



January 31, 2018

The Honorable Chris Sprowls
Florida House of Representatives, District 65

The Honorable Jeff Brandes
The Florida Senate, District 24

TRANSMITTED VIA EMAIL

Dear Representative Sprowls and Senator Brandes:

Thank you for the leadership that each of you provides to the Tampa Bay region and specifically to your home county of Pinellas. Your dedication to the improvement of the lives of all our region's citizens – and especially to the students of the USF System – has been, and continues to be, exemplary.

We are incredibly appreciative for the opportunity you extended last week to the academic and student leadership from all USF campuses to meet with you to better understand your vision for this legislative proposal and to hear their feedback. We value the open dialogue and transparency that you have displayed throughout this process. As we discussed last week, we have scheduled a series of community conversations about what might happen should CS/HB 423 become law and how we will manage that process. These conversations are being led by Trustees Stephanie Goforth and Byron Shinn, the leaders of our Campus Boards at USF St. Petersburg (USFSP) and USF Sarasota-Manatee (USFSM), respectively, and senior staff from across the USF System. Ms. Goforth and Mr. Shinn are residents of those respective communities who are heavily involved in their local business communities and each is an outspoken advocate for the students and faculty in their local areas.

As a Board of Trustees, we believe your accreditation consolidation proposal in CS/HB 423 provides the potential for significant benefits to our 50,000 students. Benefits like enhancing the reputation of the entire USF System and having all students graduate from a soon-to-be-designated Preeminent Research University, or helping students progress and graduate on a faster pace and with less debt. We support expanding the array of course options and majors at USFSP and USFSM including those in healthcare and engineering along with the benefits of access to doctoral and research opportunities in St. Petersburg and Sarasota-Manatee. We believe that the expansion of high-level research will help attract additional world-class faculty and students to every USF campus. We also see the opportunity to respond more quickly and efficiently to the high skilled workforce needs of our region by increasing our speed-to-market for new opportunities for students.

At the same time, we recognize that some members of our community are concerned about how a change like this could impact the individual USF System institution in their local area. Our community conversations are intended to help us better understand those concerns. Only by working together can we develop a brighter vision for the future – one that offers the greatest benefits to our students and the Tampa Bay region.

In your letter dated January 25, 2018, you invited the USF Board of Trustees and I to “**offer any other insights you may have on the impact of this proposal and the potential benefits to the students of USFSP & USFSM.**” On behalf of the Board of Trustees and our longstanding commitment to serving the entire Tampa Bay region, I offer the following thoughts about the accreditation consolidation proposed in CS/HB 423, as well as some assurances to the communities we collectively serve should the Legislature and Governor Scott see fit to enact this proposal into law during this legislative session.

The highest priority of the USF Board of Trustees (BOT) is the success of the students who entrust us with providing them a world-class education. If this proposal is enacted, the USF Board of Trustees will move forward in a spirit of transparency and collaboration, excited by the boundless opportunities that the Legislature and Governor Scott are providing to our university and our region. The members of the BOT and I are grateful that your proposal entrusts us with the responsibility to approve the implementation plan. We understand the gravity of this responsibility and we commit to working in partnership with the Tampa Bay Area Legislative Delegation, the Governor, the Board of Governors, and our local stakeholders to produce an implementation plan that we all can be proud of, while ensuring student success remains our guiding principle.

It is our understanding that the goal of CS/HB 423 is to create one Preeminent degree-granting institution called the University of South Florida. That single accredited institution, USF, would be comprised of three primary campuses with distinct local identities in Tampa, St. Petersburg and Sarasota-Manatee. Each campus would retain its current name and preserve its individual identity. Importantly, by bringing all three of our institutions together under one accreditation umbrella we will be more in line with other universities in the Florida State University System.

We believe the House proposal, if adopted and with the support of our local legislative delegation and community leaders, will help accelerate the achievements of each USF campus in the areas of student access, diversity, affordability, retention, graduation, and job-placement rates. Over the past five years, no other public national research university (including all 34 AAU and 81 Research 1 institutions) has matched USF's gains in 4-year and 6-year graduation rates and we expect that performance to extend across the USF System. USF's Tampa campus is also home to the most diverse student body in the USF System and has achieved national recognition for eliminating the freshman retention and degree completion gaps for first-time-in-college African American, Hispanic, White and Pell (low-income) students. Again, this is a point of pride that the BOT will expect to extend to USFSP and USFSM.

We know that you share our commitment that, above all else, we will do the right thing for all of our USF students. For example, current students in the USF System can rest assured that they will be allowed to continue their studies uninterrupted and on a timely path to graduation. While we are still early in the process, we believe there could be significant benefits to all students within the USF System if the proposal in CS/HB 423 is enacted into law. Some of those benefits include:

- All USF students, regardless of the campus where their primary instruction takes place, will graduate with a diploma from the University of South Florida, a nationally-recognized and highly-ranked Preeminent Research University.
- For the first time, the benefits of graduate research and doctoral opportunities would be available at all USF campuses.
- The success of every USF student will contribute equally towards maintaining USF's standing as a national top-tier research institution, a Preeminent Research University in Florida, and to achieve our vision to become an AAU institution. Therefore, each student, regardless of location, will benefit from the investments necessary to achieve and maintain each of those goals.
- All students attending any USF campus will have the opportunity to access every degree program offered across the entire USF System. The instruction in many of those programs could be offered on the local campus or through more convenient delivery systems.
- The need for students to transfer between USF institutions to seek the educational opportunities of their dreams will no longer be required. Upon admission to a unified USF, students would be free to move between campuses at their pleasure and at a time that best suits their educational and personal needs.

Finally, it is my pleasure to directly address the important questions you raised in your letter regarding specific commitments our BOT could make into expanding educational opportunities if your consolidation proposal becomes law. Specifically, you asked the following:

Can the USF Board of Trustees commit to the USFSP community that they will invest in these specific programs [engineering, healthcare and marine science] at USFSP if that barrier to opportunity is eliminated?

Yes. If the USF accreditation consolidation proposal in CS/HB 423 (or something substantially similar) becomes law in 2018, the USF Board of Trustees will follow SACSCOC (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges) guidelines and is committed to investing in engineering, healthcare and marine science programs in St. Petersburg. In addition, the BOT commits to delivering doctoral level education and research activities responsive to local needs and market demands.

Can the USF Board of Trustees commit to the USFSM community that they will invest in these specific programs [areas of strategic emphasis, nursing, STEM related fields, and for the first time, the opportunity to have doctoral students on campus] at the Sarasota/Manatee campus if the barrier to opportunity is eliminated?

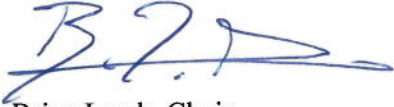
Yes. If the USF accreditation consolidation proposal in CS/HB 423 (or something substantially similar) becomes law in 2018, the USF Board of Trustees will follow SACSCOC guidelines and is committed to investing in areas of strategic emphasis, nursing and STEM related programs in Sarasota-Manatee. In addition, the BOT commits to delivering doctoral level education and research activities responsive to local needs and market demands.

If the Board of Trustees is in a position to commit to the opportunities referenced above, can you provide a timeline of the necessary steps to increase academic programs at USF Sarasota/Manatee and USF St. Petersburg to us prior to the end of the 2018 legislative session?

The Board of Trustees has been very encouraged by the possibilities presented in the consolidation proposal, however, we have refrained from taking any presumptive actions to implement any portion of the proposal before the full Legislature and Governor Scott have had an opportunity to act on the legislation. In response to your specific request, we can take the next step and I will direct leadership of the university to begin the feasibility study, which would include a timeline for investing in these new programs at USF St. Petersburg and USF Sarasota-Manatee consistent with a single accredited university. I can also assure you that, should the current proposal become law, a formal plan and timeline for execution of those investments will be adopted by the Board of Trustees as a component of the implementation plan required by the bill.

Thank you again for the consideration that you have given this proposal and for taking the time to solicit our input and ideas. We too were encouraged by the unanimous support expressed by the Board of Governors for the proposal, as they will be critical partners of the USF Board of Trustees in ensuring this successful transition for all of our students should this plan become law. If the USF Board of Trustees or I can be of further assistance to you, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Brian Lamb, Chair
USF Board of Trustees

cc: Members, Board of Governors, State University System of Florida
The Honorable Marshall Criser, Chancellor, State University System of Florida
Members, Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida
Dr. Judy Genshaft, President, University of South Florida System
Dr. Martin Tadlock, Interim Regional Chancellor, University of South Florida St. Petersburg
Dr. Karen Holbrook, Regional Chancellor, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee