April 14, 2009

Dear Colleague,

As the 2008/09 academic year begins to draw to a close, I wanted to take this opportunity to extend my most sincere appreciation for all that you have contributed toward advancing the University of South Florida over the past few months. We have all come to recognize that these are, in so many ways, unprecedented times for higher education as the world’s universities, like so many other global institutions, struggle to address the challenges presented by the widespread economic recession. In last month’s message to the faculty, I outlined the scope of the budget difficulties facing public universities in Florida on the eve of the opening of the 2009 legislative session. Now that we have passed the halfway mark of this year’s session, we have an emerging sense of what balancing the state budget may mean for USF’s students, faculty and staff in the months and years to come. Yet first, I’d like to highlight some of the recent and notable achievements of our faculty colleagues and students.

Making progress in difficult economic times

Our best estimates for student enrollment during the 2008/09 academic year suggest that we have done a remarkable job of managing enrollment in Tampa, at approximately the same levels as in the prior academic year, while witnessing modest growth at USF St. Petersburg and USF Sarasota-Manatee and marked increases in enrollment at USF Polytechnic. This system-wide enrollment plan is consistent with our commitment to differentiated missions across our member institutions and campuses and is essential to balancing the continued delivery of high quality university education with expanded student access and success. I expect this pattern to continue in the short-term even as I hope to see an upturn in graduate student enrollment on the Tampa campus. At the same time, the profile of new undergraduate students admitted for Summer and Fall 2009 looks to be very strong. Yet, given the complexities of the economy, coupled with the wide-ranging shifts in enrollment management decisions we have made in recent years (including the introduction of mandatory on-campus housing for freshmen beginning this Fall), all of which were intended to strengthen the academic success profile of our students, enrollment remains uncertain and our valued colleagues in undergraduate studies, undergraduate admissions, financial aid and student affairs are all working hard to ensure stronger academic profiles, increased diversity and improved academic performance of our enrolled student body.

At the same time I realize that, with fewer resources in our budget than in 2007/08, class sizes have increased and the balance of instruction has begun to shift away from full-time faculty. As you know, we have sought to reconcile this important matter during this year’s successful faculty recruitment and hiring cycle. I ask that you please reach out to your new colleagues as we look to welcome between 75 and 100 new faculty members to USF in August.
Throughout these difficult budgetary times, we have done our utmost to preserve and strengthen the infrastructure to support teaching excellence and learning effectiveness at USF, while carefully protecting, and investing in, the ingredients essential to enhancing our faculty members’ scholarly and research productivity. The structural realignments that were implemented in Academic Affairs last year appear to be having their desired effect. While we were able to protect all tenured and tenure-earning faculty positions, academic units and degree programs, the streamlining of the College of Arts & Sciences into two schools, the creation of the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences and the consolidation of smaller units yielded both savings in administrative overhead and strengthened the critical mass of faculty in allied fields. This has better positioned USF to “collaborate for competition” across disciplinary, departmental and even college boundaries.

As the new academic year begins next month we will, once again, be challenged to meet the academic needs of our students and provide access at the level at which we were formerly funded by the state. Your chairs and deans have been actively and creatively planning to deliver a comprehensive curriculum in the coming year, and I am pleased to share with you that we have been able to fund Summer School in 2009 at the same level as we did last year. I hope we can get off to a stronger enrollment start to the new academic year than we did last Summer. If you learn of students who are expressing concerns about whether they can afford to enroll at USF this Summer or Fall, please direct them to the Office of Financial Aid. They, and their families, need to know we are here to help them secure the scholarships, grants and loans for which they qualify and to support their continued academic success.

Due to diminishing resources and increasing costs, it will be absolutely essential to focus our precious Summer resources on direct instruction in 2009. Unfortunately, this year, we will not be able to provide subsidies for Summer research assignments (from Education and General funds) unless they are part of a prior contractual agreement or a formal USF program (such as that sponsored by the Humanities Institute) approved by the Office of the Provost. Of course, it is my expectation that many of you will be successful in competing for grants to support your Summer research activities and those of your students. Beyond that, we will continue to leverage Foundation, Research Investment (IDCR) and other sources to jumpstart faculty research. Quite clearly, such efforts continue to bear fruit.

Recently, we have been pleased to announce that Anne Latowsky, Assistant Professor in World Languages, was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, while Chuck Owen, Distinguished University Professor in the School of Music, was named a Guggenheim Fellow for 2009. This is the second such award in as many years for USF, and follows Kevin Yelvington, Associate Professor of Anthropology, who was awarded a Guggenheim last year. Congratulations to all recipients of such prestigious, national faculty awards, which serve as a wonderful testimony to the breadth and quality of USF’s faculty. Indeed, I know there are many more future Guggenheim, MacArthur, Spencer, Packard, Rockefeller, Sloan, and Woodrow Wilson fellows within the ranks of USF’s faculty. From Fulbright, to Getty, Pew, and Searle Scholars, to Beckman Young Investigator, NIH Outstanding Investigator (R35), NIH Merit (R37), and NSF Career awards, I encourage you to explore the breadth of opportunities provided across the disciplines.

The Summer months present an opportune time for you to review the directory of nationals awards on the Provost’s website and to consider nominating colleagues and/or applying for one or more of them. Most application deadlines are in the late Summer or early Fall. I encourage you to work with your chair and/or dean as you prepare your application. Furthermore, please don’t hesitate to contact Graham Tobin, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, should you need additional support from my office or from the President. We’re here to help you and there’s no time like the present to get started!
Finally, I’d like to take this opportunity to thank each of you who, through mentoring undergraduate student researchers, ensured that this year’s Undergraduate Research Symposium was an unparalleled success. I remain convinced that a great research university must, at its very base, remain committed to delivering a world class undergraduate education. USF’s Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) program, under the leadership of Naomi Yavneh, is just one example of how we demonstrate our commitment to inquiry-based learning for undergraduate students.

The News from Tallahassee

It is clear that in spite of some recent upticks in national economic indicators, Florida’s economy will face a long path to recovery. The Florida House and Senate have presented their proposed budgets for the State University System and are considerably apart from one another. Although both chambers recommend tuition increases and the infusion of one-time federal economic stimulus funding to help offset significant recurring reductions in general revenue in the coming year (-24% in the House, and a little less than -10% in the Senate), it is altogether unlikely that even with new revenues (that could include tobacco tax increases and the expansion of gambling) Florida’s universities will escape the impact of the global economic recession. Indeed, while such action may ease the short-term pain, replacing recurring funds with one-time cash will not resolve the need for us to responsibly address permanent reductions in the future. As you know, we have long been planning for a budget reduction in the 2009/10 academic year. Nevertheless, it is entirely possible that the most significant impact of diminishing tax revenues in Florida will not be felt by the State University System until the 2011/12 academic year when the current pool of federal economic stimulus funds goes away. With that in mind, it seems certain we will soon need to come together as an academic community to determine a strategy for balancing our long-term budget.

For now, we will maintain our “belt-tightening” strategy through continuing our freeze on hiring and non-essential spending. As you are all too well aware, over the past year we have worked hard to cut costs and raise new revenues. From tuition and fee increases, to redoubling our efforts in competing for federal research grants and fund-raising, we have also witnessed a shift to more centralized purchasing (especially in Information Technology), a reduction in non-essential services, managed enrollment, increased class sizes and winter closure of the university. Throughout we have maintained our focus and discipline on USF’s Strategic Plan, 2007-12, underscoring our commitment to the instructional and research core of the university and rejecting the prospect of succumbing to institutional paralysis. My primary commitment continues to be faculty retention and recruitment. Even in these difficult economic times, and through careful budget planning, we have been able to provide well-deserved, though modest, salary increases for faculty, and we must continue to grow and strengthen our cohort of tenured and tenure-earning faculty and advisors. Fortunately, and to this moment in time, we have been able to avoid the unfortunate experiences of so many others in American higher education: furloughs; salary freezes; reductions in salaries and benefits; voluntary separation; permanent closure of campuses, colleges and departments and widespread faculty layoffs. While we will continue planning to balance our budget effective July 1, 2009, and to judiciously and strategically spend down our cash reserves in the coming academic year, it seems we are destined to face mid-term budget challenges unless we witness a rapid economic turnaround, which seems unlikely. It is important that we all acknowledge the leadership of our department chairs, deans and members of the Academic Affairs leadership team for their commitment, vision and energy in navigating these difficult times. As I speak with fellow provosts around the country, including many at AAU institutions, I realize that in spite of the challenges, we have much to be thankful for, and proud of, at the University of South Florida.
Other legislative matters

While the state’s operating budget remains squarely on the minds of our elected officials in Tallahassee, there are a number of other higher education matters being discussed. From student residency requirements, Bright Futures and approval of USF’s new Doctor of Pharmacy degree to increased funding for existing and new medical schools, the future status of the Johnnie B. Byrd Alzheimer’s Center and Research Institute, and declining funds for capital improvements across the State University System, our government affairs staff remain vigilant while President Genshaft and other university leaders are working hard to protect USF’s future.

At the same time, Vice President Karen Holbrook and her team in Research and Innovation have done a wonderful job of tracking federal funding opportunities emanating from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. I encourage you to keep a watchful eye on these funding opportunities, particularly if you work in the broad areas of education, energy, and healthcare, or if you and your collaborators can identify pressing infrastructure needs.

Putting the 2008/09 Academic Year Behind Us

As we enter our penultimate week of classes in the 2008/09 academic year, I know that you are rightly focused on wrapping-up Spring instruction and preparing to evaluate student learning during Finals Week. However, I would like to apprise you of two important events that are scheduled for later this week. First, on Wednesday the new Marshall Center will be dedicated beginning at noon. Then, on Friday April 17, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., at the Embassy Suites on the Tampa campus, the Institute for Black Life will be holding its annual symposium “The Role and the Road to Leadership in the 21st Century.”

Soon, many of our students will be celebrating their academic achievements at graduation. I hope you are planning to attend one or more of the seven commencement ceremonies scheduled at USF this Spring. If you haven’t yet registered, you have until this Friday, April 17, to do so. Starting with the College of Medicine’s commencement on Friday May 1, USF Tampa will then follow by hosting three ceremonies at the Sun Dome on Saturday, May 2, at 9:00 a.m. (for undergraduate degree recipients in the colleges of Arts & Sciences and Business), 1:00 p.m. (for all other undergraduate degree recipients), and 6:00 p.m. (for all graduate degree recipients). On Sunday, May 3, USF Sarasota-Manatee’s ceremony will be at 2:00 p.m., and USF St. Petersburg’s will be at 6:00 p.m. The Spring commencement season concludes on Monday, May 4, with USF Polytechnic’s 7:00 p.m. ceremony.

The Road Ahead…

With the 2008/09 academic year nearly behind us, we are preparing for the opening of Summer School on Monday, May 11. Of course our budget and strategic planning, along with evaluation activities, will continue throughout the Summer as we critically review college compact plans, assess faculty hiring requests for the 2010/11 academic year and begin to consider recommendations of the USF-wide task forces on Faculty Roles, Responsibilities and Rewards; Integrated Interdisciplinary Inquiry; USF World; Community Engagement and Sustainability. In addition, we will be preparing to unveil some exciting initiatives for the coming academic year focused around our signature research programs Integrated Neurosciences, Diabetes and Autoimmune Disorders and Healthy Sustainable Communities; embracing emerging technologies to enhance student learning, scholarly and research productivity and community engagement; and exploring USF IDEA, a distinctive and exciting partnership that promises to reshape much of our future thinking in higher education. Finally, we will all need to continue our focus on sharpening learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness,
along with system-wide governance matters, as we prepare our five-year midterm report to the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools, our regional accrediting agency.

Of course, none of this can be or should be conducted in an organizational vacuum. Over the past year, we have taken productive strides toward actualizing our commitment to the principle of shared governance, from working in partnership with the Faculty Senate to craft a Memorandum of Understanding related to Major Organizational Restructuring of Academic Units, to establishing a broadly representative USF System Budget Planning Advisory Committee, and the ongoing joint effort aimed at recasting the USF Faculty Senate Constitution and Bylaws. An active, constructive and meaningful faculty voice is essential to the future success of USF, as is the experience and expertise you bring to such important deliberations. Recently, I’ve asked the USF Faculty Senate President Laurence Branch and USF St. Petersburg Faculty Senate President David Carr, along with college deans and department chairs, to forward recommendations to me for faculty liaisons to serve on the USF Board of Trustees’ Academics and Campus Environment, Finance and Audit, as well as Health Sciences & Research workgroups. I urge you to carefully consider such important opportunities as you balance your faculty roles and responsibilities in the months to come.

In spite of the economic storm clouds overhead, the 2008/09 academic year has been a most productive one. In addition to the many remarkable accomplishments highlighted earlier in this communiqué, we have also witnessed the approval of three new PhD programs and a PharmD program by the Florida Board of Governors, the implementation of a new and much improved benefits package for postdoctoral fellows at USF (to be administered out of a new Office for Postdoctoral Affairs in the Graduate School), purchase of the Weatherbird II to support oceanographic research, the implementation of a pilot postdoctoral fellows program in the humanities and social sciences, the establishment of a Center for India Studies and many notable accomplishments by USF faculty members and students. While we should be proud of our many achievements throughout the 2008/09 academic year, we cannot be satisfied as much work remains as we strive toward reaching our ambitious vision.

Before this semester ends, I would like to extend one last invitation for you to join me for tea this Friday, April 17, from 2:00–3:00 p.m., in my office. This provides a wonderful opportunity for me to hear directly from USF faculty members and for you to meet members of the Provost’s leadership team. Meanwhile, I continue to learn much from my visits to colleges and departments. Having benefited greatly from my visit to USF Polytechnic in February, I very much look forward to meeting with students, faculty, staff and leadership at USF Sarasota-Manatee next Tuesday to learn about their plans to submit an application for separate regional accreditation in the near future.

That having been said, I do hope you will find some time outside of your instructional and research activities this Summer to rest and regenerate your energies in preparation for the opening of the Fall semester. I look forward to having you join me at the opening Faculty Forum, scheduled for Thursday, August 20, at 3:30 p.m., in the new Marshall Center’s Oval Theater, with a “Welcome Back” reception to follow.

Best regards,

Ralph

Ralph C. Wilcox
Provost and Senior Vice President