Dear Colleagues,

The Stewarding Excellence @ Illinois Biology Education and Research at Illinois Project Team was asked to “gather basic information and refine key questions for a longer term project that will take place in AY 2010-11, ultimately producing an outline of key issues for a process to streamline campus research and education activities in biology.” The Project Team’s comprehensive work provides a greater understanding of the breadth and depth of our biology enterprise and will significantly assist the campus as we think about ways we can enhance and support this enterprise. The Project Team conducted an extensive survey of biology education and research on campus, compiled a database summarizing their findings, and provided detailed suggestions for further analysis and review. The survey received a high response rate (65%), which indicates the campus’s interest in this project. We thank the team for its pivotal contributions to this process. We are also grateful for the insights and feedback submitted by the Campus Advisory Committee and the campus community.

As a campus, we began this review and visioning process for biology education and research in 2008 with the Committee on Defining and Advancing Biology Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The 2008 committee, chaired by Professor Gene Robinson, highlighted the importance of biology education and noted the emerging focus on quantitative biology and interdisciplinary studies. Included within that report were recommendations that the campus develop new interdisciplinary courses, create capstone courses that cross and integrate biological sub-disciplines and demonstrate the centrality of evolutionary biology, provide discovery-oriented research experiences for all biology majors, and establish a bio-literacy program that requires a core cross-disciplinary biology course for all undergraduate students. Although the economic downturn impacted the campus’s ability to immediately implement many of the findings and recommendations of the 2008 report, that report motivated and informed our charge to the Stewarding Excellence Team.

Building upon the 2008 report, the Stewarding Excellence Team provided the necessary foundation of a current and thorough inventory of the biological sciences on campus. Armed with the substantive and structural information provided by both committees, the campus is now equipped to begin the process to streamline campus research and education activities in the biological sciences that we anticipated in our charge letter to the Stewarding Excellence Project Team. At its core, this process requires the campus:
to openly examine the extent to which the resources dedicated to biology education and research are used as effectively and efficiently as possible, with optimal quality and visibility of our efforts, and whether our organizational structures support goals of excellence.

This next phase will be overseen by a Steering Committee. As the Project Team has demonstrated, our campus is broadly engaged in biology education and research. Based on data that showed the extensive scope of biological education on our campus, the Project Team called for further review of the significant duplication and synergies across units that exist on campus. In charging the Steering Committee with this further review, we ask that the Committee focus on fundamental questions related to the optimal academic organizational structures, to financial models that support cross-disciplinary teaching and research, and to campus-wide strategic hiring. In particular, we pose the following questions:

1. Do the academic structures that are currently in place enhance or inhibit cross-disciplinary collaborations in teaching and research? This analysis should include:
   a. an examination of the impact on research and teaching, whether positive or negative, of having multiple units across campus with faculty expertise in the same biological disciplines;
   b. an investigation of whether moving or sharing faculty lines or teaching responsibilities would create an overall greater benefit to the campus than what is provided by current configurations;
   c. an evaluation of campus facilities including classroom and laboratory space to determine whether our research support units and teaching facilities are adequate and managed appropriately; and
   d. a determination whether the current degree programs and courses offered are reflective of the direction of scholarship in the 21st century.

2. Are the current financial models providing optimal support for faculty research and teaching in the biological sciences? Are there ways to use campus funds more efficiently and with greater positive impact on our educational and academic programs?

3. How should a campus-wide strategic hiring program for the biological sciences be structured that addresses and builds on the recommendations of the 2008 committee report? With respect to more immediate strategic hiring goals, we anticipate asking the Steering Committee to assist the Office of the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in reviewing hiring requests related to the biological sciences submitted by the campus in spring 2011. We ask that the Steering Committee’s analysis of strategic hiring include:
   a. an evaluation of what procedures would allow broad campus input and lead to the strategic identification of the choices of disciplinary areas in which hiring should occur and the unit location of new faculty lines; and
b. an exploration of how start-up costs could be shared or allocated among units interested in joint hiring.

We recognize that these questions raise complex issues that require careful deliberation and consultation. We are confident, however, that there are opportunities for improvements that could be accomplished in a more immediate time frame and we ask the Steering Committee for structural recommendations that might be pursued in both the short and long-term.

We close out this Stewarding Excellence project knowing that the next phase will be an ambitious undertaking and will need to be conducted over many months. We are extremely grateful to the following faculty members who have agreed to shepherd this next phase and to articulate the long-term vision for biology education and research across the campus: Rashid Bashir, Martha Gillette, Susan Martinis, Larry Schook, Steve Sligar, Evan Delucia, and Jodi Flaws. We have asked Professor Bashir to chair this committee and he has graciously agreed to do so. We ask the Steering Committee to provide a report and set of recommendations by May 31, 2011.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Easter
Vice President and Chancellor (Interim)

Richard P. Wheeler
Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (Interim)