

## **“From Practicing Law to President Law”**

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Thank you, Peter, for that kind introduction. I am delighted to be here and to support the Center for Excellence in Law and Higher Education Policy as it hosts this wonderful event.

Higher education is experiencing a great deal of change and its leaders are navigating complex challenges.

Many institutions across the country are wrestling with enrollment cliffs, shrinking budgets, and debates about free speech and civil discourse — just to name a few examples. And amid all of this, we are still committed to preparing our students for their future careers in rapidly changing fields and serving as a major resource for employers by filling the talent pipeline and ensuring that our graduates have the skills needed to be successful once they land that first job.

As a university president, there are several issues that I continuously think about, and wonder how institutions like my own can not only navigate them, but also emerge from them ready to enhance our commitment to serving our students, faculty, and staff. Without change, there are no new opportunities.

Today, I'd like to share my thoughts on four different areas within higher education that are experiencing a great deal of debate but are

also ripe with opportunities for the future — promoting lifelong learning and a sense of belonging, student mental health and wellness, attracting top talent, and navigating the public's perceptions of higher education.

Now, before I continue, allow me a few moments to share about my journey from a legal career to serving as a university president.

As Dr. Lake mentioned, I am the first USF graduate to serve as president of the university. I may be coming into this new role from a non-academic perspective, but the truth is, I have a longstanding history with my alma mater that goes back to the early years of my professional career.

When I came to the University of South Florida for the first time, I was just 18 years old — and like thousands of our students, I was the first person in my family to go to college.

To help pay for my degree, I got a job in the university's Division of Sponsored Research, which allowed me to take six credits per semester for free while supporting myself. I never dreamed that this decision would have such a profound impact on my life.

I knew that I wanted my education, but I also knew there was more beyond it. The educational and professional experiences I had through USF helped me realize I could center my career around helping others

achieve their goals. It took me almost 10 years to make it happen — but I earned my bachelor's degree.

After graduating, I cashed in my retirement plan to pay for law school at Stetson University. At first, I was worried that it would be challenging for me to keep up with the curriculum. But with the motivation and guidance from a wise advisor, I was reassured that if I wanted that law degree badly enough, I could have it.

I started my career as a lawyer and stayed involved in my community by volunteering my time with organizations like the local chamber of commerce and economic development councils — and even our local military community at MacDill Air Force Base.

I also served as part of the inaugural board of trustees at USF for 13 years, and later on the board of overseers at Stetson's College of Law. You do anything for that amount of time, and you pick up a lot about what's going on both at the university and in the broader landscape of higher education. In fact, these opportunities resulted in me adding another practice area to my law career — higher education. I regularly represented higher education institutions on matters of concern.

All these service opportunities were a way to give back, of course, but they also allowed me to try new things and learn about parts of my community I never would've discovered otherwise. It's these experiences that have given me a broader perspective of the role that higher education institutions play in our society.

It's a common misconception that our colleges and universities are a place you enroll at after graduating high school, work toward earning your degree for four years, and unless you enroll in graduate/professional school, that's the end of your journey with the institution.

Instead, I want everyone in our community to think of our university as an invaluable resource that can support their educational needs — regardless of where they are in life. For many, the pursuit of knowledge might not always mean enrolling in a traditional degree program, and higher education institutions are well-positioned to facilitate this.

It's an idea that we refer to as the lifelong affinity model — which includes programs at the university that connect with students as young as elementary school and up through their golden years.

We offer summer programming for K-12 students to help them learn about careers in high-demand fields, like cybersecurity. We also host pre-college programs that allow high school students to explore their academic interests, experience the college environment and grow their interest in pursuing higher education. And in fact, one of these programs is a summer honors institute and mock trial intensive hosted in partnership between USF's Judy Genshaft Honors College and Stetson University.

Microcredentialing is a trend in the business community. To reach professionals who seek opportunities outside of a traditional degree program, USF's Office of Corporate Training and Professional Education offers programming to help "upskill" employees at companies across the country — such as Amazon, Bristol-Myers Squibb, CAE USA, Centene (WellCare) Corporation, and Citibank.

To reach adult learners in our community, we are also home to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, a member-based learning community for adults aged 50-plus who seek low-cost classes, workshops, lectures, events, and social networking activities.

From a policy perspective, as president, I'm frequently meeting with business leaders and elected officials to demonstrate the long-term benefits of this approach. It can help support pressing needs within our workforce and economy such as early education and career exploration, upskilling, and professional development. The possibilities are endless.

Simply put, I want everyone in our communities to view USF as a resource that can help them pursue their goals and be successful in whatever they set out to accomplish. And along with ensuring we're offering the right programs and opportunities for our students — we must also ensure they can see themselves pursuing them.

As a first-generation college student, everything I set out to do during my time at USF was something I was experiencing for the first time. I

was fortunate to have a strong support system through my work at the Office of Sponsored Research and my boss, Bill Taft — who to this day I still consider to be one of my greatest mentors.

Without this support system giving me the courage to pursue my dreams and helping me navigate the challenges I faced along the way, my journey to graduation would have been much more difficult.

Nearly one-third of rising college freshmen are first-generation college students, and this is only one of the many important populations that our colleges and universities serve. Some of the additional groups we serve include Pell grant recipients, adult learners, student veterans/military-connected families, and students with unique abilities, just to name a few.

Higher education institutions across the country have reaffirmed their commitment to fostering an inclusive community on their campuses, so everyone feels a sense of belonging.

We are not committed to this ideal simply because it's the right thing to do — research shows that students who feel a sense of belonging at their institution perform better in their coursework and are more engaged on campus.

An institutional focus on promoting student belonging can lead to increased student retention, and in the long run, it can help with the recruitment of new students as well. As college and university

enrollments across the country continue to shrink, this is something that many institutions are paying close attention to.

The enrollment cliff isn't an issue impacting the University of South Florida directly — we actually saw a record number of admissions applications last year — 65,000 (a 30% increase) applicants applied for approximately 7,000 spots in our incoming class of first-year students.

What we are paying close attention to is how we can better reach underrepresented student populations and help them navigate the unfamiliar terrain that often accompanies the university admissions process.

As a public university, we aim to recruit and retain a student population that is reflective of the diverse communities that call our region home. And to do so, we need to be strategic in eliminating those common barriers to entry.

To give you an example of what this looks like in practice, since 2020, our university has doubled the size of its Guaranteed Admission Pathways Program — also known as GAPP — from nine to 18 high schools in six counties.

The program is designed to strengthen university-community engagement while increasing admissions opportunities for students from federally designated Title I high schools — those where high

numbers or high percentages of students come from low-income families, to secure a spot at USF by meeting GPA and standardized test score benchmarks.

GAPP helps demystify the admissions process by providing students from underrepresented and special populations with a clear glide path to entry.

We must take a deep look at the ecosystem we create for our prospective students, and the policies and environmental factors impacting them — such as costs/financial aid and degree planning and advising — and ensure they have access to the resources and support they need to flourish.

And along with promoting a sense of belonging, another important challenge higher education leaders are navigating is how to provide support to students who are wrestling with their mental health.

We know that being a great university isn't just about academic or research excellence — we need to create an environment where everyone can thrive, and that work starts with promoting health and wellness.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, we have learned some valuable lessons about investing in the health and well-being of our entire community and how to support our students through times of distress.



And because we are committed to prioritizing this work, our university created a new role of Chief Health Officer to better facilitate the critical conversations that lead to a healthier university community.

Research shows that the pandemic has taken a toll on the well-being of thousands of people, including high school and college students. At USF, the professionals who staff our university's Counseling Center are outstanding, but like many other colleges and universities, we experience staffing shortages, even though the demand for services continues to grow.

Our university is responding to this need by expanding the services we provide to our students. We recently introduced a virtual health and well-being platform (Timely Care), and other online services that can supplement our in-person counseling services. This program allows our students to access mental health care 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for free.

Students enrolled in our colleges and universities are especially vulnerable to mental health concerns — and our institutions should be doing everything we can to support them. Our mental well-being impacts everything we do and supporting our people will ensure they can live a healthy and productive life.

Earlier you heard me mention staffing shortages within our counseling center — but the truth is this issue also impacts other departments and

offices at the university. This is something that many colleges and universities across the country are struggling with as they begin to rethink how they hire and retain top talent at their institutions.

And for some departments — such as financial aid, for example — staffing shortages can impact an institution's ability to remain in compliance with federal regulations for administering financial aid programs. When you look at it from this perspective, attracting top talent to the institution isn't just an HR problem, it becomes a broader policy issue, too.

Early on in my presidency, I spent time on each of USF's three campuses to listen to our employees about their experiences and the challenges they faced in their roles. We have nearly 15,000 employees at USF, and it became clear to me that we can do more to support our people at every level, especially those who work hard on-campus day in and day out to support our facilities and operations.

Over the past couple of years, USF has implemented several human resources-related initiatives to invest in our people, including:

- Base salary increases and an increase of USF's minimum wage to \$15/hour.
- A program to cover tuition for dependents of employees.
- Adopting a hybrid, flexible work environment.
- Improved total rewards and competitive wage analyses.

- Enhanced employee recognition.
- An Employee Success Center with free and discounted leadership training available for career growth (live and online training).

All these factors can certainly impact the recruitment and retention of our employees, but they also help us reward their hard work and acknowledge the significant value they bring to our community.

These efforts have a direct influence on the morale and well-being of our employees, and that in turn supports our focus on being a great place to work. Modernizing our HR practices is important because our people are our greatest asset, and without them, we would not be able to maintain such a strong environment for learning and innovation.

And these efforts have already resulted in some national recognition. Last year, USF was recognized twice by Forbes as a Best Place to Work — in July, we were named one of America's best places to work for women, and in August, we were named an overall top employer within the state of Florida.

So, I've talked about our programs. Our students. Our employees. These items are top of mind for leaders in higher education because they have a direct impact on our success as an institution. We are continuously tasked with a broader goal of pursuing excellence — and we are pursuing this goal at so many different levels.

But what does pursuing excellence really look like, in practice, and how do you measure it? A common response to this question is higher education rankings and the benchmarks associated with them.

While there has been recent debate about whether rankings are an appropriate scorecard for comparing and evaluating colleges and universities, there are still a lot of metrics out there that leaders have to pay attention to — and several that we should continue to measure whether they are included in rankings or not, such as graduation rates, social mobility, and time to degree.

Whether it be through the data measured by governing bodies or rankings created by national entities like U.S. News and World Report, we are not pursuing rankings for their own sake. Instead, our focus is on how higher education institutions can reach new heights while demonstrating that our efforts are contributing something relevant and useful to the people in our communities.

And in today's climate, a lot of people are questioning why they should send their children to college. It can be expensive, and the return on investment isn't always clear. Many people are asking themselves, what is the real value of higher education?

It is because of this that I often find myself thinking about the public's perceptions of higher education and how through my role as a university president, I can better illustrate the value of earning a college degree.

In USF's case, we are a public research university, so one aspect of my role is telling the university's story and highlighting the services our institution provides and the impact we make both within our region and beyond. We need to continue getting the word out and showing people why our institution is worth investing in.

For example, one audience I frequently engage with is elected officials, to discuss the policy issues that impact our university and to rally support for new initiatives that will require both monetary investments and legislative approval.

A lot of the rigorous academic standards that we hold ourselves accountable to and aim to grow in require resources — more specifically, money.

For example, the resources that we ask for from the state and other funding sources can have a transformational impact on our students and researchers in areas such as hiring new faculty and hosting new programs. And the resources we secure can help us in more indirect ways, too, by funding activities such as capital improvements and maintenance and upkeep of our facilities.

We're not just asking for money for the sake of it, however. We're looking for efficiencies. With more resources, we can attract new talent, launch new initiatives, and better meet the needs of our communities.

Last year, USF celebrated a historic level of funding in the state budget, and that money is supporting our operating budget, facilities construction, and other maintenance priorities — aspects of the university that many don't think about because it's more “behind the scenes” and the outcomes are less apparent. To secure these funds, our university had to engage our policymakers in conversations about the state budget and how investments in our university are investments in our students and our communities.

Simply put, with additional resources, our higher education institutions can accomplish so much more. But leaders must make the effort to gain buy-in and support to make these things happen.

Another way that we can help shape the public's perception of higher education is by playing a more prominent role in the surrounding community. As a major social and economic engine, at USF we already do a lot in this area — but strengthening our connection to the community remains a key focus for our institution because we know we are better together.

We recently allocated additional resources to increase USF's footprint in the community, and we have welcomed a new Senior Vice President of University-Community Partnerships, who will be tasked with nurturing our university's relationships with businesses, nonprofits, and governments and building a strategy to further improve our community engagement.

It is this type of work that will improve the public's perception of our country's colleges and universities. When they see us actively involved in the community and lending our research and expertise toward the betterment of society, they will be able to better understand the invaluable role we play in building a better world.

With all these challenges — and more — looming on the horizon for higher education, it is incredibly important that our institutions have steady, stable, and supportive leadership.

As a university president, I am continuously asking myself how we can do things better. How can I empower our community to link arms and move forward together?

When I served on the university's board of trustees, my role was all about governance and strategic planning. As President, I get much more hands-on with solving the university's complex challenges. I'm more down in the weeds to make sure we can accomplish the goals laid out in our strategic plan.

I am continuously focused on ensuring that we are paying attention to the details. And to do this, I've held onto three key elements of my leadership style that I developed throughout my legal career.

The first is the importance of listening and maintaining open communication. As I mentioned earlier, one of the first steps I took as president was completing listening tours across our campuses,

colleges, and departments. I continue to do those even today as I discover even more projects and programs housed at the university.

I've found that when you maintain transparency with your people, they better understand the decisions being made at the executive level, and they are much more likely to follow your lead.

The second element is being nimble and welcoming new opportunities to collaborate with others. This is especially important when leading the institution through times of crisis.

Whether it be during a natural disaster, like a hurricane, or during more uplifting times when we can seize new opportunities, a willingness to be responsive and move quickly will serve you well as a leader.

For example, when Hurricane Ian struck the state of Florida last Fall, I stayed on campus, visiting with our Emergency Operations Center and students living on campus in our residence halls. This gave me a better understanding of everything that goes into our response efforts, and it was wonderful to see everyone in our community come together.

And as I mentioned, being nimble is an invaluable asset when opportunity strikes.

One of the great opportunities our university had in recent years was to partner with Stetson University to launch a direct admission and accelerated pathway to the College of Law. USF doesn't have a law



program, but this partnership empowers our students to make a seamless transition into their future legal careers and receive the advising and support they need to thrive.

And finally, the third element of my leadership style is the importance of community building. More specifically, the importance of building a strong team around you.

When I talk about effective leadership, I make it a point to mention that no one person can accomplish everything by themselves. Every great leader has a talented team surrounding them.

I believe in empowerment. I believe in providing resources. I believe in having a strategic plan that's inspirational and that everybody can agree on, and that allows us to all walk in the same direction to accomplish those goals. And I believe that when all of that happens, as a leader you get out of the way and just make it happen.

All these factors have served me well throughout both my legal career and my time in higher education. They have allowed me to focus on the bigger picture, and think beyond what was done yesterday, so our institution can create a clearly defined vision for the future.

We often think of higher education institutions as places where students attend to earn their degrees and enter the workforce. Where our faculty teach courses and conduct research within their respective

disciplines. But our colleges and universities can offer so much more to transform lives and shape the future.

When I talk with people in the community about USF's impact, I make it a point to mention that our university does more than teach students how to use tools and systems.

We give them the background and thought processes they need to think critically, conduct sound research, and adapt to rapidly evolving industries. We help them become agile and respond to emerging challenges they'll confront in the future.

In addition to our robust knowledge base, higher education institutions have a wealth of expertise and cutting-edge technologies at our disposal that we share with businesses and partners across our region, to help identify issues and develop sustainable solutions.

Now is the time for higher education institutions to position themselves for the future. The workforce is changing quickly. Technology is rapidly evolving. And when we train our students for their future careers — we are preparing them for jobs that don't exist yet.

When it comes to workforce development, higher education institutions have a role to play on both sides of the equation. There is the training and skill building of the employees, but there are also opportunities to help up-and-coming businesses implement new research and technologies so their efforts can be successful.

We have an invaluable role to play if we open ourselves up to being a resource to everyone in the community — and remain open to the creative solutions that will solve the unimaginable challenges of our future.

I recognize that in these turbulent times, many of us are unnerved by the rapid developments that seem to be occurring one after the other in higher education, and that we are anxiously awaiting new developments. Believe me — when serving as a university president, there is never a dull moment.

But of all the things that I've had the pleasure of doing in my life, serving as the University of South Florida's president is one of the most fulfilling. I started my professional career here, stayed connected over the years, and now I've come full circle.

What I truly enjoy about this role is I have a front-row seat in the pursuit of new knowledge and the development of groundbreaking innovations. I have the privilege of learning something new every day and encouraging our students to do the same.

The scholars and leaders who have dedicated their careers to advancing higher education are shaping the future. Not only through the students they educate, but the research they conduct and the businesses and community organizations they partner with.

We may not know everything about what the future will bring for higher education, but our colleges and universities are filled with passionate, dedicated, and incredibly smart people who are committed to building a better world.

And I am honored to serve at the forefront, leading one of these great institutions in the road ahead.