



PATH TO PREEMINENCE

Dear USF Community, Alumni, Friends and Supporters:

This week was one of very mixed emotions for the USF Community. We accomplished our primary goal of student success by conferring degrees upon nearly 6,000 new graduates across the USF System. We have much to be proud of in all our accomplishments, but none more so than helping our students achieve their dreams and earn their USF degrees.

As you know, we have also been addressing what we feel is a significant impediment to our future success this week in our collective response to the last-minute introduction of changes in law to the metrics that directly impact one of USF's most important and publicly stated goals — achieving our rightful designation as a “*Preeminent State Research University*.” The *Preeminent* designation is a public recognition by our state of USF as a premier Florida research university, but it also comes with a significant additional investment in USF by the State of Florida each year as a reward for achieving the program's benchmarks. I first want each of you to know how proud I am of your swift, forceful and principled response to our request for your assistance in making our collective dissatisfaction known. The USF and Tampa Bay community rallied together with an unmistakable message in support of fairness and transparency and for that we will be eternally grateful and proud.

Many of you have asked for the facts about how this situation was thrust upon us with so little notice and what the impacts are of this new legislation. I realize that there are a lot details outlined in this letter below, but the length of this letter is not a coincidence. It's important that you are aware of the facts of the matter.

Since the preeminence program was enacted into law in 2013, USF has set out on a course to meet 11 of the 12 benchmarks in law, which is the threshold necessary for achieving the *Preeminent* designation. The metrics cover various aspects of student profile, retention and graduation, institutional research & development prowess, faculty achievement and independent national rankings.

Through the hard work of our students, faculty and staff since 2013, USF has achieved most of the benchmarks already. We were proud to announce this spring that we met yet another metric – our tenth – by achieving a 90% retention rate during the Fall 2016 Semester. Importantly, we remained on track to reach the eleventh metric – the 6-year 70% graduation rate – next year after posting a 67% 6-year graduation rate this year. The achievement of this eleventh metric in spring 2018 would allow us after five years of hard work to reach our goal of recognition as *Preeminent* in addition to millions in new state investment that comes along with the designation. We already know – thanks to the graduates who walked across our stages this weekend – that a 70% 6-year graduation rate

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has been achieved this year which will be certified next spring. Said directly, this milestone would have assured USF *Preeminent* eligibility in 2018 had there been no change to the 2013 metrics during this legislative session.

In January 2017, the Florida Senate filed legislation to convert the preeminence program's 70% 6-year graduation rate requirement to a 4-year graduation rate of 50% or greater. Over the ensuing months, this legislation was favorably passed by three separate Senate committees before reaching the Senate Floor. The full Senate voted twice on this legislation and by votes of 35-1 and 36-2 endorsed this new 4-year 50% threshold. The Florida House, in turn, filed similar legislation and even considered it in a House committee and that House postsecondary education oversight committee also endorsed the 4-year 50% threshold as the appropriate benchmark to measure preeminence. At no point in the four months between January 11 and May 5 was it ever publicly suggested that a 4-year 50% threshold was inadequate for determining preeminence.

In late April 2017, I requested that the Board of Governors (BOG) of the State University System certify what we believed to be true – that USF's most recent 4-year graduation rate was 54% and that we continued to achieve the other 10 metrics we had previously met. The BOG performed the data certification and within days of our request they notified the Legislature that if the change in law that they had proposed and repeatedly endorsed since January was enacted as expected, USF would qualify for the *Preeminent* designation immediately in 2017, one year ahead of our expected schedule. To be clear, no one jumped the gun. We were working with facts and a process that was transparent to arrive at this fairly straightforward conclusion.

Unfortunately, after being informed of USF's metric achievement level and agreeing over the course of several public meetings to budget more dollars than originally planned for preeminent-achieving institutions, a policy change was introduced that had never before been publicly considered. At the final public meeting of the legislative session, late on a Friday afternoon on the last scheduled day to meet, a change in the graduation rate was proposed and immediately adopted to change the preeminence graduation metric to a 4-year **60%** threshold, above USF's certified 54% rate. That was the first time that anyone at USF or even most of our local legislative delegation had heard of this new threshold. I have personally spoken with several members of our local legislative delegation and many share the same level of frustration with the process and the outcome of this late change in the legislation.

This last-minute change had a two-pronged negative effect on USF. It caused the loss of nearly \$11 million recurring dollars in 2017-18, which USF would have shared in if designated *Preeminent* in 2017. This loss of funds has certainly garnered a lot of attention, but our institution's leadership was more concerned about the second prong – pushing back the expected date by which USF could earn the *Preeminent* designation from either 2017

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(if the January 11th through May 5th plan had been adopted on May 8th), or 2018 (if no change had been adopted and USF meets the 6-year graduation rate threshold next year), to 2020 or later when we project to reach a 4-year graduation rate of 60%. This is an unacceptable outcome for the Tampa Bay Region and for USF.

Some have defended the move by arguing that the Legislature has the *right* to make changes to legislation up until the last minute, to which I reply, “Of course they do.” Without exception, I respect the presiding officers’ authority and position. But USF students, faculty, staff, alumni, supporters and the entire Tampa Bay community also have the right to express our opinion, based on facts, on the unacceptable impact of those late changes on USF and the Tampa Bay Region. Additionally, we all have the obligation to ask why such a late change was necessary and was it adopted with full realization of the negative impacts it would have on USF now and in the future.

I have also heard over the past few days that the USF System “should be grateful for the \$42 million in increased funding it is receiving.” Let me also be clear about this, we are very pleased to receive this additional funding. Many members of our local legislative delegation, including Senator Jack Latvala in his role as Senate Appropriations Chair, played a key role in securing this additional funding. This has been, by any measure, an historic year for investment in the State University System and student financial aid, and large portions of that state investment are directed to the USF System and our students.

I would also like to point out the fact that of the \$42 million in increased operational funding that the USF System will receive next fiscal year, nearly \$35 million of it is from funding made available to all state universities that is awarded out based on institutional performance. Our local delegation worked hard to put the funding into those pots and the USF System worked hard to earn our fair share. That is what makes this preeminence decision so disappointing and something that requires an immediate plan for resolution. USF’s five-year plan to reach preeminence was thrown off in its final year with no consultation and the investment we stood to earn through our performance was pushed back many more years.

Thankfully, leaders among our Tampa Bay Area Legislative Delegation, such as Senators Bill Galvano, Tom Lee, Darryl Rouson and Dana Young and State Reps. Danny Burgess, Janet Cruz and Shawn Harrison and others spoke out on USF’s behalf. We have secured a commitment through their guidance that the leadership of the Florida Legislature is willing to sit with USF’s leadership and determine how best to get USF back on its appropriate path to preeminence. We expect this to happen as soon as practicable so we can bring a full resolution to this matter of significant concern and to report back to you immediately on this plan for resolution. Settling for anything less would be unacceptable for our institution and our region. This is the path forward to a resolution.

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I want you, our supporters, to know that the expectation of the Board of Trustees of USF is that a swift resolution will be achieved that keeps USF on its original track to preeminence. I have confidence that our advocates in the Legislature have heard us loud and clear and want to help rectify this situation. As such, I ask for your patience as we continue to work on this critical issue, your gratitude towards those who have helped us this year, and your willingness to be called upon again if necessary to ensure that our mutual goals are reached and USF is rightfully designated where it belongs – *Preeminent* – without delay.

I cannot thank you enough for your unwavering support for the USF System and the students and community we are honored to serve. GO BULLS!

Sincerely,

Brian Lamb, Chair
USF Board of Trustees

