Dear Colleagues,

We write to acknowledge our gratitude for the thoughtful and diligent work performed by the Stewarding Excellence @ Illinois U of I Extension Project Team. Interim Associate Dean and Director of Extension and Outreach Robert G. Hoeft submitted a response supporting the recommendations made by the Project Team. The University of Illinois Extension (Extension) is a complex organization serving important educational and outreach functions on behalf of the University of Illinois. In many areas of the state, Extension is the only contact with the university for the citizens of the region. The work of Extension is a key component of the public land grant mission of our institution.

The Project Team recognized that there are significant efforts already underway to reorganize Extension in its scope, size, and programming. Extension and the communities it serves have taken substantial steps to ensure the continuation of the proud traditions of Extension, including creating new programming and levels of service for developing areas of societal interest and need. Communities value the work done by Extension and feedback provided reflected concerns that Extension is under-serving both rural and urban communities.

Relative to the use of state appropriated funds, the Project Team noted:

“General Revenue Funds should always be invested in some way that leverages additional funding, whether that is from tuition, corporate partners, research funders, fees for service, or State and federal programs.”

We strongly agree with this comment. The campus should fund Extension on a continuing basis at least at the minimal amount required to receive matching funds from the Smith-Lever appropriation. In Fiscal Year 2010, the campus was required to fund Extension at least at the level of $11.8 million in order to generate Smith-Lever funding. As noted by the Project Team, the $11.8 million in Smith-Lever funding generated about $56.8 million in matching funds. We note that the actual funding of Extension at $12.5 million in Fiscal Year 2011 is dangerously close to the minimal amount required.

We are persuaded by the arguments in favor of broadening the base of support for Extension by creating a campus-level Extension position to require a review of that proposal. The Project Team recommended:

“Campus and University leadership should consider moving U of I Extension from its existing location within ACES to a campus-level position to promote broader participation by faculty across the campus in the core research and education missions of U of I Extension, and to increase opportunities for U of I Extension to generate external research funding.”

A campus-level Extension position, working in concert with additional colleges and units, offers the opportunity to raise the visibility of Extension, assist the campus in its outreach efforts across the state by using the Extension network, facilitate recruitment of students from underserved populations, increase state and federal funding, and encourage a robust solution to the need for strategic communications and
marketing for Extension and the Urbana campus. A central campus presence for Extension may be accomplished by having the Extension Director jointly report to the Chancellor’s office and to one or more college dean(s). The restructuring of Extension could also include combining the functions of Public Engagement and Extension into one office to bring coherence to an outreach portfolio that has traditionally been diffuse and poorly aligned. These structural changes may be done all at once or in a phased approach.

Accordingly, Associate Chancellor William Adams and Interim Associate Dean for Extension and Outreach Robert Hoeft will be charged with engaging a process by which a new reporting structure will be developed. Additionally, we ask that the other areas outlined for action in the report also be examined and, where appropriate and possible, pursued, e.g., increasing programming to urban populations and other non-traditional users of Extension services, collaborative proposal-writing, and shared services for grant opportunities. In order to provide the best advice, the current leaders of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences and University of Illinois Extension, the Divisions of Institute of Natural Resource Sustainability, the Office of Public Engagement, the Council of Deans and representatives from the Urbana-Champaign Senate will be convened to identify an action plan for the movement of Extension to create the appropriate campus level position or office. These restructuring efforts will be done in consultation with United States Department of Agriculture officials, state and local elected officials and supporting organizations so that questions and concerns can be addressed throughout the process. We ask for preliminary feedback on the new structure no later than April 30, 2011, and final recommendations by June 30, 2011. Our goal would be to transition to the new structure during the Academic Year 2011-2012.

We will explore the advantages and disadvantages of a separate appropriation for Extension. In order to make a decision whether to pursue this legislative initiative, consultation with the Office of the President and the University Office of Governmental Relations will occur immediately.

We must seize the opportunities afforded by the insights gained from the Stewarding Excellence process to position Extension and other outreach activities of the campus for maximum impact. These outreach activities are a principal means by which we can fully capitalize on the public land grant mission of the University of Illinois.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Easter
Vice President and Chancellor (Interim)

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