

Dear Colleagues,

As we launch a new semester that is both filled with possibility and shadowed by uncertainty, I would like to share some celebrations with you and prefigure what lies ahead.

Celebrations and Accomplishments

Looking back over my first six months at USF, I am heartened by the extraordinary efforts that this community is making to live out our mission and provide a transformative educational experience despite difficult circumstances. Even as you have been called on to do more to ensure that our students' immediate learning and socio-emotional needs are met, you have also continued to think strategically, build toward the future, and work for a more just and sustainable world. Some of your unsung accomplishments these past few months include:

- Welcoming our largest-ever cohorts of Black undergraduate students and international graduate students.
- Launching our new **Transfer Portal** and **Transfer Belonging and Excellence Initiative** to help usher prospective and new transfer students through a streamlined path to success and enrolling our largest spring transfer cohort in five years.
- Launching the **Laudato Si** initiative and the **Laudato Si Action Platform Working Group**.
- Becoming the first Jesuit university in the world to **receive official designation as an Age-Friendly University (AFU)** by the Age-Friendly University Global Network.
- Gaining approval for the **Internet and Intellectual Property Justice Clinic** to take on patent work as well as trademark work, making **USF School of Law the first ABA-accredited Northern California law school** to do so.
- Receiving a large three-year grant **award from the Gates Foundation**, in partnership with Chapman University, for the School of Education to develop innovative educator preparation programs for a diverse workforce teaching underserved children.
- Receiving a generous gift to establish the **China Business Studies Initiative (CBSI) Innovation and Leadership Fund**, opening doors to overseas travel and immersions to students and providing programmatic support.
- Launching Freedom Dreaming (**C-HER**, School of Education,) and **Diffused Academia (CRASE)** mini grant programs to encourage research projects that co-create knowledge collectively with BIPOC communities and explore the (post)pandemic scholarly environment respectively.
- Opening the College of Arts and Sciences' Innovation Hive's ideation and maker space in Harney Science Center and hosting its first set of classes and student research projects.

I know that you can add many more "wins" and celebrations to this list. I invite you to take a moment to post a note of celebration, affirmation, or gratitude to this **virtual community noticeboard**. Taking time to celebrate our victories — large and small — and to lift up those whose creativity and leadership we appreciate helps all of us to feel seen and nourishes us for the work ahead.

Looking Back and Lessons Learned

During the past six months, the skills of observation and listening I honed over two decades as a qualitative researcher have been put to the test. During "walk-n-talks" with student and faculty leaders, weekly Zoom office hours, walking tours of spaces where our students learn, faculty meetings, and virtual and in-person (sometimes chilly!) gatherings, you have generously shared your insights, institutional memory, hopes, and concerns. I am grateful to each of you who has taken the time to accelerate my learning and help me to become a better, more informed leader. My enduring sense is of a community that, despite our challenges, is unified by our calling to educate for justice. A community that recognizes that while our efforts are far from perfect, we are committed to striving for Magis, to be more wholly in solidarity with one another and the wider local and global communities in which we reside.

Perhaps two key lessons emerge for me from the past semester. First, that we must **attend to our hearts** — bruised by the impact of the pandemic, economic and workload stresses, racial violence, political crises, and more — **and to our relationships** as a prerequisite for meaningful progress on any of our strategic goals. Second, to quote Alice Walker, that "we are the ones we have been waiting for." Everything I have witnessed has led me to believe that USF is poised for Magis, that **our bold vision of radical inclusiveness and transformative Jesuit education is exactly what the world needs in these heartbreaking and uncertain times**. And that we are not alone in this calling. As we step courageously forward with purpose and vision, we will be met with external resources, partners, and opportunities that support our efforts.

Looking Forward and Next Steps

So what are our most pressing priorities, as I see it? We must:

- Create spaces to really listen to one another, **cultivate our capacity to share and hear difficult truths**, deepen our ability to allow for multiple perspectives, and, *when we are ready*, open our hearts to healing and reconciliation.
- Ensure that our **academic programs are evolving** to meet the demands of a fast-changing world. We must evolve existing programs and build new programs to meet prospective students where they are and prepare our students for the future.
- **Upgrade our facilities** so that all of our students — in the arts, sciences, and professional education — enjoy world-class spaces to learn, create, experiment, exhibit, and perform.
- Map a pathway to annual budgets with operating margins that allow us to **reinvest** in our people and our core academic enterprise.
- Continue to grow our **domestic and international enrollments**.
- Rebuild our **antiracism and DEI infrastructure**, so that we can develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach to this critical work and better support our community.
- Develop strategies to **recruit, retain, mentor, and support our diverse faculty, staff, and librarians** that address the unique stressors of the pandemic workplace.

In the coming weeks and months, the Provost's team plans to partner with the USF community to:

- Share the findings of and school/college-level responses to the **Campus Climate Survey**, and invite participation in next steps;
- Offer **facilitated spaces** for sharing, healing, and repair;
- Roll out structures for **strategic plan implementation, assessment, and communication**;
- Work with the schools and college as they **refresh and align school/college strategic plans** with the university plan;
- Complete an **integrated strategic enrollment plan**;
- Support faculty and program heads in **developing new academic programs and updating existing** programs;
- Work with our Development and Facilities teams and other campus partners to pursue opportunities to **improve facilities** in the arts, sciences, and professional programs;
- Launch the **re-imagined DECO**;
- Launch our new **Latinx Excellence and Belonging Initiative**;
- Launch a revised **Retention, Persistence, and Equity Committee** to identify strategies to enhance student success and equitable outcomes;
- Begin the journey to attain **HSI and ANAAPISI status** in order to make a USF education more broadly available and enable access to federal resources that accompany those designations.

Please stay tuned for invitations to participate in these initiatives, as you feel able. Lately, I have been inspired by **Ruha Benjamin's call for "viral justice"** made up of small, widely spreading practices that cumulatively cause a sea change in communities and institutions. We all have heavy workloads and most of us have additional commitments outside of the workplace. No one individual's heroic efforts can create the change we want to see as an institution. But together, our individual efforts add up to an extraordinary force for good.

Cultivating New Mindsets

As we settle into the uncomfortable reality of how quickly and profoundly our lives have changed, it is becoming clear that there will be no return to a world of certainties and control, plans that go the way we envision, and lives that we have mastery over. But then, for many of us, our race, gender, class, or geography has often meant that precarity is just a paycheck, wildfire, or police stop away. The question that Ruha challenges us with is: **how will we evolve as quickly as the world around us?** What mindset and work practices can we cultivate that will allow us to meet change and uncertainty with a radical openness to possibility rather than overwhelm and resistance? And what might we need to let go of?

Letting go of rigidity, black-and-white thinking, and a need to control my environment has been a lifelong healing journey for me. I have worked on my tendency to judge too rapidly, to resist ambiguity, to want to chart a straightforward path forward when one has not yet revealed itself. Mindfulness has been one way that I have become more relaxed, playful, curious, and open to possibility.

What is your contemplative work? How might we as a community of **"contemplatives in action"** develop new ways of living and working in this pandemic workplace? What are we willing to let go of in order to more fully experience the beloved community that we yearn for?

I look forward to exploring these topics and more with you in the weeks and months ahead.

Warmly,



Julia Chinyere Oparah
Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs

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