April 8, 2020

Dear Faculty and Staff,

In an effort to keep you as informed as possible, I write to share a few updates about our plans for continuing to serve our students, employees and you as we navigate these uncertain times.

I know you have many questions, including how long campus will remain closed; what changes we can anticipate as a result of potential revenue losses; and what will the upcoming fall semester look like? The truth is that we don’t yet have definitive answers to those and other important questions, and much depends on how the global pandemic plays out over the weeks and months ahead.

Even though we are unfortunately on the virus’ timeline instead of our own, we’re taking a proactive approach to mapping out the university’s future during ever-changing conditions. Senior leadership from all areas of the university are actively engaged on a daily basis in decision making and planning that will prepare us for any eventuality.

Despite significant changes in recent weeks, the university’s financial outlook through the end of the fiscal year remains strong. We estimate that the cost of the coronavirus to the institution through summer session, net of cost savings, will be between $20-$40 million. Through prudent budgeting and temporary delays of capital projects, we can for now absorb these costs without resorting to hiring freezes or a reduction in force for full-time employees. That said, we recognize that the environment could change quickly and further constrain our flexibility. We have asked all campus HR and business managers, as well as deans and other hiring authorities to consider only hiring critical personnel
between now and June 15. All of us must be mindful of expenditures and focus on the most critical aspects of maintaining our current operations.

I urge you to visit the university’s coronavirus website for the latest policy updates that affect employees, including annual and sick leave, teaching and research support, and health tips.

Many more critical decisions are on the horizon, and even though we can’t predict what the future may hold, we are unwavering in our commitment to four guiding principles:

- protecting the health, safety and welfare of our employees and students;
- limiting and mitigating the spread of the virus in our community;
- maintaining academic and research excellence;
- and sustaining core university functions.

Earlier this week, I charged a new committee — aptly named the Future Planning Group (FPG) — with examining how we can best prepare for and adapt to the impact of the coronavirus past our summer session. This group includes representatives from all facets of university operations and will receive continual guidance from public health experts. Central questions the group will address include:

- What does the coronavirus modeling look like, and what does that mean for campus/community safety;
- When will acceptable risk occur to bring students back on campus;
- What potential changes will we need to make for the fall semester;
- What impact do decisions have on future university operations (academics and research, budgeting and staffing, student support, athletics, and enrollment management).

Importantly, key findings and recommendations of the group will be made available to you, and a website is being developed to keep you informed of its work. You also will be able to provide input and suggestions for consideration on the site. Initial recommendations about the fall semester are expected by late May.

We anticipate that the work of the FPG in coming weeks will have impact on the annual budgetary process for academic and administrative units. As more information about this process is available, it will be posted on the FPG website.

We also have a committee that is developing a cost cutting strategy in the event that a worst-case scenario occurs that would result in significant costs to this institution that the “prudent budgeting and temporary delays of capital
projects” mentioned earlier would be unable to cover. These strategies include hiring freezes (including temps), furloughs (if authorized), consulting cancellations, no overtime, and in worse case – potential pay cuts. None of us wants any of these consequences to occur, which is why we are watching this carefully. But we must plan for not only the most likely courses of actions, but also for a worst-case scenario in the event that occurs. Again, we on the virus’ timeline, not our own.

The other point I want to make is that with prudent risk, we have to quickly prepare ourselves to launch out of COVID-19 as soon as possible and feasible. Reducing all of our resources to survive COVID-19 may take many months to recover once we’re back in a normal environment, and we cannot afford to do that. I would like to do much better than merely survive this crisis. We must recognize opportunities and where we need to go, and move in that direction as quickly as possible. For example, if “cuts” become necessary, I would want them to be minimal, so that it does not take us months to recover. Our planning must not only look at getting us through this crisis, but it must also look out towards the strategic horizon post COVID-19.

We encourage our faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, staff and others to continue pursuing emerging research opportunities to combat this COVID-19 pandemic. We will likely be dealing with the effects of this virus for many months to come. The UofSC community can and should be an essential contributor in developing the next generation of infection prevention strategies, testing solutions, therapeutic modalities, and other approaches to address COVID-19. Such local research efforts have already begun in earnest, and university leadership will continue to prioritize and foster these efforts as we move forward.

Finally, I want to thank all the members of our Gamecock community for your continued patience and exemplary work ethic amid this unprecedented health crisis. Whether you are teaching remotely, continuing important research or providing crucial services for students and families, each of you is doing your part to ensure our future success.

Our community is stronger than ever, and I am confident we will persevere as long as we remain united by our central mission of service to our students and the state.

Forever to Thee,

Bob Caslen