



A MESSAGE
from the Provost

December 14, 2021

Dear Faculty Colleagues,

As both the fall semester and calendar year draw to a close, I'd like to take this opportunity to extend my most sincere gratitude for your continued dedication and tireless support of our students, and unwavering commitment to your scholarly activities. When I reflect on the many uncertainties that we have navigated together over the past year, and consider our innumerable accomplishments as a university community, finding some much-needed and well-deserved time to disconnect, rest, and enjoy time with family and friends is going to be more important than ever. Happy holidays!

This past weekend, we celebrated the graduation of more than 4,500 students, including President Law's conferral of 181 doctoral degrees, and now we can look to a [return to campus](#) in January with a renewed sense of excitement and optimism. The new year promises to usher in many changes, including the appointment of a new president and, as you [previously read](#), a new provost. As I begin my 15th year as provost, I plan to step aside in 2022. Thanks to the contributions of so many talented members across our university community and strong board leadership, I am confident that USF finds itself in a very strong position and that our brightest years lay ahead.

Another new and exciting task for spring will be implementing [In Pursuit of Excellence](#), USF's Strategic Plan for 2022-2027, which was approved unanimously by our Board of Trustees (BOT) last week and will be presented to the Florida Board of Governors for ratification toward the end of January. I am especially proud of the plan's emphasis on supporting faculty excellence as we continue USF's unmatched upward trajectory as the nation's fastest-rising university. During the upcoming semester, your deans will lead the way in developing college-based strategies to help achieve our institutional goals and objectives through optimizing the distinctive qualities of each unit.

I hope you share in my excitement for what is yet to come? Of course, like you, I recognize that the broader higher education landscape across Florida, throughout the nation and indeed around the world, is presently facing some difficult challenges. Perhaps foremost among these are questions related to academic freedom. Like so many of my faculty colleagues, I've been spending a lot of time lately reflecting on the status of free speech on college and university campuses.

As you've heard me say consistently throughout my tenure as provost, and as I reiterated in [my letter](#) to the faculty at the beginning of this semester, at USF, we believe that the unfettered right to free speech and academic freedom is fundamental to accomplishing our institutional [mission](#). Indeed, just last week, our BOT further affirmed this commitment by unanimously approving USF's strategic plan, including the following core value statement in support of ["Collegiality, collaboration, academic freedom, viewpoint diversity, and an institutional commitment to the open exchange of ideas, divergent opinions and philosophies, rigorous debate, grounded in the principles of civil discourse, and professional responsibility."](#) This action was consistent with [USF Policy 10-050](#) on *Academic Freedom and Responsibility* and follows a [Statement on Free Expression](#) signed by all Florida State University System presidents in 2019.

At USF, we are proud of our commitment to student success and our record of research, scholarly and creative productivity. We understand that the education of our students and the pursuit of truth, along with the creation and dissemination of new knowledge, require us to challenge orthodoxy in the classroom and to champion free intellectual inquiry through our scholarship. Yet equally

important is our responsibility to promote viewpoint diversity through civil discourse. Importantly, our modeling and encouragement of grounded, robust argument and debate are essential to preparing our students for meaningful contributions to civil society and to foster the next generation of leaders to further strengthen the foundation of our democracy. This also becomes an integral part of developing critical thinking and other high-demand core skills expected of graduates as they make their way into the workforce or to graduate school. As members of an academic community, we must provide our students and colleagues across the political spectrum, from conservative to progressive, a climate characterized by tolerance and respect in which they can present their thoughts and ideas free from restraint yet open to reasoned challenge. Moreover, it is not our job to protect members of our campus communities from unpopular, disagreeable, or even offensive ideas and opinions. After all, our very *raison d'être* in the academy is to educate rather than indoctrinate – to open minds rather than close them.

I know how difficult this can be at times as we address big and often divisive questions confronting us in society today, including, yet not limited to, climate change and the environment, gender identity, gun violence, healthcare and vaccinations, immigration, national and global security, racial justice, taxation, and voting rights. Yet then again, no one ever suggested that delivering a high-quality education was free from the challenge of opposing viewpoints, that unpopular ideas cannot advance knowledge, or that the founders of our nation took for granted the right to free speech. It is within these contexts that I look forward to further exploring how we can more deeply embed the principles of free speech and academic freedom in the life of USF.

In closing, I'd like to provide you with a few key updates and information related to items of particular interest to faculty:

- Earlier this semester I received inquiries from colleagues on branch campuses about annual faculty performance appraisals. The annual faculty review process typically ends with the department chair/school director and the dean acknowledging that the appraisal has been completed. While it isn't typical for a dean or regional chancellor to examine individual annual performance appraisals, in the rare occurrence that the regional chancellor chooses a designee to provide input to a review, it must be a single individual familiar and experienced with the assigned duties of faculty members, not an additional campus committee. Please reach out to your department chair or school director should you have additional questions or concerns about annual performance appraisals,
- The 2022 state legislative session begins in January. As in the past, we will be carefully monitoring current and prospective legislation that could impact USF and the State University System,
- As you wrap up the Fall 2021 semester and prepare for the beginning of Spring 2022, key dates and other faculty-focused events and resources are included on the [Faculty Success website](#). I encourage you to check this page frequently as more events for the spring semester are being finalized, and
- Once more, for updates on Covid, I encourage you to please review [President Law's most recent update about spring 2022 with advice from the Covid-19 Taskforce](#).

Again, I do hope you enjoy your much-deserved break, and I look forward to seeing you when we return in January. If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to your department chair or college dean, or feel free to contact me directly at provost@usf.edu.

Best regards,

Ralph C. Wilcox

Provost & Executive Vice President

University of South Florida