

Dear Colleagues,

As we head into this very busy part of the academic year, I wanted to highlight our collective achievements, report on the progress in implementing the strategic plan, and outline the collaborative efforts underway to address retention and enrollment declines. These were among the topics discussed at the President's Town Hall earlier this week, and I invite you to view the video if you were not able to join us for the live event.

Responding Nimbly to the Changing Higher Education Landscape

The USF 2027 Strategic Plan articulates a vision for USF as "a dynamic institution that is able to respond rapidly and transparently to a changing world." As we continue to face challenges — from students affected by the mental health and financial impacts of the pandemic, to inflation levels not seen in decades and a bullish job market that is causing many prospective graduate students to pause on their educational goals — I am deeply impressed with our community's ability to generate data-informed solutions and willingness to try creative new approaches.

The drop in undergraduate first-time, first-year retention from 86.2 percent in fall 2021 to 80.7 percent this fall, accompanied by troubling signals in the recently completed New Student Success Survey, tell us that our students are struggling in greater numbers than in the past. This is cause for concern and for action. Similarly, the dip in graduate enrollments, driven in part by a strong labor market but also by aggressive discounting by our competitors, has accelerated our efforts to re-evaluate and refresh our graduate programs, financial aid, marketing, and recruitment strategies.

Together, we are moving strategically, methodically, and in data-informed ways to reverse graduate enrollment declines, improve retention, and put USF on the path to financial sustainability. In so doing, we elevate our social justice mission of educational equity by providing access and opportunity and supporting success for our diverse students. Here are some brief updates on current efforts across Academic Affairs and in partnership with Student Life colleagues:

- Our Student Success and Retention Task Force, led by Vice Provost Shirley McGuire and Associate Vice President Shona Milazo, is working across units to strengthen structures that support our undergraduate students, bolster advising, and increase students' sense of belonging. A new data-informed approach to this work will help us pinpoint and direct resources to the most effective interventions. Our goal for next year is to reach 83.5 percent, in line with our four-year average.
• The provost's office is opening the Academic Innovation Fund to allow academic units and Student Life partners to seek funding for new initiatives that will promote retention in our continuing student body. Learn more and apply for funds here.
• We have improved our data collection and invested in additional market research so that our academic leaders can make data-driven decisions about how to evolve our offerings and refine our financial aid strategy in a rapidly changing landscape.
• Our academic deans are working creatively and collectively, in partnership with the provost's team, to develop school-specific strategies to grow graduate enrollments by creating new programs in areas of high demand and high community impact, revising existing programs to meet the needs of our students, and strengthening financial aid, marketing, and recruiting practices.
• We are initiating a process of review and redesign with the goal of launching a new undergraduate core curriculum in fall 2025 that will make a USF education even more distinctive, attractive, and mission-aligned. At the request of the Core Advisory Committee, the Joint University-Wide Curriculum Committee (JUCC) has recommended the creation of an exploratory task force as a starting point for the revision of the USF undergraduate core curriculum. Faculty, librarians, staff, and students are invited to self-nominate or to nominate others for the task force by Nov. 23.

Submit a Nomination Form »

- The Latinx Excellence and Belonging Initiative is embarking on a series of listening sessions for USF students and the entire community, reviewing data and investigating best practices nationwide, with the goal of developing a report and recommendations by the end of this academic year. A priority project for the Office of ADEI is to partner with key teams and offices including orientation staff, Cultural Centers, and Student Life to collaborate on robust programming to support the belonging and persistence of our Latinx students.

These efforts will yield results in the medium and long term, as we try new strategies, assess results, and make adjustments along the way. In the near term, however, we will have another budget gap to close. This is unwelcome news for our community, but we will navigate the budget closing process as we did last year, working collaboratively and creatively, and putting our mission, values, and the need to strengthen and grow our academic programs at the center of our decision-making.

Strategic Plan Implementation Update

Even as we respond to current trends, we must keep our strategic priorities front and center and continue to invest in our future. I am grateful to the nearly 140 members of our community who have agreed to serve on working groups that support implementation of the USF 2027 Strategic Plan. I've been inspired by their willingness to serve USF in this important work, their commitment to honor the participatory and inclusive spirit of the strategic plan, and their efforts to translate the plan into action and hold us collectively accountable for progress toward our goals. Here are a few updates on our progress:

- Working groups for each of the six strategic goals have been launched, as well as a working group on global focus and responsibility. All working group members have participated in ADEI training as part of our commitment to centering anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in both our process and our deliverables.
• Community conversations hosted by each working group will provide members of our community the chance to offer input and hear directly from the working groups on each goal. I'd like to thank working group number 5 for leading a thoughtful and productive conversation last week with more than 100 participants. The Jamboard from that session is available here. Future community conversations will be listed on the Working Groups web page.
• Working groups are coordinating with units across our campuses to inventory initiatives already underway. They will identify low-hanging fruit that we can get started on in the short term; plan for longer-term projects that advance our goals; offer regular updates on their progress; and provide recommendations for how to implement and prioritize the actions outlined in the plan and measure progress against our goals.

Looking Ahead

Our community is brimming with opportunities to celebrate our values, gather in solidarity, and honor change-makers who have advanced social justice. I hope you will find time to participate in one of the many upcoming events in November — whether attending one of the conversations or workshops listed here, taking a moment to recognize the service of students and members of our community who are veterans, or joining the Institute for Nonviolence and Social Justice for an extraordinary evening in St. Ignatius Church on Nov. 19, featuring racial justice activist Bryan Stevenson in dialogue with Dr. Clarence B. Jones, discussing the struggle for racial justice in America.

Warmly,

Chinyere

Chinyere Oparah
Provost and Vice President, Academic Affairs

To sign up for office hours, click here.

Antiracism, Faculty Success, and the Tenure and Promotion Process

Thursday, Nov. 10 | 11:45 a.m.–12:45 p.m. | Zoom

Faculty and Librarian Excellence and Equity Series
For deans, faculty, and librarians
Hosted by Sheila Smith McKay, Vice Provost of Equity, Inclusion, and Faculty Excellence

This workshop, which includes pre-readings and breakout sessions, focuses on key readings about tenure and promotion issues that define higher education at this time, including reviewing tenure and promotion documents through an ADEI lens. We will discuss research justice, seeing research and service using a diversity lens, and other relevant issues that frame why this conversation informs our collective work.

Register Here »

Reimagining the Core Curriculum

Thursday, Nov. 17 | 11:45 a.m.–12:45 p.m. | Zoom

Innovating Jesuit Education Series
Co-hosted by Senior Vice Provost Shirley McGuire and Professor Jo Loomis, faculty chair of the Joint University Curriculum Committee (JUCC)

This event will begin with a short overview of the current core curriculum, the provost's charge for the redesign process, and timeline. Participants will be asked to share insights about the current core curriculum and ask questions about the initial stage of the redesign process. The event may be of particular interest to those considering serving on the Core Redesign Task Force or Advisory Board. Please see the Undergraduate Core Curriculum Redesign web page for the call and future updates.

Register Here »

Hiring for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Tuesday, Nov. 29 | 11:45 a.m.–12:45 p.m. | Hyflex

Transformational Leadership Workshops
Hosted by Associate Vice Provost of ADEI Sabrina Kwist

This workshop provides an opportunity for the USF community to discuss hiring practices and processes that reflect the university's commitment to antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Register Here »

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