

March 14, 2026

President Shannon B. Lundeen

Good morning, everyone. What an honor it is to stand here with you today. Before I begin, I want to start with gratitude. Days like this do not happen on their own. They take an extraordinary number of hands, hearts, and minds working together to create something meaningful for a community. I am deeply grateful to the members of our Board of Trustees for their leadership, their stewardship of this institution, and the trust they have placed in me. I am grateful to my leadership team, and to the faculty and staff of Stephens College, whose dedication to our students and our mission makes this place so special.

This day would not exist without the tireless work of the inauguration committee, our events team at The ARC Collaborative, and the many colleagues across campus who poured their creativity and energy into preparing for today. We are also grateful to the donors and corporate sponsors whose generosity made this ceremony possible. And I want to extend my appreciation to the many community leaders, fellow presidents, colleagues, friends, and family members—many of whom traveled long distances to be here. Your presence means a great deal to me and to our community.

I would also be remiss if I did not thank the residents of this facility—our equine brothers and sisters—who have generously yielded their indoor classroom to us for a few days. And I must go on record giving a special shout-out to Mario the Friesian horse and his unmistakable “I woke up this way” energy. (If you know, you know.)

But most importantly, I want to recognize our students. You are the reason we do this work, and the creativity, courage, and curiosity you bring to this campus inspire us every day. This past year has not been an easy one for our community. There have been moments that tested us—moments that asked us to demonstrate resilience and to show care for one another. Which is precisely why today matters. Today reminds us that we deserve joy and celebration. As a community, we deserve to pause, to reflect on our past and imagine what we will build next.

This moment carries weight. It carries history. And it carries responsibility. Leadership is never something one simply assumes. As our board chair Nancy Brown said earlier, leadership is entrusted. I feel that trust profoundly. As I begin my presidency at Stephens College, I do so with immense appreciation—and with a clear understanding of the moment we are in. Higher education is changing. The economics of small colleges are changing. Expectations from students, families, and our communities are changing. And moments of change require courage.

Not the dramatic kind we sometimes imagine. But the steady, principled kind that guides daily decisions. If there is a leadership philosophy that will guide my presidency here at Stephens, it is a simple one: courageous leadership. Not courage as performance or bravado, but courage in practice. Researcher Brené Brown reminds us that courage and vulnerability are inseparable—that we cannot be brave without also being vulnerable.

I choose vulnerability as a leadership strategy because it is a prerequisite for courage. This means that I will lead with transparency about the realities facing our institution. Higher education is experiencing demographic shifts, financial pressures, and rising operational costs. Stephens is not immune to those forces. But honesty is not pessimism, it is the beginning of alignment. I will share the data openly. I will invite our community to understand both the challenges and the opportunities ahead. And together we will make decisions grounded not in fear, but in facts and in our shared commitment to Stephens' mission. Institutions do not thrive because leaders protect people from reality. They thrive because leaders invite people to face reality together, cultivating trust through transparency, which in times of transformation, is our most valuable resource.

And, in addition to transparency, humor, when used with care, is another tool that can be effective in quickly building trust. Anyone who has spent time with me knows I use this tool often. I like to remind people that they're interacting with a human when they interact with "the president" and one of the most efficient ways to accomplish this is to laugh at myself—something I've had ample opportunity to practice during my first several months here at Stephens.

Our purpose at Stephens is serious, but I believe that courageous leadership demands moments of lightness and shared joy. Humor reminds us that even in the midst of tough data and difficult decisions, we remain human. It allows us to breathe. It lowers the barriers that tend to keep people from speaking honestly. When we can laugh together—even gently at ourselves—we create a culture where people feel safe enough to ask hard questions and brave enough to participate in solving them. There is ample research demonstrating that shared laughter quickly cultivates a sense of community and belonging, promotes cognitive and affective flexibility, contributes to emotional and organizational resilience, and serves as a shortcut to fostering trust. Where there is trust, communities can act courageously together, even and especially when the path ahead is uncertain.

I will invite our community to take thoughtful risks because institutions that refuse to experiment become institutions that refuse to evolve, eventually becoming irrelevant. One of the most profound responsibilities of leadership is caring for a community in moments of grief and uncertainty. During my presidency, I will lead Stephens with the understanding that our first obligation is always to our people. When difficult moments arise (and we have had our fair

share of those in the last 9 months), I will choose presence over distance, care over spectacle, and dignity over politics. Our students are not symbols. They are individuals whose lives and aspirations matter. We must always remember the why that guides the risk-taking, the transformation, the courageous acts. I will ask that we consistently place students at the center of every decision we make, asking again and again: *Will this expand opportunities for our students? Will it strengthen their learning, their leadership, and their futures?*

Today, we gather in a space built not only for beauty, but for partnership—between human and horse, strength and trust, discipline and grace. That feels right for this moment. Because Stephens College itself has always been a place of partnership between legacy and possibility, between who we have been and who the world now needs us to become.

Nearly two centuries ago, this institution committed itself to what was then a radical act: educating women to think freely, to lead boldly, and to shape lives beyond the boundaries society imagined for them. My colleague and mentor, Dr. Mary Dana Hinton whose work has greatly shaped my thinking about leadership, reminds us that some of the most transformative leaders in our society - the ones that see new possibilities, who inspire courageous acts and new futures - emerge not from society's center, but from its margins. Dr. Hinton challenges us to view the margins as not simply places of social exclusion or empty space on a page, but as places that cultivate extraordinary insight and imagination. From the vantage point of the margins, people learn to see systems differently. They see the gaps others overlook. They recognize barriers that those at the center rarely notice. And they imagine possibilities for change that established structures often struggle to conceive. Leading from the margins means bringing that hard-earned knowledge born of experience, resilience, and perspective, into the work of shaping institutions and communities. It means leadership that does not simply reinforce the status quo, but questions it. Leadership that does not center only those voices already amplified but makes space for those whose ideas and experiences have too often been silenced or ignored.

In many ways, Stephens College has long been a place that educates exactly this kind of leader. As we heard from SGA President, KaLynn Irey earlier, our students often arrive here from places where they have felt unseen, underestimated, or overlooked. Some come from communities that have historically been excluded from the corridors of power. Others arrive carrying experiences that have taught them, sometimes painfully, how systems work and how they fail. And it is precisely those experiences that matter. Because students who have learned to navigate the margins often possess an extraordinary ability to read the world clearly. They notice what others miss. They ask questions others have not thought to ask. They bring creativity, empathy, and determination to the work of solving problems. At Stephens, we do not ask those students to leave those perspectives behind. We ask students to utilize them – to

share them with us. We create an educational environment where students can transform lived experience into leadership, where imagination becomes innovation, and where those who have stood at the edges of systems are prepared to step forward and reshape them.

That work has never been more important than it is today. Because the future will not be built only by those who inherit existing structures. It will be built by those who have the courage and the perspective to transform them. And for nearly two centuries, Stephens College has been preparing exactly those kinds of leaders. We are a college that centers and celebrates the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of those who have historically been pushed to the margins of higher education. And Stephens is a college that recognizes the insight and leadership that emerge from those vantage points.

We educate artists and actors, dancers and designers, filmmakers and screenwriters, nurses and counselors, physician assistants and educators—creatives and caregivers, storytellers and scientists—people whose work heals, challenges, comforts, and transforms the world. This is our why, our shared purpose. And if that purpose truly matters, then it must guide not only what we teach, but how we lead this institution into the future.

Sustaining a mission-driven college in today's environment requires courage not only in the classroom, but in how we imagine the future of the institution itself. It requires that we be willing to explore new partnerships, new enterprises, and new ways of generating the resources that allow our mission to endure. But innovation without purpose is simply experimentation. So as we consider opportunities that may fall outside the traditional higher education business model, I will ask our community to apply a simple test.

First: **Does this opportunity expand hands-on learning opportunities for our students?**

Second: **Does it strengthen our connection to community?**

And third: **Does it have the potential to generate sustainable revenue that can support our mission—including expanding access to education through scholarships for our students?**

If the answer to those three questions is “yes,” then it is an opportunity worth pursuing. Because courageous leadership is not only about preserving tradition. It is about ensuring that the mission that has defined Stephens College for nearly two centuries continues to thrive for generations yet to come.

One recent example of this approach is our decision to acquire Nourish Café & Market. At first glance, a college purchasing a local café and market may seem like an unusual move for a higher education institution. But when we applied our test, the answer became clear.

Nourish creates meaningful opportunities for students to engage in hands-on learning—from entrepreneurship and business operations to marketing, hospitality, and community

engagement. It strengthens our connection to the Columbia community, creating a gathering place where campus and community meet, collaborate, and build relationships, and patrons interact with Stephens College in new ways. And it has the potential to generate sustainable revenue that we can (re)invest in our students and their education.

In other words, Nourish is not simply a business venture. It is an example of what courageous, transformative leadership can look like: reimagining how a college can both sustain itself and deepen its mission at the same time. If we are serious about preparing students to transform the world, we must also be willing to transform the way we steward the institutions that educate them.

Let me close by inviting you to observe another kind of transformation. Look around you and take in where you are. For those of you visiting campus for the first time, let me assure you: yes, this indoor arena is part of a real 18-acre equestrian facility... on a college campus... in the middle of a city. And if that strikes you as unusual, you are already beginning to understand Stephens.

Construction on this arena was completed in 1940, and for more than eight decades it has served as a place where students learn discipline, partnership, and trust. A place where rider and horse learn to communicate, and where progress happens through patience, resilience, practice, and care. Earlier this week, students were riding horses in here. In less than 48 hours, this arena has been transformed into a space that can host more than 300 people for a formal celebration. By Monday morning, it will once again become a classroom for our equestrian program. What better illustration could there be of our inauguration theme? **Future Forward. Tradition Inspired.**

Turning this space into something many initially thought impossible required openness, creativity, risk-taking, and a community willing to imagine something new. And the result? Total transformation. In many ways, what we see in this arena today reflects a deeper truth about education and leadership.

Institutions transform lives when they have the courage to open doors wider, amplify new voices, and imagine possibilities that tradition alone could never foresee. Educators advance that same transformation when we have the courage to challenge assumptions, invite students into difficult questions, and create spaces where intellectual risk is not only welcomed but expected. And courageous leadership, whether in classrooms, communities, or institutions, begins from exactly the same place: the willingness to imagine something different, and the courage to build it together.

The late writer and educator bell hooks reminds us that *“the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility.”* At Stephens, we believe that possibility does not stop at the

classroom door. It extends across our campus, into our studios and clinics, our stages and laboratories, our stables and community partnerships. It shapes how we teach. It shapes how we lead. And it shapes how we imagine the future of this institution.

Transformation, whether in the life of a student or in the life of a college, never happens by accident. It happens when people choose vulnerability and courage over comfort. When they ask new questions. When they take thoughtful risks. When they work together to build something that did not exist before. That is the work of education. And that is the work of courageous leadership.

As we carry Stephens future forward—tradition inspired, let us continue to imagine boldly, learn together, and transform both our students and the world they will lead. Thank you.
