Steering Committee for Biology Education and Research
Rashid Bashir, Chair
Evan Delucia
Jodi Flaws
Martha Gillette
Susan Martinis
Larry Schook
Steve Sligar

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for agreeing to serve on the Biology Education and Research Steering Committee. The work that you are being asked to do is the culmination of a process that began with the 2008 Committee on Defining and Advancing Biology Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and was further advanced by the Stewarding Excellence @ Illinois review. Armed with the substantive and structural information provided by both committees, we ask you to begin the process to streamline campus research and education activities in the biological sciences. 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.

Specifically, we ask you to focus on fundamental questions related to:

- optimal academic organizational structures,
- financial models that support cross-disciplinary teaching and research, and
- 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 ask 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. Your analysis of strategic hiring should 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.

4. Should the campus have a standing committee or a regular periodic review process to provide oversight and guidance regarding structural issues and strategic hiring opportunities presented by the cross-disciplinary nature of the biological sciences?

   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. Therefore, we ask for structural recommendations that might be pursued in both the short-term and long-term and that you provide a report and set of recommendations by May 31, 2011.

   We have asked Professor Bashir to chair this Steering Committee and he has graciously agreed to do so. You are empowered to create and solicit others to serve on sub-committees, should you find that to be necessary. Members of the Provost’s Office will also stand ready to assist you in this work.

   We are extremely grateful for your willingness to shepherd this next phase and to assist us in articulating a long-term vision for biology education and research for our campus.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Easter
Vice President and Chancellor (Interim)

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