Dear colleagues,

On September 25 I met with faculty at an Academic Senate-sponsored open forum, and this message will recap the topics discussed and information shared.

The morning of the open forum, Inside Higher Ed and the Chronicle of Higher Education featured two items that that centrally concern what we do as an academic community. The Inside Higher Ed article features an open classroom that two of our faculty planned for September 23 until it was blocked by Zoom—citing compliance to anti-terrorism laws—and subsequently, by Facebook and YouTube. (I hope you’ve read President Mahoney’s communications about how and why the university came out in support of the class under academic freedom.)

The second article, in the Chronicle of Higher Education, concerns a federal executive order signed on September 22 that bans federal grants to institutions that promote what the order calls “any form of race or sex stereotyping or any form of race or sex scapegoating.” It goes on to single out “instructors and materials teaching that men and members of certain races, as well as our most venerable institutions, are inherently sexist and racist”—and asserts that “such ideas may be fashionable in the academy, but they have no place in programs and activities supported by federal taxpayer dollars.”

The developments featured in both articles should concern us deeply, because they block the flow of ideas at the university’s core. A university without academic freedom, and without the freedom to ask and support difficult questions—especially questions about itself, or any “venerable institution”—isn’t a university.

Now more than ever, we all need to stay engaged and vigilant. Above all, let’s recommit to the values of open dialogue and challenging, uncomfortable discussion and debate. It’s how we learn to broaden and sharpen our perspectives, to ask better questions, and to reach better decisions. Toward this end, I’m especially grateful for the vitality of shared governance at San Francisco State, and I want to thank Senate Chair Teddy Albinia and Vice Chair Jackson Wilson for facilitating this open forum. The idea for the open forums came out of last year’s Academic Senate Executive Committee, to which I’m also grateful. I’m further grateful to the nearly 150 colleagues who signed up for this open forum and who sent in nearly 100 questions, which were ably summarized and shared by Chair Albinia and Vice Chair Wilson. As we move into another year of unpredictable conditions, I expect to hold more forums regularly in order to maintain open communication.

**Budget**

Among the questions sent in advance, it isn’t surprising that the first issue on many peoples’ minds is budget. At my open forum on June 5, I shared the news that the university was then expecting a 10% reduction in the Governor’s allocation to the CSU. Subsequently, all cabinet areas were asked to undertake 10% budget cuts, and in Academic Affairs, we worked hard to cut our costs and meet our share of the nearly $40 million dollar deficit that hit the campus: we
reduced budgets for lecturers and operating expenses, and we pulled back one-time carryforward funds in order to cover the gap between our reduced budget and our anticipated, actual needs until we could make longer-lasting changes.

As hard as we all worked to reduce our costs, about 90% of the institution’s budget is committed to salaries—so there was a limit to how far we could reduce before we reached a place where our only option was cutting salaries and jobs. Let me make it clear: this was a last and worst option. The pain it causes an institution and those who have devoted themselves to it is deep and long-lasting. While I can’t diminish that pain, I do want to acknowledge it, and to do my best to answer your understandable questions.

Last week some of you may have seen CFO Jeff Wilson’s budget update presentation to the Academic Senate and University Budget Committee, along with HR AVP Ingrid Williams’ presentations on the layoffs. The information that follows draws from them, as well as clarifying the implications of both for Academic Affairs.

As of course you know, earlier this month 131 of our employees were notified of their layoffs, as were the unions with employees who were affected. This is a process that follows the contract; and by the contract, layoffs occur by classification, not individuals. They also don’t follow funding source, which is why grant-funded positions were included—even though, as many of you have rightly pointed out, such layoffs would not save the university money. Two of you asked why layoffs seemed to affect junior staff disproportionately: this is because the order of layoff is also determined by the contract, in ascending order of seniority. But I know: it’s very painful to see this come to these valued and vulnerable staff.

The next stage in the layoff process is a “meet and confer” with the unions whose employees are affected: the issue of grant-funded employees will be discussed then. I know that faculty and particularly PIs are very concerned about these staff, and I want to emphasize first, that HR is aware of these concerns and second, that we need to respect the process, even while offering our support and kindness to the staff who are understandably upset and hurt by it.

I so wish there had been other avenues open to us: furloughs, for example. We pushed for this. But the campus isn’t permitted to initiate furloughs on its own. Instead, the system needs to approve furloughs, and it did not approve them. That was this year—but perhaps it might for next year, particularly if there are further cuts, as we’ve been told to expect.

I also want to say something about MPPs—or managers and administrators (such as vice presidents, deans, associate deans, associate vice presidents, budget officers, and other managers, as shown on the Academic Affairs Organizational Chart). We’ve made a commitment in Academic Affairs to cut costs by reducing MPPs. A number of open MPP positions will not be filled—including one that reported directly to me—and there are other MPP positions that are being either let go or transferred to other divisions; this is an ongoing process, and it doesn’t follow the same timeframe as staff layoffs because MPPs are not covered by a union. Further MPP reductions are going to need to be considered in winter 2021. When MPPs are let go, the work under them needs to be reorganized, along with the reporting lines of those whom they manage.
I’m working with the deans and other academic leaders to plan how we’ll organize the work of the division in the immediate and the longer-term. It won’t be easy. But I know we’re all strongly committed to transparency and consultation as we move ahead.

But even our current layoffs and MPP reductions won’t cover our budget gap—and we need to keep this in focus as we plan for the year and years ahead, when we anticipate further cuts. As I just shared, this year in Academic Affairs we used one-time funds to cover the costs of lecturers and operating expenses after our nearly 10% cut. But those same funds won’t be available to us next year, so we need to create longer-term savings that will stabilize our budget. In consultation with the deans and President Mahoney, I made the difficult decision to suspend tenure-track faculty hiring this year, which will allow us to recuperate salary savings; we’re also suspending the presidential awards. These actions will narrow our budget gap, but they won’t close it. To do that, we need to look more closely at the costs of our operations.

This brings us to an update on work that I previewed at our June open forum.

Over the summer the Executive Committee of the Academic Senate came together with the Academic Affairs Council (comprising the deans and associate vice presidents who report directly to me) to look closely at our budget, with three main goals in mind:

1. Identify cuts that will create sustained and sustainable cost reductions
2. Align spending with our core mission
3. Plan to emerge from this crisis by
   a. Acting strategically (rather than reactively)
   b. Using shared governance and open dialogue in a process of consultation
   c. And then building in a review and assessment process to make sure our actions really meet our goals

The result of that work is what we’re calling a “Portfolio of Imperfect Options”—recognizing no single one of these options will give us a complete fix, but the right balance will. Finding that balance will take broad discussion and serious engagement, starting with a deep-dive into the finances of Academic Affairs itself, so everyone understands where we are and why. The budget and portfolio were shared with the University Chairs’ Council last week, and Senate Chair Albiniaiak and I will be taking them to the college councils in the weeks ahead for more in-depth discussion; after that, they’ll be further shared with faculty and staff in open forums, the Academic Senate, and the University Budget Committee, all to generate discussion, to gather feedback, and to help identify the right balance of solutions. This is why Chair Albiniaiak and I are doing this together: while I recognize that I’m ultimately responsible for Academic Affairs’ fiscal health, I also want to use the mechanisms of shared governance in order to open up discussion around how to best achieve that goal. Toward that end, Chair Albiniaiak and the other members of Ex Com—together with the deans and academic leaders in the Academic Affairs Council—are critical participants, sounding boards and co-creators of smart solutions. I also want to recognize that Chair Albiniaiak and the Senate Executive Committee can gather faculty and staff feedback that may be more candid and direct than people want to share with me or the deans; and with their help, we can better interpret, understand, and act on that feedback. Over
the course of this semester, I hope you’ll take advantage of opportunities to join the discussion, to weigh in, and to help us all reach the right balance of options moving forward.

Planning for 2021 (online learning, and faculty and student success)

As you know, Chancellor White has announced that our instruction for spring will be largely remote. As much as we all want to return to in-person operations with our students and colleagues, we need to do all we can to keep ourselves and our communities safe, particularly since we’re expecting a COVID resurgence in the winter. What we did this fall wasn’t easy—and it didn’t happen without hiccups—but I’m incredibly proud of how well we worked together to pull off a nearly entirely remote curriculum, while also allowing limited campus access for some in-person activities under safe conditions. And most of all, we’ve been able to prioritize and protect our communities’ health, as reflected in the low number of COVID cases we have experienced, relative to the numbers on many other campuses with less restrictive plans.

As we plan for the spring, the chairs are preparing their requests for limited in-person exceptions, which will be even further restricted by the guidelines of the San Francisco Department of Public Health. We are also creating provisions for graduate student research, as well as limited, safe equipment use. But again, we’re driven by the goal to restrict the number of people on campus to the absolute minimum and to monitor health and safety conditions as carefully as we can.

One of the success stories of the semester and year is the work that our faculty have done preparing their classes for online delivery while also creating virtual learning environments that are equitable, engaging, and student-centered. CEETL has played a big role in this, and they’ve lived up to their name— as the Center for Equity and Excellence in Teaching and Learning—by insisting that excellence doesn’t happen without equity. In a presentation to the Academic Senate this week, Maggie Beers shared the record-breaking levels of faculty participation in CEETL’s summer and fall programming—and students are giving very positive feedback already. We should anticipate that, even after we resume in-person instruction, our experience with virtual modalities will change how we teach and learn. For example, I hope we can think further about developing hybrid and flexible delivery models that respect students’ learning needs as well as the complex circumstances of their lives, work schedules, and commutes—which can make it hard for them to come to campus every day.

I was asked whether the university is considering expanding the virtual tools it offers faculty. iLearn has been expanded to include a range of tool options, and faculty have been developing asynchronous video content at an impressive rate—I’m told that we’ve seen 1,000% more video content uploaded than in the previous fall semester. The university supports a number of alternative media development tools that as CourseStream, Camtasia, Adobe Premier, and Kanopy. Anyone who’s interested in learning more about these options should reach out directly to Academic Technology. We’ve also rolled out platforms for providing software access to students.

While celebrating the remarkable work of our faculty, I don’t want to minimize how challenging it is—particularly for those with children at home or who are experiencing barriers to research, scholarship, creative activities, or community engagement due to COVID. Following federal
mandate, we approved Covid related leaves for a number of faculty members affected by caregiving responsibilities. And The Professional Development Committee is planning programming over the course of the year to support faculty who are struggling to accomplish their RSCA goals. Following the Academic Senate’s resolution, probationary faculty now have the option of taking a neutral year in their RTP clock, which is meant to alleviate some pressure. In addition, as Provost, I placed a letter in every faculty member’s PAF to contextualize the challenges that the pandemic has created for our faculty’s professional lives during this time. Carleen Mandolfo, AVP for Faculty Affairs, is working with the faculty affairs committee on an updated resolution meant to address these continuing concerns, as well as emphasizing how the two pandemics – viral and racist -- are disproportionately affecting the professional productivity of women and faculty of color. There are other resources available; in particular, I want to recommend the Employee Assistance Program, which offers a range of resources for coping with the stressful conditions that are affecting us all right now.

I was also glad to see a number of questions about student success. Before the pandemic, Lori Beth Way, Dean of Undergraduate Education and Academic Planning, was awarded a major grant from the Stupski Foundation, which provides new resources to support student success. As of this year, all new first year students have an assigned advisor. There are also Peer mentors assigned to A2 classes this semester. And we’ve rolled out online student support in tutoring and advising to keep students engaged even while online. Use of online tutoring has been particularly strong.

I also got a question about student well-being as we approach the election and the many stressors it entails. So I reached out to Dean of Students Danny Glassman to ask how his office is supporting students, and he told me about a new site they’ve launched, YOU @ SF State that helps support student health and wellness virtually. Student Affairs is also offering ongoing support to students through Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), Dean-on-Call, and other services, which are all using virtual platforms. The election is very much on all our minds these days. I’ll share these resources with you as you become aware of student stress. I also wanted to let you know that Associated Students has been very active around the election, and they’ve launched a voter registration and get out the vote drive under an initiative that they’re calling “Chomp the vote!” Information is on their website and will also be linked in the letter I’ll be sending out.

To close, I want to thank you for all that you do for our students and academic community during this time of extraordinary challenges. To end where I began, shared governance makes our university strong, and your participation is vital.

I hope that your fall semester is off to a promising start.

Best wishes,
Jennifer

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