

Dear Members of the USF Community,

The abrupt decision this week by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) barring international students from remaining in the country if they enroll in remote-only instruction this fall is, quite simply, cruel and reckless.

When the spread of COVID-19 this spring forced USF and other colleges and universities across the nation to move to remote learning, ICE granted a temporary provision to the in-person course requirement for the “duration of the emergency.” It is senseless to withdraw the waiver while the COVID-19 pandemic worsens. Those who fail to comply with the new guidance may face harsh immigration consequences. This is naturally causing great distress and confusion for our international students — even as the pandemic and the ensuing financial crisis are creating new challenges and increased uncertainty for universities planning to begin the academic year.

We have worked assiduously and successfully with ICE’s Student and Exchange Visitors Program (SEVP) over the years to ensure that our international students comply with visa regulations as they successfully complete their USF academic programs. However, the timing and the intent of this particular order appears to be designed to place pressure on colleges and universities to expand their in-person instruction this fall without regard to concerns for the health and safety of individual students, faculty, and others.

As you know, when we begin our fall semester in August, USF intends to welcome students from across the country and around the world with a mix of in-person, hybrid, and remote classes. We are preparing for our in-person classes by prioritizing safety, and we are carefully preparing for scenarios if public health circumstances and county ordinances require us to adjust this plan.

This week's ICE order is causing anxiety for our international students as well as for their faculty, classmates, advisers, and mentors. It is a decision that runs counter to the commitments and values we foster and uphold as a Jesuit university. It is a decision that is in opposition to our priorities to care for each individual student and support them to the fullest extent possible in their educational journey. International students are greatly valued at USF, make extraordinary contributions to our community, and enrich the learning environment for all their peers. Our international students should have the same learning options as our domestic students in the course of their educational progress.

So, how is USF responding?

- I have directed our general counsel to engage in active conversations with other West Coast universities about seeking an injunction to prohibit enforcement of the order, following a similar legal course that Harvard and MIT have recently taken. I will keep you posted on the progress of this work.
- ISSS and the Provost's Office are working directly with every affected international student and their academic programs to ensure students are able to continue their education here at USF and maintain their immigration status.
- Reflecting the generous and inclusive spirit of the USF community, there has been an outpouring of support from across the university. Our ISSS office is working around the clock to support international students. Our schools and the college immediately began working to expand in-person and hybrid offerings. Our faculty has expressed their solidarity and commitment to help our students. Our domestic students have offered to swap classes with international students who may need a particular in-person course.

As a Jesuit university that prioritizes the value of community, we intend to increase in-person instruction as soon as it is safe and responsible to do so. But, until that time comes, we will continue to offer a mix of instructional options that maximize safety and optimize academic progress. Along the way, we will not stand idly by to see our international students' dreams and educational progress interrupted by a misguided order.

Thank you for all you do for our community. I continue to pray that you and yours are keeping safe and staying healthy during this pandemic. In a few weeks, I look forward to welcoming you — either in person or virtually — to USF's new academic year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul J. Fitzgerald". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Paul J. Fitzgerald, S.J.

President

Office of the President

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