Inclusive Leadership Practices through Intentional Impact & Collaboration”
-  **Upstate Room:** “Fostering First-Generation Student Success: Leveraging the Community Cultural Wealth Framework”
-  **Lowcountry Room:** “Is This Worth My Time? Insights into Men’s Engagement Patterns at Carolina”

1:55 PM - 2:40 PM | Breakout Session 3

-  **Magnolia Suite:** “Insight into the Associate VP Role: Career Moves, Lessons Learned and Leadership Insights”
-  **Carolina Boardroom:** “Inside USC’s Canva Playbook”
-  **Craft Room:** “Working Across Generations: Conversations, Challenges and Collaborative Solutions”
-  **Pee Dee Room:** “Not-So-Secret Transfer Agent: Discovering Your Role in the Transfer Student Experience”
-  **Upstate Room:** “Recognize, Report, Support: Building Capacity for Hazing Prevention and Response”
-  **Lowcountry Room:** “AI at Work: Building Confidence and Connection Through Curiosity, Not Fear”

3:05 PM - 3:25 PM | Lightning Session 2

-  **Magnolia Suite:** “Gamecocks Don’t Get Played: A How-to Guide for Navigating Conversations around Student Betting”
-  **Carolina Boardroom:** “Curious Supervision: Helping Student Employees Thrive”
-  **Craft Room:** “What Does Campus Accessibility Look Like? Applying Stadium Service Concepts to Enhance the Experience for Students with Disabilities”
-  **Pee Dee Room:** “Building College Students Ethical AI Literacy Through Interactive Online Modules”
-  **Upstate Room:** “Micro-Breaks that Fit Your Workday”
-  **Lowcountry Room:** “The Curious Conflict: Transforming Workplace Conflict into Connection”

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

DAY 2: FRIDAY, JULY 24

TIME	EVENT/ACTIVITY	LOCATION
8:00 AM - 9:00 AM	Check-In & Breakfast	Ground Level & Congaree Room
9:00 AM - 9:45 AM	Breakout Session 1	Various Locations
9:45 AM - 9:55 AM	Break	
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10:40 AM - 10:50 AM	Break	
10:50 AM - 11:35 AM	Breakout Session 3	Various Locations
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FRIDAY,
JULY 24



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10:50 AM - 11:35 AM | Breakout Session 3

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THURSDAY KEYNOTE

A Few Glorious Sips from the Well of Curiosity, featuring the Dean of Fun!

J. Scott Derrick

Managing Senior Search Consultant, Spelman Johnson Executive Search

J. Scott Derrick earned his B.A. in Mathematics ('88) from Furman University and his M.Ed. in Student Personnel Services ('90) from the University of South Carolina.

Since 2017, J. Scott has served with Spelman Johnson Executive Search, currently as a Managing Senior Consultant. In a higher education career spanning 25 years, J. Scott worked at both public and private institutions, most recently as Executive Director of the Student Union & Cone University Center at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2014-17).

Previously, he served as the Director of the Trone Student Center at Furman University (1999-2014), the Director of Student Life at the College of Charleston (1992-98), and Assistant Director of Student Activities at the University of Richmond (1990-92).

Also known as the "Dean of Fun," J. Scott is an auctioneer and published author who loves to have a good time, is an avid movie fan, and relishes any opportunity to hit a round of golf with friends. A native of Irmo, SC, J. Scott lives in Tuscaloosa, AL, with his wife, Deborah, his daughter, Gracie, their poodle, Kristina, and their cat, Rain.



FRIDAY KEYNOTE

The Rough Draft Mindset™: Your Shortcut To Creativity and Innovation

Tianna Faye Soto

Keynote Speaker & Journalist

Tianna Faye Soto is a keynote speaker and journalist based in New York City. With expertise in mental health, wellness, and servant leadership, she empowers audiences to face their journey with clarity and confidence. Her work has been featured by The United Nations Foundation, Cosmopolitan, and Women's Health magazine.

As a Puerto Rican, Jamaican-Chinese woman, Tianna understands what it's like to live between worlds. Through her engaging, interactive keynotes, she ensures that all audience members feel seen, heard, and welcome in conversations about identity and well-being—no matter what their backgrounds. Her work is heart-centered, service-driven, culturally informed, and rooted in empathy.

Tianna holds a Master of Arts in Clinical & Counseling Psychology from Columbia University and degrees in Psychology and Spanish from NC State University. Additionally, she is a certified yoga and meditation instructor and wellness consultant who works with clients to help them achieve their personal and professional goals.



BITES & INSIGHTS

A CURIOUS EXCHANGE WITH SENIOR LEADERS

You have questions, we have answers. Join the Senior Leadership Team for a snack break and learn more about the thought leaders who bring the strategic priorities to life.

Student Affairs Senior Leadership Team



J. Rex Tolliver, J.D.

Vice President, Student Affairs
and Academic Support



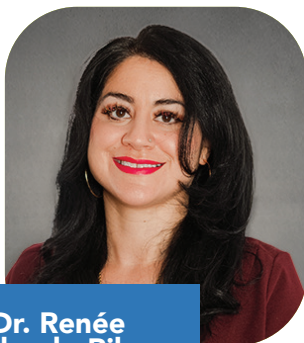
Dr. April Barnes

Assistant Vice President,
University Housing



Alicia Bervine

Executive Director,
Human Resources



**Dr. Renée
Delgado-Riley**

Assistant Vice President
for Planning, Assessment,
Innovation and Strategy



Dr. Dan Friedman

Assistant Vice President,
University 101 Programs and
the National Resource Center



Dr. Stacy Fritz

Associate Vice President,
Student Health and Well-Being
and Chief Health Officer



Ben Galloway

Associate Vice President,
Division CFO and COO



Dr. Ambra Hiott

Associate Vice President,
Student Life



Lisa Jerald

Chief of Staff



Rebecca Lancaster

Lead Senior Director,
Development



Dr. Justin Lawhead

Assistant Vice President
Career Readiness and
Post-Graduate Success



Rhonda Laylo

Director of Student Services and
Special Assistant to the Vice President



**Dr. Silvia Patricia
Rios Husain**

Associate Vice President,
Student Success



Shonta Sellars

Executive Director,
Communications and Marketing



Dr. Marc Shook

Associate Vice Student,
Dean of Students and
Deputy Title IX Coordinator

THURSDAY,
JULY 23

SESSION SCHEDULE



9:00 AM - 10:15 AM

THURSDAY KEYNOTE

A Few Glorious Sips from the Well of Curiosity, featuring the Dean of Fun!

J. Scott Derrick

 Congaree Room



10:30 AM - 10:50 AM

LIGHTNING SESSION 1

From Idea to Insight: What Happens When an Initiative Falls Flat?

Mara Sansolo

 Magnolia Suite

In Student Affairs, we are encouraged to innovate, pilot new ideas, and respond creatively to evolving student needs. Yet when an initiative loses momentum or fails to produce the intended outcomes, we rarely pause to examine it with intention. Instead, many efforts quietly fade without structured reflection. Grounded in the conference theme of curiosity, this session invites participants to reframe stalled initiatives not as failures, but as opportunities for insight.

Through a practical reflection framework and guided discussion, attendees will explore common factors that cause initiatives to fall flat, uncover the assumptions that shape implementation, and learn strategies for transforming unmet expectations into actionable learning. Participants will leave with tools to foster a culture of iteration, reflection, and continuous improvement within their teams and departments.

The Psychology of Curiosity in Design

Larissa Sands

 Carolina Boardroom

What makes people stop, look, and want to know more? This session examines how curiosity drives attention and engagement in visual communication. Through the use of ambiguity, contrast, surprise, and incomplete information, designers can encourage exploration, deepen audience involvement, and create lasting impressions. By understanding how curiosity influences perception and decision-making, designers can create more compelling visual experiences that capture attention, sustain interest, and encourage meaningful interaction with a message.



**THURSDAY,
JULY 23**

SESSION SCHEDULE

Feed Your Starter, Not Your Stress

Andrea Valaitis

 *Craft Room*

This interactive 20-minute session uses sourdough baking as a metaphor and mindfulness practice to explore stress regulation, adaptability, and sustainable professional growth. Participants will learn how nurturing a temperamental sourdough starter mirrors navigating unpredictable campus environments — requiring patience, observation, flexibility, and trust in process.

Curiosity Over Crisis: Navigating High Stakes Problems & Calls with Upset Students and Families

Dr. Dan Colascione

 *Pee Dee Room*

High-stakes calls from upset students and families can feel overwhelming, but they're also powerful opportunities to build trust, connection, and clarity. In this fast-paced lightning session, participants will learn curiosity-driven strategies for de-escalating tense conversations, embracing engaged parents, and guiding callers toward collaborative solutions. We'll cover practical tools such as reflective listening, reframing, boundary-setting, and expectation management—designed to help staff remain calm, confident, and student-centered. Attendees will leave with actionable techniques they can apply immediately to turn challenging calls into moments of understanding and partnership.

A Seat at the Table: Involving Students in Staff Hiring

Sammie Burt & Sully Hutto

 *Upstate Room*

Learn about the benefits of search committees and explore practical ways for student involvement on search committees. Attendees will leave with tangible tools relevant to incorporating student voices throughout the hire process, directly impacting their experiences and elevating hiring outcomes.

From Chaos to Clarity: Using Microsoft Loop & Planner

Jessica Chapman & Emma Ormond

 *Lowcountry Room*

Whether you supervise staff, advise student leaders, or juggle a lot of competing priorities - it can be challenging to keep track of all of the work, to-dos, deadlines, and more. In this session, we will discuss how we implemented Microsoft Loop and Planner apps to create a centralized “operating system” for student government and our office. These tools helped us create a system for tracking documentation, managing large-scale events, coordinating social media requests, and supporting our day-to-day responsibilities. Learn how to build structured workflows, create repeatable templates, preserve institutional memory, and increase accountability.

THURSDAY,
JULY 23

SESSION SCHEDULE



11:00 AM - 11:45 AM

BREAKOUT SESSION 1

The Hiring Lens: What Today's Employers Value Most

Jacqui Branch, Tristan Broadwater & Olivia Scott

 *Magnolia Suite*

What do employers truly look for when hiring graduates and where do they see the biggest gaps? This interactive panel brings members of USC Career Center's Employer Advisory Board directly into conversation with campus stakeholders. Representing diverse industries and hiring needs, these employers will share candid insights on workforce trends, AI, essential competencies, hiring practices, and the evolving expectations of new graduates. Attendees will gain a clearer understanding of how co-curricular programs, student leadership roles, campus employment, service learning, and student organization involvement contribute directly to workforce readiness.

Turning Content into Connection: The @UofSCStudents Playbook

Cynthia Gunter

 *Carolina Boardroom*

Social media shouldn't just inform students — it should engage them. The award winning @uofscstudents account is designed to meet students where they scroll and guide them toward the campus resources, services, and experiences that shape their success. This session will break down how strategic content, authentic storytelling, and intentional collaboration across departments can turn a social media feed into a powerful student engagement platform.

Participants will learn how to craft posts that resonate, leverage trends without losing institutional voice, and measure success in ways that matter to leadership. Through real examples and actionable takeaways, attendees will leave equipped to shift from simply posting information to building meaningful digital connections that strengthen campus engagement and student success.

Sparkling Students' Curiosity: Small Changes, Big Engagement

Alexa Rivas-Fernandez & Anna Cathryn Olle

 *Craft Room*

Tired of students walking by your table without engaging? Hoping to increase your impact and numbers in a meaningful way? Engaging with students in creative ways helps information stick and sparks curiosity! This session highlights how intentional messaging and environment specific programming enhance outreach across the college campus. Through examples and discussion, attendees will learn strategies to boost student engagement, the do's and don'ts of programming, how to adapt programs for different environments, and ways to repackage familiar topics into fresh themes.

**THURSDAY,
JULY 23**

SESSION SCHEDULE

From Curiosity to Creation: Turning AI Basics into a Custom GPT

Dr. Silvia Patricia Rios Husain

 *Pee Dee Room*

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming part of everyday work in higher education, yet many professionals are still trying to understand where to begin and how these tools can be used in thoughtful and practical ways. This session introduces the fundamentals of generative AI and shows participants how they can move beyond simply asking questions to creating their own customized AI tools. In this interactive workshop, participants will learn the basics of how generative AI works, explore examples of how customized GPT tools can support teaching, student success, and administrative work, and discuss considerations for responsible and effective use.

Attendees are encouraged to bring a laptop so they can practice building their own customized GPT. By the end of the session, participants will have a basic understanding of how generative AI works, how customized GPTs can support their work, and how they can begin developing their own AI tools to enhance productivity, support students, and streamline everyday tasks.

Connecting the Dots: From Curiosity to Strategic Investment

Dr. Renée Delgado-Riley & Nancy Derrick

 *Upstate Room*

Assessment produces impact. Finance allocates resources. When those conversations connect, organizations can move from tradition-driven budgeting to strategic investment. In this interactive session, participants will explore how outcome data, financial context, and strategic priorities can work together to inform smarter, more aligned decisions about where and how resources are invested.

The Power of Connection: What Great Relational Leaders Do Differently

Dr. April Barnes

 *Lowcountry Room*

Leadership is evolving. While traditional models often emphasize authority, position, and power, relational leadership centers influence, trust, and meaningful connection. This session invites participants to explore what relational leadership is all about by examining leadership styles, distinguishing power-based approaches from influence-driven practices, and identifying the characteristics that inspire followership. Through reflection and group dialogue, participants will clarify their own leadership tendencies and leave with strategies to lead more intentionally and relationally in their organizations.

THURSDAY,
JULY 23

SESSION SCHEDULE



12:55 PM - 1:40 PM

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

Columbia Area Schools Panel: Aspire for Further Collaboration and Advance Student Services

Jennifer Jackson, Adrien Montalvo, Melissa Brannen, Patrick Bennett & Gordon Schell

 *Magnolia Suite*

This Panel session is a collaboration between Columbia area Colleges and Universities that have been working together for 4 years. This panel will include higher ed professionals from The University of South Carolina, Midlands Technical College, Columbia College, Benedict College, Allen University, and local non-profit organization Food Share.

We will discuss monthly meetings where we share best practices, resources, and ways that we are meeting needs of students who face food insecurity and other basic needs concerns. The panel will interact with the audience through a Q&A Session This will be a timely panel as it brings together, for the first time, these schools to discuss food pantries, basic needs, but also college collaboration.

The Curious Conference Attendee: From Discovery to Departmental Impact

Lauren Brown

 *Craft Room*

Conferences often spark new questions, fresh perspectives, and meaningful connections. Yet the true value of these experiences lies in what happens after attendees return to campus. Whether you are new to attending conferences and looking for ways to bring ideas back to campus, or a supervisor seeking to maximize the impact of professional development opportunities for your team, this session offers practice strategies for turning conference learning into meaningful action.

**THURSDAY,
JULY 23**

SESSION SCHEDULE

Roots & Wings: Advancing Inclusive Leadership Practices Through Intentional Impact and Collaboration

Jameka Williams

 *Pee Dee Room*

This interactive workshop invites higher education leaders to explore how curiosity can strengthen connection and inform inclusive leadership practice. Through reflection, dialogue, and applied exercises, participants will examine the “roots” of effective leadership—self-awareness, trust, equity, and shared purpose—alongside the “wings,” or practices that foster collaboration, innovation, and engagement. Grounded in the theme connection through curiosity, attendees will gain strategies to cultivate inclusive, collaborative cultures across teams, learning environments, and institutional initiatives.

Fostering First-Generation Student Success: Leveraging the Community Cultural Wealth Framework

Dr. Jamil Johnson

 *Upstate Room*

Dr. Jamil D. Johnson will share findings from his project as a SAAS Faculty Research Fellow examining first-generation students' experiences and their engagement in high-impact practices. Attendees will (a) learn what first-generation students identify as the most important supports in their holistic success and significant barriers, (b) discuss practices that first-generation students and their advocates identify as strong sources of support, and (c) develop strategies to strengthen their own institutional support networks and community partnerships that foster success.

Is This Worth My Time? Insights into Men's Engagement Patterns at Carolina

**Dr. Kate Lehman, Dr. Kevin Wenger, Dr. Sandy Greene,
Dr. Katie Hopkins & Rebeca Greenfield**

 *Lowcountry Room*

Undergraduate men at USC participate in co-curricular and high-impact learning opportunities at lower rates than their peers, a trend that mirrors national patterns. Over the past year, our research team conducted a comprehensive institutional study using engagement-tracking data, NSSE results, and student records to understand where, how, and why first-year men engage—or don't.

This practitioner-oriented session shares key findings about participation patterns, identity-related influences, and differences between highly engaged and minimally engaged men. We will connect campus data to theories of motivation and gender socialization and explore what these insights mean for designing programs, communications, and outreach that resonate with male students. Participants will leave with actionable strategies to enhance engagement among all students, including those least likely to opt in.

THURSDAY,
JULY 23

SESSION SCHEDULE



1:55 PM - 2:40 PM

BREAKOUT SESSION 3

Insight into the Associate VP Role: Career Moves, Lessons Learned and Leadership Insights

Dr. Silvia Patricia Rios Husain, Dr. Stacy Fritz,
Dr. Marc Shook & Dr. Ambra Hiott

 *Magnolia Suite*

This panel conversation brings four of our Associate Vice Presidents from student affairs and academic support at the University of South Carolina to share the real stories behind their leadership journeys. They will share the defining moments, pivotal opportunities, mentors, and lessons that helped shape their careers, as well as the challenges and reward of stepping into increasingly complex leadership roles. Through an open and candid conversation, panelists will share what they wish they had known earlier in their careers, how they developed the skills needed for executive leadership, and what helped them move into new leadership opportunities.

Recognize, Report, Support: Building Capacity for Hazing Prevention and Response

Dr. Tripp Harris, Ayana Bush & Lexi Hinson

 *Upstate Room*

Research has found that 55% of college students who are members of student organizations have experienced hazing, and that hazing occurs across organizations of many different types (Allan et al., 2025; Allan & Madden, 2012). Just as troubling is Allan & Madden's (2008) earlier finding that more than 90% of students who experience hazing in college do not recognize that they have been hazed. Given its prevalence across contexts, it is critical for campus-based professionals across all functional areas to be aware of what constitutes hazing and what they can do to help.

Led by members of USC's campus-wide Hazing Prevention and Education Coalition, this session builds capacity for hazing prevention and response on campuses across South Carolina by a) exploring signs students could be experiencing hazing in different organizational contexts, b) highlighting the importance of reporting hazing and common reporting options across institutions, and c) workshopping approaches for supporting students who are impacted by hazing.

This session will challenge common assumptions about what hazing is and where it takes place to prompt curiosity among attendees about the roles they can play in hazing prevention and response. The session will also briefly review implications of South Carolina's Tucker Hipps Transparency Act and the recently enacted federal Stop Campus Hazing Act.

**THURSDAY,
JULY 23**

SESSION SCHEDULE

Inside USC's Canva Playbook

Cynthia Gunter, Andrea Valaitis & Larissa Sands

 *Carolina Boardroom*

Discover how Canva is assisting the way we create, collaborate, and stay on brand at USC. This breakout session offers a sneak peek at the new Canva Playbook, with practical tips, time-saving workflows, and the tools you'll need to confidently launch Canva within your unit.

Not-So-Secret Transfer Agent: Discovering Your Role in the Transfer Student Experience

Emily Kittrell, Morgan Ruebusch & Brett Kibler

 *Pee Dee Room*

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Working Across Generations: Conversations, Challenges and Collaborative Solutions

Patrice Witt

 *Craft Room*

Today's workplaces span multiple generations, each bringing distinct communication styles, values, and expectations that can lead to both collaboration and conflict. This presentation discusses key concepts and then engages the audience in deeper discussion. Drawing from personal experiences, the session will explore real-world examples of generational conflict and the strategies used to overcome them. Participants will be invited to share their own experiences and reflect on practical approaches that promote understanding, adaptability, and more cohesive teamwork across generations.

**THURSDAY,
JULY 23**

SESSION SCHEDULE

AI at Work: Building Confidence and Connection Through Curiosity, Not Fear

Dr. Kedralyn Folk

 *Lowcountry Room*

Fears about AI often come from a disconnection between people and technology, leaders and staff, and curiosity and practice. This session invites participants to reframe AI not as a threat to their work, but as a tool and teammate when guided by human judgment. Through discussion and a structured interactive activity, attendees will examine real workplace tasks, explore how AI reshapes work rather than replaces it, and identify the human skills that remain essential. Participants will leave with a clearer mindset for engaging AI thoughtfully, responsibly, and with curiosity instead of fear.

 2:40 PM - 3:05 PM

BITES & INSIGHTS

Bites & Insights: A Curious Exchange

Student Affairs Senior Leadership Team

 *Ground Floor & Congaree Room*

You have questions, we have answers. Join the Senior Leadership Team for a snack break and learn more about the thought leaders who bring the strategic priorities to life.

 3:05 PM - 3:25 PM

LIGHTNING SESSION 2

Gamecocks Don't Get Played: A How-to Guide for Navigating Conversations around Student Betting

Nikki Prude & Jenna Anderson

 *Magnolia Suite*

It seems like every class has a new trend competing with us for their attention, and this year is no exception. Is your streaming account inundated with ads for platforms like Kalshi, Fanduel, PrizePicks, or DraftKings? Are you hearing your students talk about parlays, payouts, or prediction markets? Then it may be time to talk about sports betting, a form of gambling that has risen exponentially in popularity over the past 8 years, even in states where it remains illegal.

This presentation will inform you of what betting is (and what it's not), current betting trends and behaviors nationally and here at USC, and why you should care about it. We will discuss why this is an important issue for colleges and universities to be paying attention to, and how to support students who may be experiencing gambling-related harms.

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JULY 23**

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 *Carolina Boardroom*

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What Does Campus Accessibility Look Like? Applying Stadium Service Concepts to Enhance the Experience for Students with Disabilities

Dr. John Grady & Dr. Amber Fallucca

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In this presentation, ideas and strategies for enhancing access and inclusion for students with disabilities will be explored. Focused on how to create campus events that accommodate the diverse needs of students, staff, and guests, this session will demonstrate how higher education and student success professionals responsible for planning campus events can design accessible experiences to the widest audience, including students with disabilities.

Using best practice examples of accessibility and inclusion from customer service in the sport stadium context, session attendees will learn how to innovatively adapt effective customer service strategies to reduce barriers and effectively serve students while meeting their needs during their events and in programming and special events on their campus.

Micro-Breaks that Fit Your Workday

Emily Cato

 *Upstate Room*

Small breaks can make a big difference. This 20-minute session will introduce micro-breaks, a short, intentional pause that supports your focus, energy, and well-being. Participants will reflect on signs that they need a break, explore different types of rest, and practice a few quick strategies including desk stretches and a mindful pause.



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Dr. Hengtao Tang & Dr. Yingxiao Qian

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As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly integrated into academic work, college students need the skills to use AI responsibly and ethically. This proposal showcases an interactive training program designed to help students navigate ethical challenges related to AI use in learning and academic environments. Grounded in established frameworks of ethical decision-making, the program focuses on helping students recognize ethical issues in AI use, evaluate responsible choices, and apply ethical reasoning in real academic scenarios.

The Curious Conflict: Transforming Workplace Conflict into Connection

Alicia Bervine

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Workplace conflict is inevitable but how we approach it determines whether it fractures teams or strengthens them. Too often, conflicts are treated as battles to be won or communications to be controlled. What if the more powerful strategy is to lead with curiosity? Instead of reacting, we teach participants how to engage, understand, and transform conflict into collaboration by asking better questions and slowing down assumptions.

This session reframes conflict from a zero-sum power struggle to a learning opportunity shifting the focus from “who’s right” to “what’s true.” Leaders and teams will gain skills to interrupt defensive reflexes, uncover underlying drivers of disagreements, and create environments where people feel heard, respected, and motivated to contribute to durable solutions.

FRIDAY,
JULY 24

SESSION SCHEDULE



9:00 AM - 9:45 AM

BREAKOUT SESSION 1

Insight into the Associate VP Role: Career Moves, Lessons Learned and Leadership Insights

Dr. Silvia Patricia Rios Husain, Dr. Stacy Fritz,
Dr. Marc Shook & Dr. Ambra Hiott

 *Magnolia Suite*

This panel conversation brings four of our Associate Vice Presidents from student affairs and academic support at the University of South Carolina to share the real stories behind their leadership journeys. They will share the defining moments, pivotal opportunities, mentors, and lessons that helped shape their careers, as well as the challenges and reward of stepping into increasingly complex leadership roles. Through an open and candid conversation, panelists will share what they wish they had known earlier in their careers, how they developed the skills needed for executive leadership, and what helped them move into new leadership opportunities.

Turning Content into Connection: The @UofSCStudents Playbook Cynthia Gunter

 *Carolina Boardroom*

Social media shouldn't just inform students — it should engage them. The award winning @uofscstudents account is designed to meet students where they scroll and guide them toward the campus resources, services, and experiences that shape their success. This session will break down how strategic content, authentic storytelling, and intentional collaboration across departments can turn a social media feed into a powerful student engagement platform.

Participants will learn how to craft posts that resonate, leverage trends without losing institutional voice, and measure success in ways that matter to leadership. Through real examples and actionable takeaways, attendees will leave equipped to shift from simply posting information to building meaningful digital connections that strengthen campus engagement and student success.

Connecting the Dots: From Curiosity to Strategic Investment Dr. Renée Delgado-Riley & Nancy Derrick

 *Upstate Room*

Assessment produces impact. Finance allocates resources. When those conversations connect, organizations can move from tradition-driven budgeting to strategic investment. In this interactive session, participants will explore how outcome data, financial context, and strategic priorities can work together to inform smarter, more aligned decisions about where and how resources are invested.

**FRIDAY,
JULY 24**

SESSION SCHEDULE

Sparkling Students' Curiosity: Small Changes, Big Engagement

Alexa Rivas-Fernandez & Anna Cathryn Olle

 *Craft Room*

Tired of students walking by your table without engaging? Hoping to increase your impact and numbers in a meaningful way? Engaging with students in creative ways helps information stick and sparks curiosity! This session highlights how intentional messaging and environment specific programming enhance outreach across the college campus.

Through examples and discussion, attendees will learn strategies to boost student engagement, the do's and don'ts of programming, how to adapt programs for different environments, and ways to repackage familiar topics into fresh themes.

The Power of Connection: What Great Relational Leaders Do Differently

Dr. April Barnes

 *Pee Dee Room*

Leadership is evolving. While traditional models often emphasize authority, position, and power, relational leadership centers influence, trust, and meaningful connection. This session invites participants to explore what relational leadership is all about by examining leadership styles, distinguishing power-based approaches from influence-driven practices, and identifying the characteristics that inspire followership. Through reflection and group dialogue, participants will clarify their own leadership tendencies and leave with strategies to lead more intentionally and relationally in their organizations.

The Curious Conference Attendee: From Discovery to Departmental Impact

Lauren Brown

 *Lowcountry Room*

Conferences often spark new questions, fresh perspectives, and meaningful connections. Yet the true value of these experiences lies in what happens after attendees return to campus. Whether you are new to attending conferences and looking for ways to bring ideas back to campus, or a supervisor seeking to maximize the impact of professional development opportunities for your team, this session offers practice strategies for turning conference learning into meaningful action.

FRIDAY,
JULY 24

SESSION SCHEDULE



9:55 AM - 10:40 AM

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

The Hiring Lens: What Today's Employers Value Most

Patrick Blume, Charles Kearse, Paige Long & Chelsey Roulier

 *Magnolia Suite*

What do employers truly look for when hiring graduates and where do they see the biggest gaps? This interactive panel brings members of USC Career Center's Employer Advisory Board directly into conversation with campus stakeholders. Representing diverse industries and hiring needs, these employers will share candid insights on workforce trends, AI, essential competencies, hiring practices, and the evolving expectations of new graduates. Attendees will gain a clearer understanding of how co-curricular programs, student leadership roles, campus employment, service learning, and student organization involvement contribute directly to workforce readiness.

Inside USC's Canva Playbook

Cynthia Gunter, Andrea Valaitis & Larissa Sands

 *Carolina Boardroom*

Discover how Canva is assisting the way we create, collaborate, and stay on brand at USC. This breakout session offers a sneak peek at the new Canva Playbook, with practical tips, time-saving workflows, and the tools you'll need to confidently launch Canva within your unit.

Working Across Generations: Conversations, Challenges and Collaborative Solutions

Patrice Witt

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Today's workplaces span multiple generations, each bringing distinct communication styles, values, and expectations that can lead to both collaboration and conflict. This presentation discusses key concepts and then engages the audience in deeper discussion. Drawing from personal experiences, the session will explore real-world examples of generational conflict and the strategies used to overcome them. Participants will be invited to share their own experiences and reflect on practical approaches that promote understanding, adaptability, and more cohesive teamwork across generations.

**FRIDAY,
JULY 24**

SESSION SCHEDULE

From Curiosity to Creation: Turning AI Basics into a Custom GPT

Dr. Silvia Patricia Rios Husain

 *Pee Dee Room*

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming part of everyday work in higher education, yet many professionals are still trying to understand where to begin and how these tools can be used in thoughtful and practical ways. This session introduces the fundamentals of generative AI and shows participants how they can move beyond simply asking questions to creating their own customized AI tools. In this interactive workshop, participants will learn the basics of how generative AI works, explore examples of how customized GPT tools can support teaching, student success, and administrative work, and discuss considerations for responsible and effective use.

Attendees are encouraged to bring a laptop so they can practice building their own customized GPT. By the end of the session, participants will have a basic understanding of how generative AI works, how customized GPTs can support their work, and how they can begin developing their own AI tools to enhance productivity, support students, and streamline everyday tasks.

Recognize, Report, Support: Building Capacity for Hazing Prevention and Response

Dr. Tripp Harris, Ayana Bush & Lexi Hinson

 *Upstate Room*

Research has found that 55% of college students who are members of student organizations have experienced hazing, and that hazing occurs across organizations of many different types (Allan et al., 2025; Allan & Madden, 2012). Just as troubling is Allan & Madden's (2008) earlier finding that more than 90% of students who experience hazing in college do not recognize that they have been hazed. Given its prevalence across contexts, it is critical for campus-based professionals across all functional areas to be aware of what constitutes hazing and what they can do to help.

Led by members of USC's campus-wide Hazing Prevention and Education Coalition, this session builds capacity for hazing prevention and response on campuses across South Carolina by a) exploring signs students could be experiencing hazing in different organizational contexts, b) highlighting the importance of reporting hazing and common reporting options across institutions, and c) workshopping approaches for supporting students who are impacted by hazing.

This session will challenge common assumptions about what hazing is and where it takes place to prompt curiosity among attendees about the roles they can play in hazing prevention and response. The session will also briefly review implications of South Carolina's Tucker Hipps Transparency Act and the recently enacted federal Stop Campus Hazing Act.

**FRIDAY,
JULY 24**

SESSION SCHEDULE

Is This Worth My Time? Insights into Men's Engagement Patterns at Carolina

Dr. Kate Lehman, Dr. Kevin Wenger, Dr. Sandy Greene,
Dr. Katie Hopkins & Rebeca Greenfield

 *Lowcountry Room*

Undergraduate men at USC participate in co-curricular and high-impact learning opportunities at lower rates than their peers, a trend that mirrors national patterns. Over the past year, our research team conducted a comprehensive institutional study using engagement-tracking data, NSSE results, and student records to understand where, how, and why first-year men engage—or don't.

This practitioner-oriented session shares key findings about participation patterns, identity-related influences, and differences between highly engaged and minimally engaged men. We will connect campus data to theories of motivation and gender socialization and explore what these insights mean for designing programs, communications, and outreach that resonate with male students. Participants will leave with actionable strategies to enhance engagement among all students, including those least likely to opt in.



10:50 AM - 11:35 AM

BREAKOUT SESSION 3

Columbia Area Schools Panel: Aspire for Further Collaboration and Advance Student Services

Jennifer Jackson, Adrien Montalvo, Melissa Brannen,
Patrick Bennett & Gordon Schell

 *Magnolia Suite*

This Panel session is a collaboration between Columbia area Colleges and Universities that have been working together for 4 years. This panel will include higher ed professionals from The University of South Carolina, Midlands Technical College, Columbia College, Benedict College, Allen University, and local non-profit organization Food Share.

We will discuss monthly meetings where we share best practices, resources, and ways that we are meeting needs of students who face food insecurity and other basic needs concerns. The panel will interact with the audience through a Q&A Session This will be a timely panel as it brings together, for the first time, these schools to discuss food pantries, basic needs, but also college collaboration.

**FRIDAY,
JULY 24**

SESSION SCHEDULE

Not-So-Secret Transfer Agent: Discovering Your Role in the Transfer Student Experience

Emily Kittrell, Morgan Ruebusch & Brett Kibler

 *Carolina Boardroom*

The transfer population is growing, but these students don't just pass through admissions and advising. They move through every office on campus, where each person they encounter can shape whether they feel seen, valued, and supported. Researchers call this role the "transfer agent," and this session makes the case that it extends well beyond those with transfer in their job title. We'll explore common transfer barriers, learn a five-phase framework of the transfer student experience, and practice applying both to realistic vignettes. By the end, you'll see your work through a transfer lens and leave with concrete actions for building a more transfer-affirming culture.

Roots & Wings: Advancing Inclusive Leadership Practices Through Intentional Impact and Collaboration

Jameka Williams

 *Pee Dee Room*

This interactive workshop invites higher education leaders to explore how curiosity can strengthen connection and inform inclusive leadership practice. Through reflection, dialogue, and applied exercises, participants will examine the "roots" of effective leadership—self-awareness, trust, equity, and shared purpose—alongside the "wings," or practices that foster collaboration, innovation, and engagement. Grounded in the theme connection through curiosity, attendees will gain strategies to cultivate inclusive, collaborative cultures across teams, learning environments, and institutional initiatives.

Fostering First-Generation Student Success: Leveraging the Community Cultural Wealth Framework

Dr. Jamil Johnson

 *Upstate Room*

Dr. Jamil D. Johnson will share findings from his project as a SAAS Faculty Research Fellow examining first-generation students' experiences and their engagement in high-impact practices. Attendees will (a) learn what first-generation students identify as the most important supports in their holistic success and significant barriers, (b) discuss practices that first-generation students and their advocates identify as strong sources of support, and (c) develop strategies to strengthen their own institutional support networks and community partnerships that foster success. Current research and rhetoric on first-generation students tends to focus on their limited social support and low socioeconomic status background, when compared to continuing education students (Kamalumpundi et al. (2025). Yet this assumption dismisses the strong familial relationship, connections, and resilience that first-generation students often bring with them to campus (Kamalumpundi et al. (2025).

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JULY 24**

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Dr. Kedralyn Folk

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12:45 PM - 1:05 PM

LIGHTNING SESSION 1

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Feed Your Starter, Not Your Stress

Andrea Valaitis

 *Craft Room*

This interactive 20-minute session uses sourdough baking as a metaphor and mindfulness practice to explore stress regulation, adaptability, and sustainable professional growth. Participants will learn how nurturing a temperamental sourdough starter mirrors navigating unpredictable campus environments — requiring patience, observation, flexibility, and trust in process.

**FRIDAY,
JULY 24**

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Curious Supervision: Helping Student Employees Thrive

Jeni Terrapin

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We will also spend time reflecting and engaging with other student supervisors to cultivate thoughtful discussion on how to be the best supervisors for student employees that we can be, which begins within our own selves.

Curiosity Over Crisis: Navigating High Stakes Problems & Calls with Upset Students and Families

Dr. Dan Colascione

 *Pee Dee Room*

High-stakes calls from upset students and families can feel overwhelming, but they're also powerful opportunities to build trust, connection, and clarity. In this fast-paced lightning session, participants will learn curiosity-driven strategies for de-escalating tense conversations, embracing engaged parents, and guiding callers toward collaborative solutions.

We'll cover practical tools such as reflective listening, reframing, boundary-setting, and expectation management—designed to help staff remain calm, confident, and student-centered. Attendees will leave with actionable techniques they can apply immediately to turn challenging calls into moments of understanding and partnership.

Micro-Breaks that Fit Your Workday

Emily Cato

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Small breaks can make a big difference. This 20-minute session will introduce micro-breaks, a short, intentional pause that supports your focus, energy, and well-being. Participants will reflect on signs that they need a break, explore different types of rest, and practice a few quick strategies including desk stretches and a mindful pause.

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1:20 PM - 1:40 PM

LIGHTNING SESSION 2

From Idea to Insight: What Happens When an Initiative Falls Flat?

Mara Sansolo

 *Magnolia Suite*

In Student Affairs, we are encouraged to innovate, pilot new ideas, and respond creatively to evolving student needs. Yet when an initiative loses momentum or fails to produce the intended outcomes, we rarely pause to examine it with intention. Instead, many efforts quietly fade without structured reflection. Grounded in the conference theme of curiosity, this session invites participants to reframe stalled initiatives not as failures, but as opportunities for insight.

Through a practical reflection framework and guided discussion, attendees will explore common factors that cause initiatives to fall flat, uncover the assumptions that shape implementation, and learn strategies for transforming unmet expectations into actionable learning. Participants will leave with tools to foster a culture of iteration, reflection, and continuous improvement within their teams and departments.

**FRIDAY,
JULY 24**

SESSION SCHEDULE

The Psychology of Curiosity in Design

Larissa Sands

 *Carolina Boardroom*

What makes people stop, look, and want to know more? This session examines how curiosity drives attention and engagement in visual communication. Through the use of ambiguity, contrast, surprise, and incomplete information, designers can encourage exploration, deepen audience involvement, and create lasting impressions. By understanding how curiosity influences perception and decision-making, designers can create more compelling visual experiences that capture attention, sustain interest, and encourage meaningful interaction with a message.

What Does Campus Accessibility Look Like? Applying Stadium Service Concepts to Enhance the Experience for Students with Disabilities

Dr. John Grady & Dr. Amber Fallucca

 *Craft Room*

In this presentation, ideas and strategies for enhancing access and inclusion for students with disabilities will be explored. Focused on how to create campus events that accommodate the diverse needs of students, staff, and guests, this session will demonstrate how higher education and student success professionals responsible for planning campus events can design accessible experiences to the widest audience, including students with disabilities. Using best practice examples of accessibility and inclusion from customer service in the sport stadium context, session attendees will learn how to innovatively adapt effective customer service strategies to reduce barriers and effectively serve students while meeting their needs during their events and in programming and special events on their campus.

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**FRIDAY,
JULY 24**

SESSION SCHEDULE

A Seat at the Table: Involving Students in Staff Hiring

Sammie Burt & Sully Hutto

 *Upstate Room*

Learn about the benefits of search committees and explore practical ways for student involvement on search committees. Attendees will leave with tangible tools relevant to incorporating student voices throughout the hire process, directly impacting their experiences and elevating hiring outcomes.

From Chaos to Clarity: Using Microsoft Loop & Planner

Jessica Chapman & Emma Ormond

 *Lowcountry Room*

Whether you supervise staff, advise student leaders, or juggle a lot of competing priorities - it can be challenging to keep track of all of the work, to-dos, deadlines, and more. In this session, we will discuss how we implemented Microsoft Loop and Planner apps to create a centralized “operating system” for student government and our office. These tools helped us create a system for tracking documentation, managing large-scale events, coordinating social media requests, and supporting our day-to-day responsibilities. Learn how to build structured workflows, create repeatable templates, preserve institutional memory, and increase accountability.



1:40 PM - 2:05 PM

BITES & INSIGHTS

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Student Affairs Senior Leadership Team

 *Ground Floor & Congaree Room*

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2:05 PM - 3:20 PM

FRIDAY KEYNOTE

The Rough Draft Mindset™: Your Shortcut to Creativity & Innovation

Tianna Faye Soto

 *Congaree Room*

IDEA CENTER MAP



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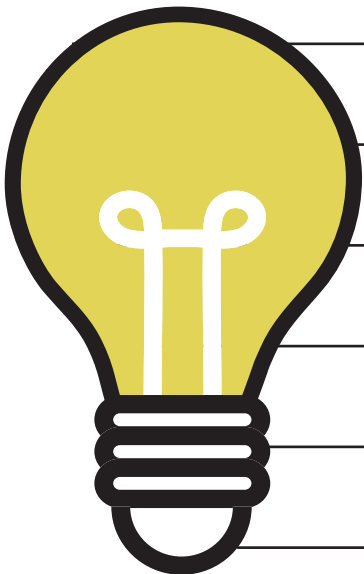
INVESTING IN A GREENER FUTURE

The Green Certification Team helps make campus more sustainable through innovative, eco-friendly practices. We work with offices and organizations to reduce their carbon footprint and implement environmentally responsible solutions.

Learn more about Campus Sustainability at sc.edu/sustainability



NOTES



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