

# Chancellor Melinda S. Arnold, PhD.

## Investiture Address – March 26, 2026

### University of Tennessee Southern

Good afternoon and welcome!

First, thank you again, **Christine**, for your thoughtful remarks and for making the trek from Montana. For a minute I was worried you were going to give away 'state' secrets.

Before I begin, I'd like to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude to the many family and friends who have traveled from far and wide to be here today. Thanks to the Kentucky crew. The drive is a little easier now.

It seems like half the population of Texas is here today. There are contingents from Texarkana, Dallas/Fort Worth, and Houston. Thank you for honoring this occasion. To my mother, **Sharon Lowes**, I am so glad you could make the trip to see the result of all that hard work.

To my daughter **Cameron** who lives in Montana, but who will always be a Jersey girl, I am so very thankful that you could celebrate this occasion with me. See? Anything **is** possible. And remember: if it was easy, everyone would do it.

And to my husband, **Jeff**. You are my cheerleader, my staunchest supporter, and an exemplar of what it means to live with heart. You are the thorniest of thorns in my side. Thank you for sticking with me.

Finally, to **Bill Lowes and Art Dellerson** who are here in spirit, thank you for your lasting lessons—on how to expertly toilet paper a house (it's all in the wrist) and for a reverent appreciation for 'OI Blue Eyes.

Thank you all for being here today to celebrate this new chapter in the history of the University of Tennessee Southern.

An investiture is often described as a personal milestone. But in truth, the ceremony is a profound act of stewardship—a moment that symbolizes continuity, renewal, and shared purpose. **This** investiture is about the future—the one **we** are building **together**. When I look out at this audience, I see the architects of UT Southern's next chapter. As your partner in this work and as a champion of this university's mission, I stand here deeply grateful.

**To the Board of Trustees:** Thank you for your confidence and the trust you have placed in me to lead this institution.

**To President Boyd:** I am grateful for your leadership and your unwavering belief that every UT campus has the power to change lives across Tennessee.

**To those who came before:** To the leaders, faculty, staff, alumni, and community partners—thank you for the legacy you have entrusted to us. We are building upon the foundation you laid.

**And, to this community:** My deepest gratitude. UT Southern **does not exist apart** from this community; it exists **because of it**.

Since its founding in 1870 as Martin Female College—inspired by the vision of Thomas Martin's daughter—this institution has been a cornerstone of opportunity in Southern Middle Tennessee. Reborn in 2021 as the University of Tennessee Southern, it is the newest member of the University of Tennessee System. While our identity has **evolved**, our core conviction remains **unchanged: education creates opportunity**. UT Southern is **not** trying to reinvent itself; we are **simply becoming who we were always meant to be—a purpose-built** university dedicated to **building community, expanding opportunity, and changing lives**. These values are the roadmap for how we will continue to serve, grow, and succeed together in the years ahead.

The strength of an institution is not found in its **buildings**, but in the trust and connection shared among its **people**. At UT Southern, **building community** means more than just sharing a campus; it means cultivating a space where every student, faculty, and staff member experiences a profound and genuine sense of belonging. As we venture forward, UT Southern will operate as a vibrant, connected hub—a place where the collective energy of our people serves as the **current** powering our growth and innovation.

While we are deeply rooted in Southern Middle Tennessee, our impact is not limited by geography. Instead, we are strengthened by the enduring bonds our students, faculty, and staff build with one another and the world around them. On

campus, we intentionally **foster an environment of collaborative leadership**, grounded in the belief that diverse perspectives are not merely welcomed, but are **absolutely required** to shape a resilient future.

Beyond our gates, we are committed to expanding our engagement with local business, industry, Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology, and community colleges. By building these strategic bridges, we ensure that our students graduate with more than a degree. They leave UT Southern with a **clear destination**, the **professional networks to support them**, and the **unwavering confidence to lead** in their chosen fields.

At UT Southern, our responsibility is to lead change, not just keep pace with it. We believe that the true measure of our institution's greatness is not found in the number of individuals we **exclude**, but in the number of people we **intentionally include and empower**. By fostering a collaborative environment where every member of our community—from **faculty exploring new frontiers in the classroom** to **students discovering their purpose** and **voice to staff cultivating student belonging**—has the tools to reach their fullest potential, we transform the ideal of **inclusion** into a tangible engine for **opportunity**.

This commitment requires a proactive approach to academic growth. It means developing innovative programs that directly address regional workforce demands while offering the flexibility of online and hybrid formats to support those who are balancing careers with their education. Whether it is a third-shift worker seeking the degree necessary for a promotion or a local professional looking to remain relevant in the marketplace, we provide the resources to navigate a personal path to prosperity. Ultimately, UT Southern does not just offer a seat in a lecture hall; we provide a **high-performance runway** to a successful future, ensuring our community remains prepared and competitive in an ever-evolving global market.

Why do we build communities and expand opportunity? Because we believe education—and **specifically the unique, student-centered education** we provide at UT Southern—is the ultimate catalyst for human transformation. We don't just grant degrees; we ignite the potential that **changes lives**.

When we empower a student with specialized knowledge and the quiet confidence to pursue their most ambitious dreams, we give them the tools to completely rewrite their future. But the impact doesn't stop with an individual. As a student reaches back to lift their family toward new horizons, they build a multi-generational legacy of achievement.

When they eventually step into the workforce to tackle society's most complex problems, they don't just fill a role—they reshape the landscape of our world. **Education is our most powerful force multiplier**; it turns the spark of a single life into an unstoppable engine of progress that drives us all forward. At UT Southern, **we aren't just teaching for today**; we are **investing in the leaders who will define our tomorrow**.

UT Southern's mission to change lives is **not** a grand, abstract concept. **It is a promise**. A promise that education here is personal; that it is **Built for You**.

**Built** for the first-generation student wondering if college is possible.

**Built** for the working adult ready to take the next step.

**Built** for employers seeking talent close to home.

**Built** for families who want opportunity without leaving their communities.

**Built** for students who want to be known—not lost in a crowd.

**Together**, we are building a corridor of opportunity—where education fuels **economic mobility, innovation, and regional vitality**. When we change one life, we change a lineage.

Leadership, **especially** in higher education, is ultimately an act of trust. **Trust** placed in institutions to prepare future generations. **Trust** placed in educators to guide discovery. And **trust** placed in students to carry forward what they learn here into the world.

I accept the role of chancellor with humility—and with clarity about the responsibility it carries. Because the future of UT Southern will not be defined by titles or ceremonies. It will be defined by daily choices:

To **innovate** when tradition alone is insufficient.

To **collaborate** rather than operate in silos.

To remain **student-centered** in every decision we make.

And above all, to ensure that opportunity **continues to expand—not contract**—for those we serve.

Today's ceremony honors tradition. But tomorrow's work calls us forward. **Together**—with courage, collaboration, and purpose—we will continue building a university that reflects the very best of the University of Tennessee System and the communities we serve.

A university **grounded** in access.

**Focused** on student outcomes.

**Connected** to community.

**Thank you** for your trust. **Thank you** for your partnership. And **thank you** for believing in the promise of UT Southern. **Together**, let us **build**, let us **expand**, and above all, let us **change lives**.

There is no place I'd rather be or no bigger work I'd rather do. It is the honor of my lifetime to serve as Chancellor of the University of Tennessee Southern.

Thank You.

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