Dear colleagues:

Congratulations on reaching the end of this extraordinarily demanding and exhausting semester. I want to acknowledge the commitment and resilience that you, our valued faculty, staff, and administrators, have shown over these last months. It’s been a semester of pain and loss, as the COVID crisis has continued to ravage our families and communities, and as our campus has responded to significant budget cuts by laying off employees and reducing offices and operations. As well as responding to the current crisis, we’ve been challenged to reimagine our future in the post-COVID age; this message will update you on important developments related to this reimagining process.

What follows is quite a long message. It will be archived here, for those who may want to read it not now but later—if you do choose not to read further, I want to reiterate the sincere thanks that come again at the end. I know how hard you’ve worked under the most challenging circumstances, and I’m grateful for your valuable service in support of our students and our mission.

As you may know, this semester I’ve consulted extensively with faculty and staff about the “Portfolio of Imperfect Options” that the Academic Senate Executive Committee and the Academic Affairs Council developed to address Academic Affairs' budget gap. (My earlier messages describe the process leading to the “Portfolio,” along with its intended outcomes.) As well as summarizing those consultations and charting next steps, I want to align the “Portfolio” with other planning processes already or soon underway, including our Student Success Plan and Academic Master Plan, because I believe that budgeting only succeeds when grounded in a larger sense of institutional direction and purpose that such plans articulate.

Throughout this semester, Senate Chair Teddy Albinia and I have taken the “Portfolio of Imperfect Options” to faculty and staff in open forums, college councils, the University Chairs’ Council, the Academic Senate, and the University Budget Committee, which have all generated valuable feedback. I’m grateful to Chair Albinia and the members of the Academic Senate’s Executive Committee for helping to interpret that feedback in ways that have strengthened the process and refined its outcomes.

From these discussions, I’ve heard several clear messages. The first recognizes that Academic Affairs must undertake both administrative and instructional cuts, and that we must preserve educational quality and prioritize student success. The second emphasizes the need for consistency and transparency in applying budget cuts to departments, colleges, and support units. At the same time, departments and colleges have also asked for room to develop their own cost-reduction solutions by drawing on their faculty’s deep-seated experience and creativity. I’ve also received questions about the timeline and process to be followed, which I’ll try to address one by one below.

Administrative Cuts
An institution that attempts to balance its budget through instructional cuts alone risks seriously devaluing its mission. At the same time, we’ve also seen how costly non-instructional cuts can be to the entire university— for example, when cuts to the university’s advising center threaten student success, or cuts to the admissions office harm student recruitment and enrollment. Costs and cuts need to be balanced in relation to one another, like interlinked parts of a complex ecosystem. Administrative cost-cutting plays an important role in the “Portfolio of Imperfect Options,” from the reduction of management positions to the merging of offices and sharing of resources. Some of this planning is already underway, as we attempt to streamline work following layoffs. In the new semester, I intend to create a staff leadership work group to help identify tasks or functions that can be redefined or eliminated. In addition, a faculty-led task force reporting to the University Budget Council has offered cogent recommendations for reducing the administrative costs of Research Service Organizations (RSOs), and I expect to enlist a small work group to plan their implementation once they have been approved.

Aligning Budget with Mission
In 2018-2019, over 140 faculty members, staff, and administrators from across the institution worked to develop a framework for an Academic Master Plan. That framework was shared with campus stakeholders and cabinet-area leadership teams in spring 2020, until COVID shut the campus. In the intervening period, the question that drove the AMP process— "What kind of future does San Francisco State University imagine for itself academically?"— has become even more relevant. The AMP framework articulates an academic mission dedicated to social justice through educational equity, and it asserts the synergistic power of the engaged teacher-scholar to redefine disciplinary knowledge within an equity framework. While the Academic Master Plan was never meant to direct budget cuts, it can help identify our core academic mission that must be preserved and strengthened. Its findings, recommendations, and completion timeline will be shared broadly with the San Francisco State community beginning in spring 2021.

Strongly aligned with the Academic Master Plan, San Francisco State’s Student Success Plan anchors our longstanding commitment to social justice through educational equity in the ambitious context of the CSU’s Graduation Initiative 2025. Our campus is united in the aim to retain and graduate more of our students, and to eliminate the equity gaps that divide them. San Francisco State is also preparing to develop its first-ever Strategic Enrollment Management plan to stabilize student enrollments—from new student recruitment to continuing student retention— by more effectively aligning our efforts, building on our strengths, and telling our story as a university.

The Academic Master Plan, Student Success Plan, and forthcoming Strategic Enrollment Management Plan affirm the university’s commitments to our students, our communities, and our service to the public good. As Academic Affairs builds a new budget, it joins these efforts in affirming our core while charting our collective future.

Short-Term Goals: Consistency and Transparency
In the spirit of transparency that’s driven our budget planning process, I want to be clear about our goals as well as our challenges. We face a confluence of three factors: precarious
state funding, volatile student enrollment, and an inherited structural deficit. Even if state funding produces a better-than-expected allocation, we still need to realign our costs with revenues that have declined over years. This summer, Academic Affairs must submit a balanced budget for the Academic Year 2021-22, which will mean closing a budget gap currently estimated at $3.8M (this figure is explained in slide 5 from the December budget presentation linked here). Across-the-board cuts could produce immediate results; but even before the COVID crisis, Academic Affairs struggled with a structural deficit that will require thoughtful planning to correct. The right mix of short-term and longer-term solutions will meet our need for both immediate correction and lasting stability; it will also address requests I've heard for consistency and transparency on the one hand and collaboration and planning on the other. In the short term, I see a need to apply consistent targets, goals, and guidelines across departments and colleges, which will create fair and equitable expectations. These include targets around class sizes, minimum enrollments, and accountability for WTUs devoted to research, service, and assigned time. Also in the short term, I see a need to limit curriculum development of non-required classes and new programs in order to prioritize teaching in areas required for student degree progress.

While short-term solutions such as these would effectively control costs, some may involve negative tradeoffs that make them less desirable for the longer term. While in place, though, they could allow departments and colleges time for planning that requires more extensive collaboration, review, and shared governance.

**Long-Term Goals: Collaboration and Faculty Ownership**

More than short-term cuts, long-term sustainability requires planning. At the program level, such planning supports the development of curricula that balance enrollments, achieve equitable distribution of faculty assignments, and prioritize teaching in areas of high student need. A Senate task force is currently preparing recommendations around faculty work assignment equity that will advance the goals of fairness, transparency, and shared governance, both within programs and across the campus. In addition, chairs have asked for better financial data and training to help them build schedules and understand curricular costs. Chairs will play an especially critical role in helping us emerge from our current crisis and create new foundations for future strength, and I recognize the need to invest in their leadership and support.

At the college and cross-college level, several years of academic program review data also allow us to consider our future mix of academic programs in light of enrollment trends and workforce projections. Integrated planning for our academic programs needs to be aligned with multi-year faculty hiring plans. Drawing on the strength of our shared governance, I believe this work will ground the future stability and growth of our academic core.

**Timeline and Next Steps**

The actions I’ve described here, which are further elaborated in my presentations on the “Portfolio of Imperfect Options,” are currently under consideration. (I welcome your feedback and questions, which can be submitted here.) I expect to finalize and detail our specific actions in a directive memo that I will send out in late January, after the Governor releases his initial budget proposal on January 11, 2021--which, together with new student
application numbers, will offer the first indication of our likely budget for 2021-22. I will follow up the directive memo by meeting again with faculty and chairs to detail our next steps. While these actions will bring changes, they will not (and are not intended to) eliminate the 3/3 teaching assignment that most of our faculty maintain; nor are they meant to institute unnecessary and permanent cuts that do irreparable harm. To ensure that these actions meet the goal of stabilizing Academic Affairs’ budget and establishing long-term sustainability, I expect to build in a rigorous, transparent assessment process and to seek your feedback at regular intervals.

San Francisco State has exceptional academic strengths and remarkable faculty who are passionately committed to our mission; our goal should be not simply to survive this crisis but to draw on our strengths and build a solid foundation for our future thriving. Toward this end, I know that we can pull through this current challenge and emerge stronger by working together.

I want to thank you again for your tireless efforts on behalf of our students, and to wish you a peaceful and healthy holiday break.

With gratitude and respect,

Jennifer Summit
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
San Francisco State University