

As he prepares for his investiture this month, USCB's new Chancellor Al Panu is excited about the future of the university. □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

By Margaret Evans, Editor



When young Al Panu, of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, arrived at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in the early 1970s, he was fluent in several languages.

English was not one of them.

Thinking back on that time of difficult transition, the new Chancellor of the University of South Carolina Beaufort has a faraway look in his eye. It's been 40 years, but his memories are vivid.

"Higher education in the Congo is not where it needs to be," he says. "So it's a dream for all of us, when we're growing up there, to eventually go overseas – whether it's Europe, the United States, even Asia. If you get that opportunity, it's a dream come true. When I was 18, I left the Congo and went to Belgium for a year, then on to the United States, and Tuskegee."

Tuskegee was a very good place for Panu, but it took him a while to know it.

“I was still learning the language, so it was very challenging,” he says, smiling. “I had studied a little English in high school, but it was mostly like, ‘John Smith goes to market.’ That kind of thing. You learned grammar and construction, so that was good. But your vocabulary was extremely limited. And you had nobody to speak English to, at least not with any confidence that you were speaking it correctly.”

Once at Tuskegee, Panu says, “I knew how to find my way around by reading the dictionary and such, but I couldn’t *speak* the language. I felt so stupid. A few times, I just wanted to go back to Belgium. I spoke French, so at least there, I’d felt like a reasonably intelligent person.”

Fortunately, Panu was living with an African American family who had experienced life in the Congo, and they encouraged him, daily, not to give up on Tuskegee. They also helped him immerse himself in the language, by speaking nothing but English around the house. Eventually – he says it took about six months – Panu broke through the language barrier, and he hasn’t met a barrier that could stop him since.

He earned his bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Tuskegee, then went on to earn a master’s and doctorate in chemistry, respectively, at the University of Alabama and the University of Georgia.

It was in the study of chemistry, Panu says, that he found a universal language. “Chemical equations don’t change from country to country,” he says, clearly still passionate about his field of scholarship.

Panu’s appointment at USCB is the culmination of a nearly 30-year career in higher education, in which he’s worked closely with students, faculty, administrators and alumni, as well as local and state leaders. Building on an academic career as a chemistry professor at Kennesaw State University, Panu joined Gainesville State College in 2007 as chairman of the Division of Science, Engineering and Technology. He was named dean of the School of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in 2010 and vice president for academic affairs in 2011. In 2013, he was made senior vice president for university affairs at the

University of North Georgia, where he served on the leadership team responsible for the consolidation of Gainesville State College and North Georgia College and State University.

“The merger of the two schools took about two years,” he says. “I participated at the highest level – talking through the structure, the curriculum, student affairs, advancement, all the things that make a university function.” Once the consolidation was complete, Panu found himself in charge of three campuses at the newly formed University of North Georgia.

All this experience has prepared him perfectly to lead Beaufort County’s swiftly-growing, multi-campus University into the future, which according to Panu, looks “very exciting.” In fact, “exciting” is a word used repeatedly by this man who radiates enthusiasm for his new position, which will be formalized with an investiture ceremony on Friday, March 18th.

With that “exciting” future ever in their sights, Dr. Panu and USCB have embarked on a new strategic planning phase called Envision 2021.

“The strategic plan that has been serving USCB was in effect until 2015,” he says. “So it was only natural that we would begin the process of developing a new one. Jane (Upshaw), and everyone who was here before me, have done a great job of positioning the school, and I’m so grateful for that. But now, as we look at where we’re going from here, it’s really important that that map be charted through a very thoughtful planning process.”

Panu says he and his team have gathered a strategic planning committee that’s intentionally very inclusive, seeking representation from both internal stakeholders – students, faculty, staff, etc. – and external stakeholders, as well.

“We are so blessed to be in a place where the community has embraced its university. So, we’ve included business leaders, county leaders, various partners that we’re engaged with... We’ll have town hall meetings and other opportunities for input from the community. Opportunities to talk about the *dream* for our university! Where’s USCB heading? What are some of the great opportunities we have in front of us? How do we leverage them? I’m excited that this planning has already given us a chance to recognize some themes that could emerge right away.”

And what might some of those themes be?

“Well, for instance, as soon as I arrived here, I had a chance to talk with the school system,” says Panu. “And I learned almost instantly that they would love for us to offer a Masters of Education or Masters of Art in Teaching, so we’re excited to look into that opportunity. This is part of what Strategic Planning does. It asks these questions.”

Panu says he envisions putting the graduate programs at the historic Beaufort campus instead of the larger New River campus in Bluffton. In fact, he says, the Beaufort campus is a very important aspect of the strategic plan. A ‘corner piece,’ he calls it. Along with possible graduate programs in education, Panu says he expects the Beaufort campus to maintain its current focus on the arts.

“But we will also explore ways the arts relate to other disciplines,” he says. “More and more these days, we talk about digital arts. That’s the union of computing and traditional arts. Website production, animation, that sort of thing. We’re moving in that direction, I think.”

Panu lights up when conversation turns to the USCB Center for the Arts, and all the special programs it offers the community.

“Did you come to the ‘Pat Conroy at 70’ weekend?” he asks, eyes shining. “I was so glad we did that! It was just wonderful. You know what touched me the most? To see people who had planned their *whole* vacation around it. And had come from all over the *country*. What a figure! It was so special meeting him. He was so gracious and gave me such a welcome.”

(Editor’s Note: Best-selling author and beloved Lowcountry icon Pat Conroy died the day after our interview with Dr. Panu, adding bittersweet resonance to his words.)

Panu says USCB is growing at a remarkable pace these days, especially considering the institution only started offering a four-year degree slightly over a decade ago, in 2004.

“When you transition from a two-year to a four-year college, it takes a while for the word to get out. That seems to be occurring now – along with the word about what a good faculty and staff we have here, and what a good ‘product’ we’re putting out. Last year, our enrollment grew by 12%. That’s the highest growth rate in the state, in our sector. We’re really growing, and I’m so excited!”

We should all be excited, because according to the most recent Economic Impact Studies, USBC is playing a huge role in our local economy – to the tune of about \$ 74 million. (And that was a few years ago, before the recent “growth spurt.”)

“But that’s just a start,” says Panu. “When you think about the workforce we’re training – the nurses, the educators, the scientists . . . We’re always looking at the needs and demands of our region. We’re very focused on responding to those. Hospitality management is another great example. When our students come out of that program, they have experience. Hands on. Because they live in this area of high tourism, they’ve had internship opportunities, etc., so they have not just the level of learning we want them to have – problem solving and such – but they have *skills*. They’re ready to work in the industry.”

When asked where he sees the University in twenty years, Dr. Panu seems to relish the question. You can almost see his vision unfolding as he forms his words, still rich with his native accent.

“I want this to be a university that is continuing to grow. When we don’t grow, we are dying . . . even though we don’t always know it. Growth is so important. But growth has many dimensions. I want a university that is growing from the standpoint of size, economic impact, and how it’s producing the kinds of professionals that are really going to meet the needs of the area.”

“But beyond that, I’m very excited about the intellectual capital that’s represented by the university. The ability to problem solve with the community. The university can really have an impact in helping towns grow in ways that are healthy and sustainable. In 20 or 30 years, will we still be able to benefit from the water resources we have? What about the tourist industry that we so appreciate? What will it take for us to be sustaining that? To pass that on in a way that’s really good? These are questions the university can help answer. Some of our faculty members

Envisioning 2021 and Beyond

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are doing breakthrough research here.”

“And then, you know, young people – college students – they bring a level of energy that’s just . . . exciting!”

The Investiture of Al M. Panu, PhD, as the second Chancellor of the University of South Carolina Beaufort will be Friday, March 18 at 11 am at USCB's Bluffton campus.