

AGENCY NAME:	University of South Carolina Aiken		
AGENCY CODE:	H290	SECTION:	0202B

AGENCY’S DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Founded in 1961, the University of South Carolina Aiken (USCA) is a comprehensive institution with a strong liberal arts and science focus. The institution functions as part of the University of South Carolina system, combining the advantages of a more personalized education afforded by a mid-sized institution with the resources of a major research university. USCA offers bachelor's degrees in over 30 areas, including several online bachelor's degree programs, and selected master's degrees designed to enhance and serve our region's advanced workforce needs. With a record-breaking Fall 2024 enrollment of over 4,000 students, USCA focuses on personal attention, deployment of engaged learning pedagogies, quality teaching, and an active campus environment. Small classes are taught by professors rather than teaching assistants and afford students one-on-one relationships with experienced faculty, individual advisement, and research opportunities, all of which support the institution's commitment to helping students achieve academic success. USCA has strong ties with the community and offers a diverse non-credit program, including certificate programs and continuing education for members of the surrounding area. U.S. News & World Report ranks USCA among the top Public Regional Universities in the South. Colleges of Distinction has also recognized the university for its continued dedication to High-Impact Educational Practices that influence both student learning and student success. Our Veterans and Military Student Success Center has continued to receive national attention and various accolades with multiple national rankings. USCA is a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), the only institution in South Carolina with that designation. This designation shows a commitment to the critical thinking, communication, and analytical skills necessary to be successful in today's workforce.

USCA's small and active campus environment gives students numerous opportunities to be involved in campus life. Student involvement offerings include community service, Greek life, intramural and club sports, leadership development programs, and more than 90 clubs and organizations – truly something for everyone. On-campus housing can accommodate almost 1,000 students, providing opportunities for students to enjoy the traditional college experience. Our student-athletes, the Pacers, compete in NCAA Division II sports as part of the competitive Peach Belt Conference in baseball, men's and women's basketball, cross country, golf, men's and women's soccer, softball, and volleyball. Through campus programming, a wide range of activities from comedians to cultural events are planned for students, by students, based on their interests.

As we dive into our new Strategic Plan: Educate. Innovate. Inspire., USCA continues to strive toward academic excellence with goals and objectives that support delivery of high-level programs and enhancement of initiatives that support student success, retention, progression, and degree attainment. USCA also focuses on increased student engagement in and out of the classroom, on campus, and throughout the community. We aim to align research and new degree programs to meet the needs of our region and support local industry. We are beginning the eighth year of the Aiken Scholars Academy, a high school for high-potential students on the USCA campus, offering a unique and engaging educational structure that will introduce students to, and immerse them in, the collegiate environment. Since launching in 2018, the Aiken Scholars Academy has enrolled over 200 dual enrollment students at USCA. Of those, over 50 matriculated as degree-seeking students at USCA; nine of which have now graduated with a bachelor's degree from USCA.

Eighty-six percent of the University's student body is from the state of South Carolina. The population is racially diverse with over 40% from under-represented racial and ethnic groups and closely mirrors the racial makeup of the state. However, our student body also spans from 39 different states. Thirty percent of our undergraduate degree-seeking students are the first in the family to attend college, and 43% are Pell-eligible. We are proud to support the social mobility of our students and have been recognized by US News & World Report for our ability to do so. The size of the student body at the University has grown in recent years, primarily due to enrollment at the master's level. Our graduate online business program enrollment remains strong and reached an enrollment

AGENCY NAME:	University of South Carolina Aiken		
AGENCY CODE:	H290	SECTION:	0202B

of over 500 students in Fall 2024. Our undergraduate enrollment has been on a slow downward trend over the last decade as we approach the national “enrollment cliff” caused by decreasing birth rates years ago. Despite the approaching peak of the enrollment cliff, we had our largest freshman class in 2024, enrolling 666 new freshmen. Our newest degree programs continue to grow, and we began offering undergraduate certificate programs in 2023-24. These certificate programs serve as micro-credentials that will help support and expand the education students receive from their bachelor’s degree programs. We have now had 18 students earn 25 undergraduate certificates in conjunction with their bachelor’s degree.

USCA’s efforts to support veteran and military students maintained a Top 50 Best for Vets ranking and a Military Friendly Gold rating. The USCA ROTC Detachment commissioned 4 Army Lieutenants in Spring 2025: 2nd Lieutenant Barrett, 2nd Lieutenant Brown, 2nd Lieutenant Brunson, and 2nd Lieutenant Tangaan. Additionally, the program has grown to an active roster of 34 cadets and the university’s relationship with the SC Army National Guard has helped bolster the USCA ROTC Detachment by completing enlistments for 23 of the 34 current cadets over academic year 2024-25.

The USCA LIFE (Learning is for Everyone) program launched in Fall 2023. USCA LIFE is a two-year program designed to support students with intellectual disabilities by offering academic guidance and fostering social inclusions. Students live independently on campus with the help of a LIFE Residential Assistant. Students are engaged in coursework, jobs, independent living activities, and social activities. Students who demonstrate significant growth in the USCA LIFE program are invited to attend the LCE (Leadership and Civic Engagement) program. There are 29 students enrolled in Fall 2025. In Spring 2025, thirteen students achieved the PACER (Promoting Academic, Community, & Employment Readiness) credential. Seven of those students are continuing into the LCE program, a two-year course culminating in a second credential.

With changing generational approaches to education and lingering challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, undergraduate recruitment and retention have faced many challenges. While our Fall 2020 freshman enrollment was stronger than expected, our retention rate of that cohort was very low. Our freshman enrollment has been increasing despite these nationwide challenges. We had our largest freshman class and our largest enrollment ever in Fall 2024 and our retention is climbing back to pre-COVID levels. Our Retention and Student Success Committee continues to work to identify and reduce barriers to student progression and retention. As a result of this group’s recommendations, 2023-24 saw the launch of a new General Education curriculum. It will take a few years to realize the impact of this change, but our goal is to reduce the time to graduation for our students and to allow them more opportunities for elective courses. We also established university-wide College/School level Retention and Student Success committees to 1) serve as liaisons to the University-level Retention and Student Success committee, and 2) evaluate and identify college- and school-level barriers to progression and retention. Some of the departmental-level initiatives include the Nursing PASS (Peer Ambassador for Student Success) program, which assists students in foundational nursing classes by integrating peer-led study sessions to clarify class concepts, discuss readings, and develop academic skills, such as time management. The mathematics department implemented curricular changes to one of the foundational math courses to improve success rates. Additionally, Academic Affairs and Student Affairs collaborated to set up a “Got questions?” table the first 2 days of classes to serve as a resource for new students. And, finally, we piloted the use of course wait lists for registration in Spring 2025 with a University-wide launch for Fall 2025. The wait lists should help students more quickly get into the courses they need as soon as a seat is available.

As part of our accreditor’s required Quality Enhancement Plan, the University created a centralized advising center staffed with professional advisors to serve first-year students. The new Office of Academic Advising had its comprehensive launch in Fall 2022. We are already seeing gains in retention due to the increased engagement with our new freshmen. In addition to enhanced support provided via academic advising, our EAB

AGENCY NAME:	University of South Carolina Aiken		
AGENCY CODE:	H290	SECTION:	0202B

Navigate software has provided the ability for faculty to submit alerts on students who are missing class or struggling academically. In 2024-25, the Office of Academic Advising began an Advisor Academy to enhance the advising skills of the faculty and developed a handbook for faculty to use when advising. Six advising workshops were offered to faculty advisors during the 2024-25 academic year. Fifty-one faculty participated in the 6 offered workshops and 26 of those faculty attended at least 5 of the workshops to earn a certificate. The Office of Academic Advising and broader Student Success Center work together to get the students connected to the resources they need, whether it's advising, tutoring, counseling, or the many other support resources we offer on campus. We look forward to continued gains in student success, retention, and graduation rates with these more engaging practices.

USCA continues its long tradition of working closely with our regional businesses, industry, and other entities to leverage the strengths of our partnerships. We continue to partner with institutions overseas for study abroad opportunities and student exchanges. The university has also continued to partner with various entities of the surrounding community including Aiken Regional Medical Center, Aiken County Government, Aiken County Public Safety, and the City of North Augusta in programs focused on preventative and rehabilitative services, community-based instruction, and other initiatives. Our Ruth Patrick Science Education Center continues to offer support to the K-12 educational system. Serving an average of over 70,000 visits per year, the Ruth Patrick Science Education Center is a major contributor to increasing STEM education in K-12 in our region. USCA has continued exciting partnerships with the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Department of Defense (DOD) which include new facilities to be constructed on USCA's campus. Construction on the Advanced Manufacturing Collaborative (AMC) has recently been completed and a ribbon-cutting was held in August 2025. The AMC will house some facilities for the DOE's Savannah River National Laboratory and The university's ABET-accredited engineering programs and related computational programs. The DOD's South Carolina National Guard Readiness facility and Cyber Integration Center is now scheduled to begin construction in early 2027. This facility, built using federal and state funds, will be the new home of USCA's cybersecurity programs.

Numerous studies have found that engaged faculty are essential to the success of initiatives related to student success, program development, research advancement, and economic contributions. Competitiveness in the national market to recruit faculty determines the degree to which we can acquire and maintain qualified faculty, particularly in the face of growing enrollment demands. A significant number of faculty and staff retirements and resignations have prompted heightened competition with other institutions for qualified personnel and success in recruiting staff is linked to our ability to compete with the companies and industries located in Aiken and Aiken County as well as many nationwide remote opportunities. We also face difficulties in attracting and retaining faculty and staff given state pay limitations, the existence of low state appropriations that do not allow for salary increases and inequity / compression adjustments, and burnout from mandated initiatives at the federal, state, and system level. Meanwhile, current faculty have serious concerns about salary compression, the larger issue of disinvestment, and the prospects for future support of their academic work. The USC system recently conducted a multi-year Compensation Project in which staff positions were reviewed and revised into new market titles and salary ranges. The final phase of the project addressed salary compression for incumbent staff; however, this project was not funded by the state or the USC system. Fortunately, USCA was able to address salary compression for many staff in June 2024, investing over \$438,000 into staff salaries. Faculty salary compression was addressed in 2024-25, resulting in an investment of over \$452,000 in which over 60% of faculty received increases.

To ensure that we provide high quality support to our incoming and continuing students, USCA continues to renovate various buildings across campus. HVAC replacements were completed in two academic buildings. The new softball field was completed as well as new roads and infrastructure projects for the new athletic fields. A variety of interior renovations (e.g., flooring, restroom upgrades, lighting, pool resurfacing) and external

AGENCY NAME:	University of South Carolina Aiken		
AGENCY CODE:	H290	SECTION:	0202B

renovations (sewer line upgrades, roof replacements, roof paintings) were completed. The new Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning that opened last year has already provided a useful and well-utilized space for meetings and trainings for faculty and staff. The Student Success Center renovations in the Gregg-Graniteville Library were completed and launched in 2024. This new space provides a centralized location for advising, tutoring, academic coaching, and math lab. This Learning Commons space also features a new centralized student success help desk. These dedicated spaces testify to the value USCA places on high-quality instruction and will enhance support of faculty seeking to further adopt and improve high impact practices. USCA values our outdoor space as well and continues to be recognized as a Tree Campus for the tenth consecutive year.

The challenges facing the University of South Carolina Aiken continue to be associated with those that are generally impacting public higher education institutions in the United States. As student populations decline, universities compete for students in ever-increasing fashion. Large research universities that can best attract out-of-state students have significant pressures applied to focus more on in-state students – the traditional and foundational reason-for-being of South Carolina’s public comprehensive universities. Thankfully, with additional state funding support, USCA has been able to hold tuition flat for the last eight years. This is highly impactful for our student population, who are primarily South Carolina residents. In fact, for the 2024-25 academic year, one third of all USCA undergraduate SC resident students paid \$0 out-of-pocket for tuition and mandatory fees and an additional 36% paid under \$2500. While state funding increased this year to 33% of our annual revenues, significant financial challenges remain when faced with overall national inflation, unfunded mandated raises for all employees, and increases in healthcare premiums. Students need increasing levels of support in both academic and mental health areas, and as the state incentivizes university-bound students to attend technical schools instead of universities. USCA supports the engagement of high school students as dual-enrolled students; however, financial strain on the university can arise as dual-enrolled students only contribute 15% of the normal tuition cost and further decrease the population of students who have traditionally attended university for four years. Our DOE and DOD construction projects also require significant additional investment by USCA to move athletic facilities, upgrade engineering and computational labs, and integrating those projects into the university’s campus. The confluence of these forces creates a challenging environment for our public institutions to flourish.

In the unlikely event that USCA is unable to achieve its goals and objectives, the public of South Carolina would lose a high quality public post-secondary education at the baccalaureate and master’s level. The resulting economic fallout would be severe, as USCA contributes \$360.5 million to the state economy, including 2,770 jobs and \$140.8 million in labor income. Additionally, the availability of qualified employees entering the workforce would be significantly impacted. Further, there would be a loss of cultural and athletic events that are crucial to the region’s appeal. There are several things the General Assembly could do to mitigate the risk of such a crisis. First, the General Assembly could continue to increase funding of USCA and public higher education in general to be more in line with investment levels of North Carolina and Georgia. Companion unfunded mandates should be avoided as they mute the impact of funding increases in funding. Recent increased funding for deferred maintenance has been impactful and should be continued.

USCA continues to increase the number of degrees awarded and is committed to answering the call to credential more South Carolinians. With internal investments in student success and external partnerships bringing federal funds to South Carolina, USCA is well positioned for continued and increasing impact on the region and the state.