I. INTRODUCTION (Purpose and Intent):

The purpose of this policy is to outline required procedures for obtaining, as well as providing, employment-related reference information at the University of South Florida System (USF System).

Each department or College may create internal written guidelines setting forth how that department or college will comply with the terms of this policy.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS:

1) Hiring Manager: A person or group of persons (including search committee members) involved in the recruitment and hiring of a USF System employee. At the beginning of recruitment, the department or college for which the recruitment is taking place is responsible for defining, identifying, and documenting who is the hiring manager responsible for conducting candidates’ reference checks. Each department or College will create internal written guidelines explicitly setting forth how that department or college defines the responsible “hiring manager” for purposes of complying with this policy and conducting reference checks.

2) Reference Check: The process by which individuals are contacted by a hiring manager to learn about an employment candidate’s work history for legitimate business reasons including, but not limited to, verifying facts on the candidate’s resume or application, and any job-related information provided during the interviewing process.

III. APPLICABILITY:

This reference check policy applies to all persons hired by the USF System, including all
faculty and staff. The policy applies to all employees, including hiring managers and members of search committees, who are gathering information on potential job candidates, including candidates who are currently employed by the USF System and who have applied for a different position within the USF System. This reference check policy also applies to all USF System employees as they provide reference information on former or current employees.

IV. STATEMENT OF POLICY:

Obtaining complete job-related employment reference information is a mandatory step in the recruitment and hiring process. To ensure that employment practices are effective, the following procedures must be observed when obtaining or providing reference information.

V. PROCESS STEPS:

A. Obtaining Employment References

Satisfactory reference checks are a condition of employment at the USF System and all offers of employment will be contingent upon satisfactory reference checks. Reference checks must be conducted for both external candidates and for current employees who are applying for transfer or promotion.

The employment reference check is in addition to applicable checks of employment verification, criminal background, credit check, sanction lists and licensure. Any offer of employment should be contingent on satisfactory completion of all applicable reference checks.

The hiring manager is responsible for obtaining professional references before making a final hiring decision. The hiring manager must contact at least three (3) of the candidate’s references, one of whom must be the candidate’s current immediate supervisor (the person to whom the candidate has a direct reporting relationship). If the candidate is not currently employed, then the candidate’s most recent supervisor should be contacted.

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1 “Employment verification” is different from “employment reference.” Employment verification refers to the process used to confirm that a candidate meets the minimum years of experience, qualifications, skills and education for the position for which he or she has applied.

2 As explained in Section II above, for purposes of this policy the term “hiring manager” refers to the person ultimately responsible for conducting the reference checks required by this policy. This policy recognizes that the hiring manager who ultimately makes an offer of employment to a candidate and/or signs the candidate’s employment offer letter (such as a Dean, Provost, Vice-Chancellor or Vice-President) may not be the same person as the “hiring manager” who is responsible for conducting the reference checks required by this policy. Departments and colleges are responsible for setting forth written guidelines specifically identifying the “hiring manager” who is responsible for compliance with this policy and conducting the required reference checks.
As a professional courtesy a candidate should be notified at what stage of the recruitment his or her references will be contacted and whether the reference check will extend beyond just the names provided by the candidate.

Prior to contacting a candidate’s current supervisor, the hiring manager will ask the candidate for authorization to contact the candidate’s current supervisor for a reference check. In some instances, candidates may be apprehensive about the hiring manager contacting the candidate’s current supervisor before the candidate has received an offer of employment from the USF System. In those situations, it is acceptable to hold off on checking references with the candidate’s current employer until an offer of employment is made, but that offer must be contingent upon satisfactory completion of the reference check with the current employer. In situations when the candidate is apprehensive about contact with the current supervisor, the hiring manager, when feasible, must contact the candidate’s most recent supervisor prior to the current supervisor before making an employment offer. If that prior supervisor provides acceptable references for the candidate, the hiring manager may extend the candidate a written offer of employment which expressly states that the offer of employment is conditioned upon receiving a satisfactory reference from the candidate’s most current supervisor. The hiring manager (and in the case of faculty hires the dean of the college) is responsible for ensuring such follow up and providing signed verification that a satisfactory reference check with the current supervisor has been completed.

In the event the candidate’s current supervisor provides an unsatisfactory reference, the Hiring Manager will document the same. Thereafter, the Hiring Manager must decide whether to proceed with employment of the candidate despite the current supervisor’s unsatisfactory reference. If after considering all factors, references, and information obtained about the candidate the Hiring Manager decides to hire the candidate despite the current supervisor’s unsatisfactory reference, the Hiring Manager should document that decision.

In the event that the current supervisor is unreachable, unwilling and/or unresponsive to reference requests, the hiring manager is directed to contact the prior employer’s human resources department (or those that may function in that capacity in a smaller organization) for assistance with completing the required reference check.

There may be situations when an employer’s policies prohibit or restrict supervisors or human resources professionals from providing detailed employment references for a candidate (for example, some employers will only confirm an employee’s dates of employment and position(s) held). If the University’s Hiring Manager encounters such a situation when attempting to check a candidate’s employment reference, the Hiring
Manager must document his/her efforts to check the candidate’s reference, the name and contact information of the individual with whom the Hiring Manager communicated at the candidate’s employer, and the fact that the candidate’s current or prior employer has indicated that its policies prohibit or restrict the information it can provide the University. Thereafter, the hiring manager must decide whether to proceed with employment of the candidate despite the University’s inability to obtain all potentially relevant information from the candidate’s current immediate supervisor, and the hiring manager must document the decision to proceed with employment of the candidate.

The hiring manager is responsible for verification of the candidate’s work background, positions held, dates of employment, performance and professional credentials. References are important both to validate the information that has been provided by a candidate and to learn about successes or shortcomings of prior employment experiences.

In some cases, such as faculty hires, the candidate will provide written letters of reference as part of the employment application process. Such reference letters may be considered as part of the overall employment reference check. Nevertheless, the hiring manager is responsible for ensuring that the candidate’s most recent supervisor was contacted directly (most often done by telephone) and provides a satisfactory reference for the candidate as part of the reference check process.

To enhance the quality of the information received in a reference check, consider the following:

- Identify yourself and the USF System as the organization that you represent
- Inform the reference of the reason for your call
- Describe the position for which you are recruiting
- Ask questions that will solicit information about the candidate’s ability to perform the duties of the position for which you are recruiting.

When conducting reference checks questions should be phrased in a manner that asks objective and job-related information. Any information volunteered by the reference that is not job-related shall be disregarded in the decision-making process. Reference checks should attempt to obtain information including, but not limited to:

- Dates of employment
- Position title
- Position duties
• Beginning and ending salaries
• Training obtained
• Job performance, including performance strengths and weaknesses
• Attendance, including reporting to work at the scheduled time
• Whether the candidate is eligible for rehire by the prior employer
• Whether, if there was an appropriate position at the organization, the candidate would be considered for the position
• Whether the candidate has been the subject of any workplace investigation or disciplinary action
• Verification of any required licenses, certifications, or degrees
• Reasons why the candidate left that employment
• Whether there is any other job-related information about the candidate that might be otherwise relevant to the University’s decision whether to extend an offer of employment

Some employers may be reluctant to provide details of a candidate’s work history. In these situations, the hiring manager should offer to provide a copy of the certification page from the USF application, which authorizes USF to obtain pertinent information about the candidate while also releasing the referent from liability when providing truthful information. For this purpose, candidates are required to complete the standard USF application prior to having their references checked.

The hiring manager who conducted the reference checks is responsible for ensuring the completion of satisfactory, current reference checks. Copies of supporting documentation must be maintained and should reflect: (a) the names and current positions/contact information of the persons providing references (including identification of the current supervisor); (b) the dates of the reference checks; and (c) the USF System employee who conducted the reference checks (including whether the reference check was in-person, telephone, email, letter and/or other).

The provisions in this policy do not limit the hiring manager to only contacting the references listed on the employment application itself. This policy does not prevent a candidate from providing, or the University from checking, as additional references the names of other professional colleagues who can provide relevant information regarding the candidate’s skills and past performance. Nevertheless, contact and reference check with the candidate’s current supervisor is necessary under this policy.
B. Providing Employment References

Information obtained by prospective employers of former USF System employees is crucial to the prospective employer’s effective hiring. Therefore, the USF System strives to provide truthful and/or documented job related information including, but not limited to, performance, attendance and eligibility for rehire.

Only representatives of the Human Resources department and/or supervisors who were in the direct line of supervision of a former USF System employee should provide employment references. When a USF System employee is contacted for reference information, but the employee does not believe he/she has sufficient information regarding the former employee in question, he/she shall refer the caller to the Human Resources Department.

When providing a reference to another organization regarding a former employee, the USF System employee is responsible for ensuring that he/she only discloses job-related information to the potential employer. Only job-related questions may be answered. Observable information may be provided. Examples of job-related information that may be shared include information regarding attendance, awards/recognitions, dates of employment, position titles, performance evaluation ratings, salary, achievements, and interpersonal behaviors.

Current Responsible Office*: Administrative Services/Human Resources & Academic Affairs

*Refer to the appropriate Responsible Office website for a current name of the Vice President or other Responsible Officer.

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