Dear Colleague:

With the Florida Legislature about to begin its 2006 session, it is time for me and the other university presidents to focus on what is perhaps our most important job: advocating the importance of higher education and ensuring that we get the funding we need to continue the great work that you do.

As you know, Gov. Bush has made his FY2007 budget recommendations. I am pleased that there are proposals that will directly help UWF:

- Proposed increases in need-based financial aid
- Proposed matching funds for private donations that support first generation university students
- Support for the Board of Governors (BOG) PECO/fixed capital outlay recommendations (which include repair/renovation funds and funds for the science-engineering-technology building)
- Proposed funding for the increased costs of the Florida Retirement System
- Proposed funds for SUCCEED grants, obtainable through partnerships with community colleges on a competitive basis
- Proposed funding for matching gifts at the BOG recommended level

However, there are disappointments for UWF:

- No funds for any of our growth proposals as endorsed by the BOG (expansion in Fort Walton Beach/military; degree programs in nursing, teaching or engineering)
- The Florida Public Archaeology Network (headquartered at UWF) is specifically targeted for total elimination
- No funds for hurricane expenditure relief
- No funds for increased operational costs
- No funds for technology needs, including the statewide electronic library
- No funds for salary increases
- No funds for graduate student health insurance

The governor is proposing very significant tuition increases (7.5 percent) for Florida resident graduate students and all non-resident students. He is also proposing a 5 percent increase for Florida resident undergraduates, the same increase as proposed by the BOG. This means that $46.7 million of the BOG requested $80.2 million in enrollment growth funds are proposed to be funded by tuition increases rather than by general fund increases. Given that our graduate and non-resident populations have dropped significantly due to the current price (the drop in non-resident students is system-wide), it is likely that neither we nor at least several other universities will be able to raise those tuition prices much if at all next year.
You may have also heard about the governor’s economic development proposals, some of which include recommended funds for universities. The two most important are the Centers of Excellence and the World Class Scholars. It is vital that we do all that we can to position ourselves for a Center of Excellence. The proposed World Class Scholars matching program matches private donations in excess of $1 million for labs, equipment and support staff in order to attract leading research faculty.

We are very early in the budget process, but as you can see there are many challenges as well as opportunities for us. The governor’s proposal is step one. The next step belongs to the legislature. We must be proactive in the process. As chair of the State University Presidents Association, I will be spending one to two days per week in Tallahassee and a few days per month in Washington working with our delegations to advance our best interests.

In addition to the funding proposals, the legislature is working on a bill regarding how the universities will be governed. That bill, which is very complex, sets the rules by which we will be allowed to operate and serve the educational needs of our citizens. It is certainly one of the most important pieces of legislation to be proposed since our overall governance system changed over the past few years. I will be very actively involved in the committee hearings on this bill by providing comments on it and doing what I can to create the best legislation possible over the coming weeks.

In addition to my activities in Tallahassee and Washington, I have also scheduled a great number of visits with potential lead donors as a part of our Creating Great Futures campaign. Substantial growth in private contributions is just as important as maintaining our appropriations and certainly worthy of my efforts.

Although these activities will require me to be off campus frequently in the coming months, I will make every effort to update you weekly on our progress. I will hold a university Town Hall Meeting March 14 at 9 a.m. in the University Commons Conference Center. At that time, I will elaborate further on the legislative agendas.

Let me close on a positive note. As you know, I have made compensation my number one priority as your president. We successfully completed our staff salary equity plan this year. We have also implemented pay for performance. Together with my fellow university presidents, we secured a 3.6 percent across the board salary increase in FY2006. Discretionary salary increases are once again our number one legislative priority. I have also made salaries my top priority as we begin our university budget council deliberations. Our superior work force is what makes UWF an institution of excellence, one on its way to becoming the best regional comprehensive university in America. I appreciate your service excellence and devotion to making it so.

Regards,
John