

April 2, 2009

Dear WSU Colleagues, Students, Alumni, Parents, and Friends:

While the state higher education budget situation in Olympia remains very fluid, I would like to update you on where things stand at this moment.

As all of you are well aware, dire financial circumstances extend well beyond the boundaries of WSU and the state of Washington. Virtually every public university in this country is struggling under the burden of serious cuts in state appropriations. Knowing that we are not alone is small consolation, however, in light of the fact that Washington's college students are among the hardest-hit in the nation.

We are evaluating two very different budget proposals—one each from the House and Senate. While the House bill is by far the most shocking and draconian, each presents major issues—not just to WSU, but to all of higher education.

Our first strategy must be to convince the Legislature, as it debates these bills over the next three weeks, that hobbling higher education is the wrong route to an economic turnaround. Successfully attaining recovery will depend upon a well-educated population and the groundbreaking scholarship, research, and technologies emanating from major research universities. Governor Christine Gregoire relied on these principles in preparing the budget she presented to the Legislature for consideration. However, the House and the Senate have taken a different approach, to the state's peril.

At WSU alone, we are setting the pace nationally with our research into clean technologies and alternative energy, agriculture, viticulture and food safety, the biosciences, smart grids and buildings, and global animal health. Furthermore, we are transferring leading-edge technologies to this state's top industries and research laboratories. Our students, both undergraduate and graduate, have unique opportunities to play a role in this and other vital work, gaining experiences that will enable them to become the kind of thinkers, leaders, teachers, writers, researchers, and entrepreneurs who will lead us into better times. The prospect of slowing down the progress we have made in recent years is simply unthinkable.

Because we are facing an economic meltdown unlike anything this country has experienced since the Great Depression, we accept that WSU will be required to make hard choices and painful budgetary decisions. I assure you that WSU has been carefully preparing for these eventualities for quite some time. Almost a year ago, we implemented freezes on hiring, travel, and non-essential expenditures, and limited pay and benefit increases. Many positions have gone unfilled, a difficult situation, but one that will allow us to keep the number of layoffs as low as humanly possible.

Throughout the year, the entire campus has engaged in a thoughtful, strategic process to define our top academic and research priorities in order to plan and budget accordingly. This Academic Affairs and Program Prioritization (A2P2) plan followed an update of the University's strategic plan. These documents will serve as invaluable roadmaps as we go forward. I have charged our best and brightest with the painstaking task of crafting the best possible solutions through a combination of strategic programmatic and personnel reductions, manageable tuition increases, federal stimulus funds and research grants, and private philanthropy. We will make each and every decision judiciously and conscientiously, with our students always top of mind.

As president of WSU, I must focus my energies on protecting and enhancing the "Three A's": Academic quality, Access, and Affordability.

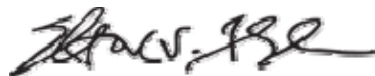
In the meantime, I would like to assure our current students and their families that we will make every effort to protect the quality of their educational experience and allow those in programs that will be phased out to graduate in their declared majors. I would like to assure our faculty and staff that implementation of personnel-related decisions will be done with great empathy and care. And I would like to assure our alumni that we will do everything possible to sustain and enhance the value of your hard-earned degree and continue to earn the legendary Cougar Pride.

It is my strong belief that if we are thoughtful and deliberate WSU can come out of this budget crisis even stronger than before. You can expect more solid and detailed information as we receive it from Olympia. We expect the Legislature to complete its work and present a budget to the Governor within the next two to three weeks. It is our expectation that the state budget will be finalized and passed into law near the end of April. At that time, we will consider the realities we face and devise a budget plan accordingly. If the foregoing deadlines are met, we would expect to present WSU budget recommendations to our campus communities on or around May 1. At that time, we will provide many opportunities for public forums, group discussions, and online feedback before the final budget is implemented on July 1.

Let me reiterate that we simply cannot launch the public phase of this process in good faith until we know the actual state appropriation level. I understand that this period of "not knowing" is taking its toll on all of us. As Moliere said, "Doubts are more cruel than the worst of truths."

Because transparency has been a watchword of mine, I have been under some pressure to lay out various budget-cutting possibilities and scenarios. Sharing incomplete and undependable information does not equate to transparency. In my definition of the word, transparency means sharing solid information when it is available. That is what I am doing today, and will continue to do as we go forward.

Thank you for your time and attention. I will write again soon.



Elson S. Floyd, Ph.D.
President, Washington State University