

From: Wilcox, Ralph
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Subject: Letter to the Faculty - December 2008



December 1, 2008

Dear Colleagues,

Faced by some of the biggest economic challenges in decades and concerned about the future of USF, your own careers and our students' success, I have understandably received questions from many of you over the past few months. In spite of the difficult financial climate I am quite confident that, to this moment in time, we have made wise decisions that will assure a strong and sustained future for the University, as well as for our faculty, staff and students. I remain committed to continuing institutional progress toward our bold vision, guided by a disciplined focus on *research and innovation, student success, global literacy and impact, integrated interdisciplinary inquiry* and *community engagement*.

Good news on my top priority –

I am delighted to announce that the USF Board of Trustees and the United Faculty of Florida reached a tentative agreement on Wednesday, November 26, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank our colleagues, on both teams, who have worked long and hard to negotiate this important contract. While details will be forthcoming, I am hopeful that the agreement can be ratified by both parties shortly so faculty can soon see the salary increases in their paychecks.

Continuing economic challenges –

The global economic downturn continues to create budget challenges for Florida, the State University System and USF. As you'll recall, we made some difficult decisions earlier this year that prepared us for a 15% base reduction. This action allowed us to respond to a 10.6% permanent reduction in the last fiscal year and a 4.0% "holdback" instituted by the Governor going into this year. As state tax revenue collections continue to decline we anticipate further cuts on the horizon. Indeed, once the state legislature convenes in special session to balance this year's budget (in light of a further decline of \$1.4 billion in tax revenues, since August, for a total deficit of \$2.2 billion in the current year, and \$2.3 billion less for fiscal year 2009-2010), we expect additional recurring base budget reductions for the current year. This could take us into the realm of a 20% cumulative base reduction in state appropriations (or nearly \$70 million less for USF) since July 1, 2007. Beyond that, we will need to see how the state legislature plans to balance the budget for fiscal year 2009-2010. I am sure that as you speak with colleagues across the country, you are hearing that their experience is not dissimilar. In spite of reduced state investment, and at this point in time, I fully anticipate that we will continue all our searches to fill the nearly 75 vacant faculty positions that have been advertised. At the same time, I remain committed to preserving all currently filled tenured and tenure-earning faculty positions, degree programs and academic departments. Moreover, recent revenue estimates saw a 40% reduction (from \$875 million to \$517 million) in the amount of funds available for new capital construction across Florida's educational institutions. While these figures are not final, it does suggest that receipt of full funding for our top priority construction projects (the Interdisciplinary Science Research and Teaching Facility and the USF Polytechnic Campus) may be delayed.

Thoughtful and deliberate responses to the economic downturn –

Like most public and private universities across the nation, our belts will need to remain tightened in the coming months. As we continue with budget planning, we will be guided by our [Strategic Plan](#) and the core principles of **centrality** to mission, program **excellence and impact**, stakeholder **demand** and future **viability and sustainability**. In the past, you have urged us to focus on targeted reductions rather than across-the-board cuts. My commitment to protecting, as a high priority, support for faculty research and scholarly activities remains steadfast as does my insistence on strengthening student learning to ensure that those students currently enrolled can progress toward timely graduation with the knowledge and skills that will allow them to compete successfully in the global marketplace of ideas. Of course, at the same time, we must do all we can to secure the financial integrity of our university.

As I have shared with you before, we will continue to judiciously spend down non-recurring reserves in support of our mission. These funds (much of which already reside in college and departmental budgets) are committed to supporting such priorities as non-permanent instructional costs (visiting instructors, adjuncts, graduate assistants, etc.), Summer instruction, new faculty start-up, renovations, staff bonuses, financial aid, and departmental operations over the next couple of years, while preserving our statutorily-mandated reserves. The reductions in state support will also necessitate some changes in behavior from years past at USF. For the first time this year, the University will be closed for normal business during the week of December 22-26, and for the two days of December 31 and January 1. By way of clarification, this simply means that USF will be closed as we would for any other holiday. Exceptions have been approved by vice presidents to allow essential services to continue. This closure over [Winter Break](#) will yield savings that will allow us to continue services for students, faculty and staff during the regular semester. In addition, I anticipate there will be further and necessary limitations on non-essential spending while we will likely witness an expansion of consolidated purchasing programs in the days to come.

Protecting our principles and balancing our budget –

Downsizing doesn't work in higher education in the same way that it might in the corporate sector. In fact, throughout this year I have done my utmost to grow the number of tenured and tenure-earning faculty members at USF because I believe sincerely that the strength of any great university rests at its heart – the faculty. As you may have recognized, there are clear and strategic advantages to hiring faculty in a broader climate of institutional downsizing. Many of you are witnessing this through exceptionally strong applicant pools for vacant positions in your departments. Moreover, it is not uncommon to find students rushing to higher education in times of economic contraction. As you know, while we did our very best to manage student enrollment this year (and we plan to do the same next year), a reduction in enrollment proportional to the state budget cuts is just not feasible. Indeed, had we taken a 10.6% cut in enrolled students this Fall, we would have had to enroll 4,826 less students than in 2007. Instead, we witnessed a 2.1% growth (930 more students) in students enrolling at USF in Fall 2008 (although we saw less than 1.0% growth on the research campus in Tampa). Furthermore, if we were to follow this principle (based upon a projected 20% base budget reduction since July 1, 2007) we would need to turn away more than 9,000 students in Fall 2009. Rather, we anticipate much the same enrollment in Fall 2009 as in Fall 2008 (46,174).

As we seek to balance cost containment with academic quality, we will give careful consideration to earlier suggestions presented by faculty members – including early retirement incentives and voluntary turnover, enhanced flexibility of staff roles, responsibilities and schedules, as well as the pros and cons of outsourcing support services. Suffice it to say, we will be watching our budget very carefully in the weeks and months ahead, as we work with the *Budget Planning Workgroup*, the deans, chairs and faculty to ensure that we make decisions that protect the long-term interests of the University, as well as its faculty, staff and students. Of course, I always welcome your [ideas and input](#).

A brighter economic future? –

As we plan for the future we will not focus our attention solely on state appropriated funds. We will explore other opportunities for new revenue generation, cost containment and resource reallocation as we examine the full breadth of USF's budget, from student tuition, research, auxiliary operations and private giving. Incidentally, on the matter of private giving, I am pleased that the USF Foundation listened carefully to your concerns and has decided to eliminate the investment fee previously assessed on gifts made through the [Faculty and Staff Campaign](#). This is important and I hope that you will, to the extent that your personal budgets allow in these difficult times, continue to make a tax deductible contribution to help strengthen USF's future. Our endowment, like most private market investments, has witnessed a significant decline in value in the past year. However, with a long and impressive record of strong investment management, I fully expect that these precious funds will rebound in the coming years.

You have likely read of [Governor Crist's proposal](#) to implement a 15% tuition increase for all resident undergraduate students next year. Florida's in-state tuition remains at or near the bottom nationally, and we all recognize that there is ample room for growth to ensure greater access and quality enhancement. In fact, at \$3,947 per year, resident undergraduate tuition and fees at USF are less than half the average of our eight national peer institutions. The Governor's proposal would allow university boards of trustees to enact 15% annual increases until such time that Florida's tuition reaches the national average. If implemented, this differential tuition would cost USF students \$12.30 per credit hour more in academic year 2009-2010. While those with Florida pre-paid tuition contracts are held harmless, students receiving Bright Futures will pay the difference. Because the proposal requires universities to set aside 30% of all revenues for need-based financial aid (thus ensuring affordable access to higher education for qualified, limited income students), with the remainder applied to hiring additional faculty and advisors to improve quality, I strongly support the proposal. At the appropriate time, I hope that you will urge your elected officials to do likewise.

USF – Continuing progress at a remarkable rate –

In spite of these difficult economic times, USF continues to make remarkable progress toward its vision for the future. All-time record performance in federal and total research awards, the number of postdoctoral fellows and doctorates awarded, along with impressive gains in student selectivity and retention all signal that USF is remaining true to its strategic path in spite of the economic downturn.

ResearchOne, a weeklong showcase (November 3-7) of USF's faculty and student multidisciplinary scholarship, was more impressive than ever before. If you haven't yet read [Research Makes the World a Better Place](#), a particularly clear and concise statement on the importance of research, scholarship and creative activity by Karen Holbrook, Vice President of Research and Innovation, I encourage you to do so. USF's research portfolio continues to grow, in both stature and volume, at a quite remarkable pace.

As you will recall, early this semester President Genshaft announced three USF-wide signature research programs. Future directions for the Integrated Neurosciences program are being steered by Dr. David Diamond, Professor of Psychology and Molecular Pharmacology and Physiology, and Director of the Center for Preclinical and Clinical Research on Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and Dr. Cliff Gooch, Professor and Chair of the Department of Neurology.

Meanwhile, faculty colleagues continue to take their well-earned places on the national and international stages, from [Professor Pat Rogers'](#) (English) installation as a Fellow of the British Academy, to [Jason Rohr's](#) (Integrative Biology) article on the impact of agrochemicals on the decline of amphibians in the journal *Nature*, and [Casey Miller's](#) (Physics) receipt of the Air Force Office of Scientific Research Young Investigator Award. Supported by the impressive scholarly accomplishments of literally hundreds of our faculty colleagues, we have so very much to be proud of.

I would also like to extend my congratulations to our 2008-2009 Fulbright Scholars, Darlene DeMarie (Psychological and Social Foundations, South Africa), Michael Foley (Theater and Dance, Mexico), Kerry Glamsch (Theatre and Dance, Romania), Claudia Jannone (English, Tunisia), and Michael Timpson (Music,

Taiwan). In addition, we welcome Phuong Le (Education, Vietnam), and Taras Pastukh (Philology, Ukraine) to USF for this year. I certainly hope that more of you will consider applying (or nominating your colleagues) for one or more of the highly regarded [National Faculty Awards or Fellowships](#) that will help strengthen the University's position among the very best in the nation.

Under the leadership of Dean Bill Garrison, and in ongoing consultation with faculty, the USF Libraries continue to identify and build exciting collections that will support the distinctive work of USF scholars, while shaping a profile essential to membership in the Association of Research Libraries. You can learn more about one of the USF Libraries' most recent strategic initiatives, the [Holocaust and Genocide Studies collection](#).

Finally, we have just learned that USF was ranked 25th in the 2008 Top Doctoral Accounting Programs by the Public Accounting Report's (PAR) annual survey of professors, placing it in the same league as the University of Chicago, Stanford, Pennsylvania (Wharton), the University of Texas at Austin, and Harvard. Congratulations to Stephanie Bryant, Director, and all faculty members in the School of Accounting.

New developments: Looking to the future –

Recently Eric Eisenberg, Interim Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, announced the academic restructuring of the College into two schools: the Schools of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences and the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. While creating a more streamlined college focusing on the liberal arts and sciences, it is our expectation that this new configuration will strengthen the critical mass of faculty in related fields and extend opportunities for greater synergy within interdisciplinary fields of inquiry aimed at finding novel solutions to pervasive and complex problems in society. A new postdoctoral program, expected to raise the national and international profiles of the humanities and social sciences at USF, will accept fellows beginning in the next academic year.

Another most pleasing development was the recent approval of three new and unique Ph.D., programs in Government, History and Sociology by the Florida Board of Governors' Strategic Planning and Academic and System Oversight Committee. I would like to extend my most sincere appreciation to President Genshaft; Interim Dean Eisenberg; Chairs Milani, Ottanelli and Mayberry and all faculty members in those departments for their hard work in assuring this outcome which is so well-deserved, long overdue, and essential to USF's future. As we well know, there are frequently unsung heroes whose names go unmentioned in such matters. On this occasion, I want to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of Helen Levine, Policy and Communications Advisor in the Office of the President. We expect full BOG approval in January at which time we also plan to be present a new Doctor of Pharmacy degree proposal.

Meanwhile, the important work of the three faculty task forces continues at USF. Focusing on *Faculty Roles, Responsibilities and Rewards, Integrated, Interdisciplinary Inquiry*, and *USF World*, you can follow their progress and review their recommendations on the [Provost's website](#).

A sad epilogue –

It is always difficult when we lose members of our university community. Recently, we were deeply saddened by the passing of [Robert Dressler](#), a longtime and deeply valued friend of USF. A Trustee of the USF Foundation and member of the Board of Trustees' Health Science and Research Workgroup, Bob Dressler was a well-known and generous figure who contributed greatly to the success of USF. Our heartfelt condolences go out to his family and friends.

The College of Education and broader University community are still coping with the tragic loss of Artia Small, an academic advisor in Elementary Education who lost her life in a fatal car accident less than two weeks ago. Ms. Small was an alumnus of USF as well, earning both a Bachelor's degree in Theology and a Master's degree in College Student Affairs. Our thoughts and sympathies are with her loved ones.

Just last week [Jessica Palmer](#), a freshman Engineering major in her first semester at USF, died after being struck by a car while crossing Fletcher Avenue. I know that you join me in extending our sympathy to her family and friends.

Finally, please don't forget...

The occasional invitations that I extend to faculty to join me in my office for coffee or tea throughout the semester represent an important time for me to hear from you and to sometimes put a face with a name. The last coffee of the Fall semester is scheduled in my office on Friday, December 5, from 8:30-9:30 a.m. Also, please remember that President Genshaft will host her annual holiday open house on Wednesday, December 10, from 4:30-6:30 pm at the Lifsey House.

Finally, I hope that you are able to join us for Fall Commencement at the USF Sun Dome on Saturday, December 13. Baccalaureate degree recipients in the College of Arts and Sciences and College of Behavioral and Community Sciences will receive their degrees beginning at 9:00 a.m., while undergraduates in the colleges of Business, Education, Engineering, Medicine, Nursing, Visual and Performing Arts and Undergraduate Studies will be honored at the 1:30 p.m. ceremony. Later, graduate students will receive their degrees beginning at 6:00 p.m. Light refreshments will be provided for faculty in the Green and Gold Room, beginning one hour in advance of each commencement ceremony. USF Sarasota-Manatee will hold its Fall Commencement at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, December 14, at the Manatee Convention Center, while USF St. Petersburg will honor its graduates on Sunday, December 14, at 6:00 p.m. in the Mahaffey Theater. USF Polytechnic's Fall Commencement is scheduled for 7:00 p.m. on Monday, December 15, at the Lakeland Center.

As the holidays approach, we are all reminded of the continuing difficulties that the global economic downturn has created for us. As we enter 2009, we will be keeping a careful eye on the condition of state appropriations in Florida, student financial aid (especially student loans), student enrollment, persistence and placement, private giving and the endowment, faculty retirement plans, and federal funding for higher education. The coming months will continue to challenge us but, as we have demonstrated during 2008, careful deliberations and innovative ideas will help guide USF along its path to the future.

As I marvel at the many remarkable accomplishments of our faculty, staff and students during 2008, I remain cognizant of the fact that I am approaching my first anniversary as Provost at USF. While few of us would have imagined the prolonged seriousness of this economic downturn in the Summer of 2007, I am heartened by the manner in which we have been able to work together in recent months to make some difficult choices and to shape responsible solutions to the unprecedented challenges, all while maintaining focus on what is of core importance to USF – for that, I thank you.

Best regards,

Ralph

Ralph C. Wilcox
Provost and Senior Vice President