

Dear Colleagues,

It has been moving to witness the eagerness and excitement of our new students and their parents over the past week as they have settled in. Thank you to each of you who worked so hard to bring in a highly academically qualified and diverse class and to make orientation and move-in such a great success.

As we embark on the demands of the academic year, I hope that we can continue to carry the gifts and lessons of summer with us. The summer provides many of us precious time to unplug from the fast pace of our work, whether teaching, grading and advising, supporting student success and campus life, or managing behind-the-scenes operations. As we enjoy the offering of spaciousness, we find that it is from this fecund void that creativity springs. In her deeply transformative book *Belonging: Remembering Ourselves Home*, Toko-pa Turner speaks of an inner well that is too often left untended and covered in brambles. A portal to the “world behind the visible surface of things which is pulsing vitality into our lives. It is the birthplace of dreams, the workshop of imagination, the source from which all creation arises.” Hiking in the redwoods, we suddenly receive inspiration for a poem. After a week’s vacation in a place that is new to us, the solution to a particularly sticky research dilemma or operational roadblock becomes crystal clear. Our brains — when fed with rest, silence, or with fresh stimuli — respond with brilliance and originality.

Given the connections between rest, wellness, and creativity, it is no surprise that we are seldom able to harness our most innovative capacities when we are drowning in emails or stressed out fighting fires. So the question then becomes, how can we continue to foster the conditions that allow us to connect with our innate capacity to create and innovate once the semester starts? This is of particular importance this academic year, as we kick off implementation of the **USF 2027 Strategic Plan**, which calls on us to reimagine Jesuit education and to create an agile and innovative culture. I encourage you to put identifying and creating the conditions for innovation high on your list of priorities for this year.

What that means will be different for each of us. Inspired by the book *Peak Mind*, and the gift of a singing bowl from Nepal, I have recently taken up a 12-minute morning meditation practice. No excuses, no questions, every day. Amisha Jha found that just 12 minutes dramatically improves our ability to access higher cognitive functioning regardless of what is going on around us. Perhaps sitting still offers a daily invitation to the greater creativity that Turner speaks of to enter and inspire us.

I hope as we enter the new academic year, that we will each find or recommit to a regular practice of wellness and invitation, not only for our own self-care but because these individual actions are central to the creative, innovative culture that we are crafting together. As Turner reminds us, “as you are tending to your inner well, know that your work is part of a larger mission that is attempting, through our combined experience, to come into harmony. In other words, our individual well-being is also the well-being of the whole.”

The themes of collective wellness and mutual responsibility are poignantly reflected in *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Indigenous ecologist Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, chosen by the Tracy Seeley Center for Teaching Excellence for its Summer Book Club in which more than 75 of our colleagues participated this summer. Weaving together strands of Indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge, Dr. Kimmerer admonishes that “we make a grave error if we try to separate individual well-being from the health of the whole.” Describing the occurrence of mast fruiting in the pecan trees of her ancestral lands, she reflects on how the trees act as a collective. “If one tree fruits, they all fruit — there are no soloists. Not one tree in a grove, but the whole grove. Not one grove in the forest, but every grove.... What happens to one happens to us all. All flourishing is mutual.”

I look forward to providing further updates in the coming weeks regarding our strategic plan and Integrated Strategic Enrollment Plan implementation, academic program innovation, and our project to reimagine education with Jesuit values and social justice vision at the center. It is your collective effort and creativity that will ensure the success of these initiatives as we work together to build the thriving enterprise outlined in our strategic plan “that generates and shares abundance with current community members and with those who will live, learn, and work at USF in the future.”

Warmly,



Chinyere Oparah
Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs

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