

Opening Remarks at USF Town Hall

Remarks delivered by USF President Rhea Law

September 13, 2023

Good morning! Thank you for joining us for the university-wide town hall for faculty and staff. We sincerely appreciate your time, and we are excited to discuss ongoing important initiatives that will advance our university's bold path forward.

We are now in week four of the fall semester, and it already feels like so much has happened. Our residence halls in Tampa and St. Petersburg are 100% full, we've welcomed another high-achieving class of new undergraduate students — nearly 6,900 in total — and we've endured our region's first major hurricane of the season.

It's certainly a busy time here at the University of South Florida, and before I continue, I'd like to take a moment to reflect on everything we've accomplished together these past several months.

USF's upward trajectory is being recognized at the national level. This summer, our university reached one of the most significant milestones in our nearly 70-year history. We received an invitation to join the Association of American Universities, a prestigious group

of 71 leading public and private research universities in the United States and Canada.

AAU universities make up just 3% of all four-year universities in the U.S. — and USF is the first public university in Florida to be invited in nearly 40 years, since the University of Florida joined in 1986. We are also the fifth youngest institution to join the AAU and one of only six member institutions founded after 1950.

There are many benefits to our university joining this prestigious organization. USF's membership in the AAU will provide more opportunities for federal research funding; help us attract even more top talent; and increase the value of a degree for our students because they are earning it from a world-class institution now included among the ranks of America's leading research universities.

Our membership in the AAU will also open doors for our faculty and staff to connect, collaborate, and contribute to broader discussions with peers at fellow member institutions. These opportunities will allow our university community to make an even greater impact in the future.

As USF's visibility continues to grow, so too have the resources we've received to advance our mission and vision.

This year's state budget represents the largest operational increase in the university's history. We received a \$63.3 million recurring increase to USF's operational budget to support the work of each of our three campuses and USF Health.

USF is once again among the top institutions in the State University System's performance-based funding model, which measures universities on a series of student success-based metrics. We are the only SUS institution to finish in the top four every year since the model was implemented in 2014, and our position in the standings resulted in an allocation of more than \$50 million to our university, an increase of nearly \$15 million from last year.

And for the second year in a row, USF has broken records in philanthropic support. Last fiscal year, USF received more than \$157 million in gifts from over 37,500 donors — which shows that our community recognizes our university's upward trajectory and the value of supporting the success of our students, faculty, staff, and programs.

And because of USF's commitment to being a great place to work and to providing an outstanding employee experience, we have recently earned national recognition from Newsweek and Forbes for being one of our nation's best places to work.

All these accomplishments are a reflection of just how far we've come as an institution. USF's visibility in the national landscape has been one of the biggest hurdles we've had to overcome. I know all of you do, but many people don't realize just how remarkable our university is, or all that we've accomplished in a relatively short period of time.

But thanks to your hard work — that is no longer the case. Our nation's top universities recognize that USF has emerged as one of them. They now consider us to be a peer — and there are so many amazing things in store for our journey ahead.

As we embark on this shared journey, we must remain focused on how we can maximize the impact of our membership in the AAU, because this isn't the end. It's the beginning of an exciting new chapter at the University of South Florida — one fueled by continuous improvement and our continued pursuit of excellence.

To ensure that we continue to propel our university forward, we have outlined key initiatives that will guide us in this next chapter.

First and foremost, we remain focused on maximizing the success of our students. Our university is committed to providing our students with the resources, support, and opportunities they need to thrive academically and personally — both here at USF and beyond.

Additionally, we will continue to support faculty excellence, retain our top performers and recruit even more bright minds to join our great university. Those efforts include recruiting and retaining faculty members in academic programs that are aligned with our university's strategic plan, such as health sciences, environmental and oceanographic sciences, global and national security, and others.

As I mentioned before, USF's invitation to join the AAU will create new opportunities to expand our research activities and other scholarly endeavors, and we want to invest even more in this important work. Our faculty's research contributions continue to make a global impact, and by increasing our interdisciplinary collaborations and pursuing new opportunities to engage with

federal agencies, we can do even more to solve global challenges, fuel innovation, and transform lives.

We are also taking steps to enhance and modernize our HR practices, to better support your needs as USF employees, and to ensure our university remains a great place for our people to work, learn, and grow. That includes our efforts to ensure USF is supported by a strong and sustainable financial base, fueled by a new budget model that is strategically aligned and transparent for those who are making decisions on behalf of their teams.

Our institution's impact will not just be limited to our three campuses. USF is an integral part of the communities we serve, and we are enhancing our commitment to working together with our business and community partners because we know we are better *together*.

Our university's partnerships are a two-way street. Our students benefit from the hands-on learning opportunities available through these organizations, and our partners benefit from having access to USF's research expertise, our state-of-the-art technologies, and our talented graduates who help fill pressing workforce needs. Your work helps fuel these partnerships, and we look forward to nurturing

our existing relationships in the community and forging even more collaborations in the future.

And speaking of community, on the horizon looms a wonderful opportunity for our university to bring people together, and that is through our new on-campus stadium, which is expected to open in fall 2026. Just last week, we announced a historic \$25 million gift from Tampa General Hospital and received approval to move forward with the project from the Florida Board of Governors.

Across the country, we have seen many universities — several of whom are fellow AAU members — be successful in both academics and athletics. We can do the same here at USF.

Our vision for a stadium is not just a project that will benefit our football, women's lacrosse, and other athletics teams. The stadium will transform the USF student experience and provide a compelling reason for our alumni, Bulls fans, and community members throughout the Tampa Bay region to visit our campus and stay engaged with the university. It will be a rallying point that brings us together in ways we never have been before and inspires the next generation to pursue higher education — right here at USF.

The stadium will enhance the visibility of our university's brand both locally and on a national stage. It will serve as a powerful recruiting tool for students and faculty as we raise USF's overall profile. This visionary project will lift USF to new heights, creating a brighter future for our university and our region.

In addition to the on-campus stadium, we are building momentum for the future — not only through the initiatives I just mentioned but also through several campus growth projects, such as the recently completed Student Health and Wellness Center and the new home of the Judy Genshaft Honors College.

And we're not done — our university will soon open the first-ever student center and residential housing complex in Sarasota-Manatee, and we are pleased to continue our planning efforts for a new Environmental and Oceanographic Sciences research and teaching facility in St. Petersburg that received significant funding from the legislature this past session.

While we are very excited about all these new projects, we have not lost sight of the importance of investing in existing facilities that support the needs of our students, faculty, and staff every day. We are actively working to balance these infrastructure projects and to

better identify and prioritize pressing needs in the future, which we're going to talk about in more detail later on.

We are proud of our university's continued progress, but there is still more work to be done. We have our sights set on reaching the top 25 of all public universities and pursuing excellence in all aspects of the university — for the betterment of our students, research, and the communities we serve. I know that by linking arms and working together, we will get there!

Now, we know where we want to go, and how are we going to get there? You all know I'm a big fan of forward motion, and thanks to your hard work, we've moved from creating a glide path to building our launch pad for the future, which focuses on several important aspects included in our university's strategic plan.

That is why we are here today. Communication is a key part of my leadership style, and today's town hall is an opportunity for my leadership team and me to provide valuable information that supports your work and to hear about issues that are important to you.