

# **Chair Weatherford and President Law Comments on Current Events and Maintaining a Safe Environment on Campus**

*As Prepared for Delivery*

USF Board of Trustees Meeting | Tuesday, December 5, 2023

## **Chair Will Weatherford**

Today is the first time our board has met since the horrific attacks in Israel back in October. I would be remiss if we did not mention those events and recognize how they have impacted members of our community and events on our campuses.

First, let me reiterate what President Law and I shared previously with the university community, which is that USF condemns the attacks by Hamas. All senseless, deadly acts of violence and terrorism have no place in our society. Our thoughts continue to be with all those who have been directly affected in some way.

Since the October attacks, there have been several events held on our campuses related to the ongoing issues in the Middle East. These types of rallies or protests are not unusual on a college campus, and we have seen them before many times over the years at USF on a wide range of subjects that are often controversial or highly sensitive.

During these events, the views expressed may be upsetting or offensive to some members of our community. While our obligation as a public university is to uphold the constitutional right of free speech and open dialogue, we want to be clear that the groups holding events do not speak on behalf of our university and USF does not endorse the content of their speech.

Because these kinds of activities are not new to us, our staff are well-trained and experienced in how to handle these situations. They are working day and night to ensure that all gatherings remain peaceful, do not disrupt academic experiences and university operations, and do not violate any laws or university policies.

Our priority remains maintaining a safe and healthy campus environment. Our message to students, faculty and staff continues to be that USF is a place

where we treat each other with respect, empathy and compassion, even if we disagree.

Now I'd like to provide an opportunity for President Law to speak a bit more about our university's response.

### **President Rhea Law**

Thank you, Chair Weatherford. First, let me reiterate my condemnation of the Hamas attacks, and express my deep concern for all innocent civilians who are affected by this tragedy.

I also want to acknowledge that, for those in our community who have deep ties to Israel and the Middle East, these events, and the rhetoric surrounding them, continue to be a source of pain, fear, sadness, and anxiety. We recognize that passionately held beliefs associated with the conflict in the Middle East inevitably lead to opinions and ideas expressed that upset some members of our community and raise questions about how such speech can be permitted.

As a public institution, USF is obligated by the First Amendment to permit such speech and peaceful assembly, subject only to reasonable limits upon the time, place, and manner within which the assembly and speech take place. We are committed to safeguarding the First Amendment rights of all members of our community, while at the same time making clear that the groups and individuals exercising those rights do not speak for our university and USF does not endorse the content of their speech.

While the First Amendment may prevent the university from mandating civility and respect in all instances, it is our firm expectation that all members of the USF community always exhibit these qualities in their interactions. This expectation underscores our collective dedication to upholding the core values that define our institution.

To be explicitly clear, the safety of the USF community is our highest priority. Violence and discrimination, including harassment and intimidation, will not be tolerated on our campuses. Incidents of antisemitism, Islamophobia, hatred, and bigotry have no place in our society. The university has strict policies designed to combat all of these, and we remain committed to enforcing all laws and policies to swiftly address any violations we identify on our campuses. We strongly encourage anyone who experiences or witnesses such behavior to report it to the USF Police Department or the appropriate university department for immediate review.

I want to expand on the steps we are taking to keep our campuses safe and address the university's mission as a public institution and our obligations under the First Amendment.

As part of our commitment to safety, there has been and will continue to be an increase in the visibility of USF police officers on campus, including a dedicated presence near student religious organizations' facilities 24 hours a day. Our strong partnerships with other local law enforcement agencies also provide an additional layer of security. Our teams in Student Success, in partnership with USF Police, are working diligently to ensure that all gatherings remain peaceful, do not disrupt academic experiences and university operations, and do not violate university policies or any laws.

I wish to express my gratitude to members of the Student Success team, USFPD, and countless others who play a role in keeping our campuses safe, as well as to our students, faculty and staff — the vast majority of whom have conducted themselves in a civil and respectful manner.

As we always have in challenging times, it's critical that we strive to uphold our university's values and keep our focus on how we carry out our institutional mission. With that in mind, we will be taking several additional actions:

I, along with my leadership team, have met with several members of our USF family, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community representatives. As trusted presidential advisors, their perspectives and expertise are valuable as we make decisions going forward.

We will review our current policies and procedures regarding events and free speech, along with continuing to seek additional ways to proactively educate our students, faculty, staff, and community on these issues.

During the spring semester, we will offer programming designed to facilitate civil discussion and offer viewpoints on the history of the Middle East. We will also host a series of focus groups early in the spring semester to foster an open dialogue, gain a deeper understanding of varying perspectives, and discuss the fundamental principles of the First Amendment.

We will continue to keep our community updated on the details associated with these actions in the coming weeks. We urge everyone to do their part to ensure that USF continues to be a safe and peaceful place where we treat each other with respect and empathy.