Abernathy Elected Carolina Union Board Chair
Darian Abernathy, a junior human development and family studies major, has been elected chairperson of the Carolina Union Board of Directors for the 2020-21 academic year. Abernathy will succeed the current board chairperson, senior Jaylen D. Evans, in April.

Abernathy has been deeply involved in the Carolina Union since her first days on campus, participating in multiple Union leadership programs and serving as a student employee. Her initial experience at the Union came during her first semester at Carolina when, as a UNC Lookout Scholar, she took a class designed to help first-generation students with their transition to college life. The course was led by Shauna Harris, associate director of the Carolina Union's Office of Student Life & Leadership.

"That's where I discovered that there was this amazing place at UNC called the Carolina Union," Abernathy said. "I knew it was going to be a formative part of my college experience."

During that class, Harris encouraged Abernathy to apply to other Union programs including leadership development programs such as Leadershape and Carolina United. She also landed a job at the Union as professional development coordinator, and the Union has served as an unofficial campus home for her ever since.

Abernathy, who is from Hickory, North Carolina, credited her mother with instilling a desire to achieve and encouraging involvement beyond the classroom. "My mom's goal was always to make sure that my three sisters and I went to college," Abernathy said. "She's a pretty amazing woman to send four girls to college. She was so intentional with keeping us involved with our community, making sure we had good grades, and being at teacher meetings. I know all of that was hard on her, but I'm thankful for all of it, because without it, I could have gone down a very different path."

During its regular March meeting, the Union's student-led board elected Abernathy as its next chairperson after presentations from three candidates. "Her passion for and experiences at the Union set her apart," said Evans, the current chairperson. "I have no doubt that she will do a fantastic job."

Abernathy said that her approach as board chair will be to find out where she can help and try to serve others. "I never considered myself a leader until other people called me one," Abernathy said. "I just thought, "No, I'm just being me." But I think the courses I've taken helped me see that I have a leadership style. I consider myself more of a servant-leader and that is going to be my approach as board chair. To lead by serving others, and asking what they need and giving back."

Abernathy said her primary goal will be to create more programming that helps round out student experiences beyond the classroom. "I love everything that the Union does in helping students and fostering the whole student rather than just the academic part,"
she said. "I think that's the Union at its best, and that's what I want to help foster more of. I want to help the Union have that impact on more students because it has meant so much to me."

Abernathy also pointed to the need for the Union to serve UNC's graduate and professional students. "They pay student fees so they pay for this facility and they deserve to have it serving them," Abernathy said. "I want to help integrate them more into this building that they pay for and close the gaps between serving under grads and grad students. I know understanding how to serve them better has been a priority this year, and it will continue to be a priority for me."

Fellow students described Abernathy as a thoughtful leader who brings compassion to her work. Junior Shadi Bakhtiyari worked with Abernathy as a Union student employee and said that Abernathy would often set aside her own projects when other co-workers needed help.

"She has the heart to serve and the heart to lead," Bakhtiyari said. "The Union will be stronger with her leading the way."