

USF College of Education Faculty Call for Respectful and Transparent Decision-Making: Let's Build Trust in Challenging Times

Background

On Wednesday, October 14 at 10:30 A.M. Provost Ralph Wilcox met for 30 minutes with faculty and staff from the College of Education. After 25 minutes of preamble, Provost Wilcox informed us of four decisions that took all of us by complete surprise: 1. The College was not continuing with its search for a Dean (we had received an update the previous week on the committee's progress); 2. The College would stop offering its current undergraduate degrees (at some point in the near future); 3. The College would be "reimagined" as a Graduate School of Education - possibly housed within another existing College or Unit; and 4. the College would receive a 35.7% budget cut. Provost Wilcox answered a total of 4 questions before moving to his next meeting. With the announcement, we were given no guidance as to concrete next steps or procedures to navigate such a dramatic elimination of nearly half of the College's programs and erasure of a core identity of a founding College of the University of South Florida. In addition, USF did not prepare messaging or press releases to inform our students, alumni, and community partners.

Since that time, beyond a couple of brief responses to questions from the College Faculty Policy Council, we have not seen or heard from Provost Wilcox. While our undergraduate enrollment still remains above 800 students, we understand that his decision is positioned as strategically aligned with broader University priorities as well as in response to enduring structural challenges to teacher education enrollment that necessitate alignment of recurring expenses with recurring revenue.

In response to concerns around transparency regarding the strategic realignment process and priorities, The Office of the President created a strategic realignment website. In discussion of the process (How: The Process), President Currall's website states, "Guided by our Principles of Community, the process has been deliberative and inclusive." We robustly contest this assertion. Deliberative and inclusive consultation cannot happen after the fact. In addition, in the month since the announcement, the process has been marked by obscurity and unilateral top-down directives at odds with norms of faculty consultation and governance as outlined by the Florida SUS Advisory Council of Faculty Senates and the AAUP.

Rather, from our vantage point as faculty in the College of Education, the process is more accurately characterized by a lack of consultation, a lack of a plan for communication with stakeholders, a lack of consideration of USF's unique position serving the largest school districts in the country, as well as a lack of concrete guidance.

Lack of Consultation

The Provost's announcement was shocking to us, both in its content and delivery. We had no indication whatsoever that a dramatic, College-altering and disproportionate cut of 35.7% would

be decreed by the Provost given our continued ability to exceed USF metrics in our annual reports. College-level leaders, Associate Deans, and Department Chairs had very little warning as well. Earlier in the fall, Interim Dean Ponticell held meetings with faculty and departments to inform (not consult) faculty to prepare for potential impending cuts of 8.5% in the current year and an additional 10% for the following academic year-in line with the instructions from the Florida Board of Governors. It was clear to faculty that some belt tightening would occur, but there was no indication that the college's budget would be decimated.

While dramatic decisions with little to no stakeholder consultation may be normalized practice in other public and private organizations and businesses, it is almost unheard of (or at least it used to be) in higher education. Public universities are in part governed by faculty members. Faculty members are and should always be involved in decisions about degree programs and curriculum. Given the draconian decision, faculty members across the university, not just in the College of Education, are rightly worried about their rights, about their ongoing role in university governance, and about having a voice in decisions that have massive impacts on their scholarly fields and programs.

As a faculty, we are well aware that there are structural challenges and that we need to embrace the hard and continuous work to strategically reinvent ourselves. When called upon and consulted, we are more than willing to engage in strategic realignment planning. When Dean Torres called upon the faculty to realign our programs in 2013, the Faculty Policy Council and multiple ad-hoc committees did the work that was asked of them. Ultimately, while no programs were altered (faculty was explicitly told that programs would not and should not be altered), 8 departments were folded into 3 departments. Then again, in the Fall of 2016, a committee of 27 faculty and USF and external stakeholders collectively dedicated hundreds of hours to help produce a 163-page draft report, *Imagining a New and Bright Future for the College of Education*. In 2017, recommendations were published from that work in 5 areas: Program Review; Research; Recruiting, Enrollment, and Retention; Partnerships and Marketing. Some of the recommendations from the report were beginning to be implemented under the leadership of Dean Knoeppel. This was further complicated by USF Consolidation and repositioning our College from 3 departments to 4 departments, again with consultation and input from faculty. Faculty have a track record of stepping up when asked to reconsider structures. But in this case, we want to be very clear: prior to the October 14 announcement there was absolutely no faculty, staff, or student consultation.

Lack of Communication

What has been stunning is the clear lack of any prior plan for communicating this highly impactful decision. Superintendents, School Boards, Florida Department of Education leaders, USF Foundation, USF Administrators, Ex-USF Presidents, alumni, students, and many other stakeholders first found out about this decision through private Facebook posts on October 14, or either the *Crow's Nest* or *Tampa Bay Times* on October 15. Leaders in our own college and our college communication director had not been briefed as to the decision and guided to plan

responses to what would be an inevitable barrage of concern. Interim Dean Ponticell and Provost Wilcox had a reactive press conference after the news-and outrage-had spread throughout the community.

We continue to be concerned with competing messages that incite confusion and anxiety. On the one hand, we are told to move with great expediency to develop a final plan for the stated budget cut by December 18th, while on the other hand, we (and external stakeholders) are told that all plans are preliminary. We are further concerned as to the impact the inconsistent messaging has on current and future student enrollment and the significant amount of time faculty have had to spend on calming student concerns-while still working with great uncertainty.

Lack of consideration of USF's College of Education's Unique Position

The proposal of 5th year teacher education pathways that include a Masters degree was presented in an editorial signed by President Currall, Provost Wilcox, and Interim Dean Ponticell (with no consultation of faculty in the College) that appeared on October 28th in the Tampa Bay Times. Our stakeholders clearly understand this approach to be woefully inadequate to meet the needs of our local schools. This is a point the Superintendents and School Boards of Hillsborough, Manatee, Pinellas, Pasco, Polk, and Sarasota districts made abundantly clear in an op-ed in the Tampa Bay Times, as well as in a highly publicized meeting of the Superintendents, district staff, and ex-USF President Betty Castor on October 30th. It is important to note that school boards in Pasco and Pinellas counties have also passed resolutions imploring the university to reconsider its approach.

Our local community, the broader state, and the nation are in the midst of a massive teacher shortage. Our partner school districts need more, not fewer, well-trained teachers. USF administrators will say that offering Master's level teacher certification programs is a good replacement for the undergraduate program. It isn't. While the landscape has shifted and school district processes and state colleges provide alternative pathways to teacher certification, USF plays a unique role in the broader Tampa Bay region and state. We are the public university that anchors teacher education in ways that centrally serve the public good.

The College of Education has a long and proud history of working with its local community, schools, and school districts. In his comments to faculty, Provost Wilcox made reference to the University of Florida 5-year teacher education program as a potential model. We argue that we do not need to follow the University of Florida, as that represents a path of institutional replication rather than unique development. In addition, USF is located in Tampa Bay, not Gainesville, and the needs of our community are very different from those in smaller cities.

USF was established in 1956 with a distinct mission to serve and engage a broad metropolitan community-an identity further strengthened as we consider our strengths as a consolidated college. We should embrace our identity as the University of South Florida-a distinct and unique metropolitan research-intensive, community engaged, and publicly serving College with

financially responsible undergraduate teacher education. One of the central recommendations in the 2017 *Imagining a New and Bright Future for the College* report is that we should focus on becoming “a model of a research-intensive community-engaged College of Education”. Our community has spoken very clearly as to the central importance of teacher education to the nearly 500,000 students served by our surrounding public-school districts. The School or College of Education should continue to offer undergraduate teaching degrees. They are at the core of our mission, our responsibility to our communities, and are important to our success in preparing graduate students for research and faculty positions in other schools and colleges of Education around the globe.

We are a strong contributor to a Research 1 Community Engaged University whose mission includes the statement: “As a public metropolitan research university, USF, in partnership with our communities, serves the people of Florida, the nation, and the world by fostering intellectual inquiry and outcomes that positively shape the future - regionally, nationally and globally.” This service mission is one of the reasons we are so proud to work at USF, proud to work at a university that so well describes itself as responsible to and for the public good. Yet the public outcry from community members, students, teachers, principals, and superintendents against cutting undergraduate teacher education is loud and clear. We question whether a university that ignores these cries or, perhaps more accurately works to mollify them with platitudes, can make any claim to being community engaged, let alone working for the public good.

Lack of Concrete Guidance

As a faculty, we are now tasked to ‘re-imagine’ a School of Graduate Education, without undergraduate teaching degree programs, on a very short timeline, and with a dramatically reduced budget. What is particularly unnerving is the lack of any concrete guidance as to how to proceed. Once the announcement of the closure of the college and disproportionate cut in funding was made, we were given absolutely no guidance as to how to proceed. Processes are currently being developed in response to requests and questions that emerge from the weekly meetings of our faculty and Faculty Policy Council. Yet, our plan is due to Provost Wilcox in mid-December. Given these dynamics, either the initial planning for implementation was absent, or intentionally chaotic. We do not know which, as we have not had any concrete guidelines from the Provost's office. Despite these challenges, we are also considering innovative and cost-cutting ways, like Education minors or honors elementary and secondary teaching programs, to continue offering undergraduate education.

We are leading scholars and researchers in the field of Education who prepare, train, and mentor our undergraduate and graduate students for successful careers in the field, and in our local schools. Our individual and collective commitments to preparing top teachers, practitioners, trainers, administrators, researchers, scientists, and scholars has not and will not change.

Conclusion

As faculty, we are excited to be consulted as we consider new possibilities for more substantive realignment of programs and collaborations in ways that move us to work in partnership with the local community. As USF Faculty from the College of Education, we also recognize that there are several structural challenges that must be addressed in ways that are authentic, transparent, and build trust.

With guidance, deliberation, and inclusive decision-making, faculty are ready to embark upon strategic and sometimes difficult choices. However, given the recent events, trust has been irreparably broken. We request a pause in the current process of re-alignment as we carefully consider the necessity of the “proposed” budget cuts and explore pathways that are responsive to our students, alumni, and stakeholders. We also need a pause in the re-alignment process to ensure transparency and the application of the USF Principles of Community.