Dear Colleagues,

The Stewarding Excellence @ Illinois Project Team charged with evaluating the Institute of Aviation was asked to tackle a difficult set of issues that the campus has been grappling with for decades. We are grateful for their diligent efforts and excellent work. Likewise, we are thankful for the insights and feedback submitted by Institute of Aviation, the Campus Advisory Committee, the campus community, and the general public.

The Institute of Aviation has a prestigious history and a well-earned reputation for being a leader in aviation education. Almost as long as its history, however, questions about its “fit” and the strength of its ties to our core missions have existed. The campus has continually examined how we may support the Institute, its faculty and students, while honoring our commitments to the broader student body, campus community and the public. After careful evaluation of the complex, and sometimes competing interests of our students, faculty and the public, we have concluded that significant changes should occur.

Therefore, we will propose to the Campus Senate during the current semester, through the appropriate consultation and presentation to the Senate Committee on Educational Policy, that all academic curricula in the Institute be discontinued or transferred to other academic units. Concerted effort was made to explore whether the bachelor and master’s degree programs could be transferred to create a multi-disciplinary program in an existing college. No new academic home has been found for the Human Factors degree programs. As noted by the Project Team report, the tenure-line faculty within the Human Factors programs have been, by prior arrangement, moved to either the College of Engineering, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS), the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, or the College of Education. Engineering and LAS were considered as possible homes for these programs, but both have indicated that they do not intend to sponsor a proposal to transfer existing undergraduate Human Factors degrees from the Institute of Aviation into their respective colleges. Conversations are ongoing with Engineering regarding the possibility of transitioning the existing Human Factors master’s degree into a new master’s degree that incorporates human factors scholarship but is broader than aviation to include such areas as health care, highway safety and human-computer interaction. Absent a firm commitment by either Engineering or LAS to support Human Factors degrees (either through transfer or transition into new degree programs), we will recommend that those degrees be discontinued.
The campus remains committed to the current Human Factors students and tenure-line faculty members. Whatever form the proposal to the Senate takes, the campus will provide the current students adequate time to complete their studies. Similarly, as long as the faculty lines remain occupied by the current faculty members, the campus will continue to support those lines. If those faculty lines were to become vacant, however, the campus, in consultation with the units, would evaluate whether re-filling a vacancy is appropriate based on the current programmatic and financial needs of the respective unit and the campus. Consequently, additional savings may be possible associated with the retirement of those faculty lines.

With the elimination of academic curricula, the economic viability of the remaining pilot training and flight certification functions need to be addressed. Accordingly, we have asked Illinois Business Consulting (IBC) to evaluate the marketability of alternative business models for a stand-alone and self-supporting flight certification program. The IBC has been encouraged to investigate feasible business models and, if appropriate, to continue evaluating what kinds of community partnerships should be pursued. The IBC will submit its report at the end of this fall semester and we will make our decision regarding a non-degree flight certification program during spring semester 2011.

Finally, we must address questions about the impact of these proposed organizational changes on the airport. The Project Team concluded that decisions to eliminate or significantly reduce the Institute of Aviation flight programs would be unlikely to impact commercial service to Willard Airport. Although it is not possible to predict with certainty the impact of those proposed changes on the level of commercial service, no strong evidence exists to support that a negative impact is inevitable or even necessarily to be expected. Specifically, while a lower Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) tower rating remains a possibility, it is the tower service hours and not rating that are the key issue to commercial airlines. FAA data provided in the SEI report shows that two local airports (Bloomington and Peoria) currently have lower FAA ratings and higher levels of commercial traffic (both in terms of number of flights and passengers).

A vibrant airport is important to our community and to the university. We continue to evaluate ways to support, market, and grow the airport’s commercial services. A critically important partner in this endeavor is the Champaign County Economic Development Corporation, with whom the campus is actively involved in ongoing discussions about ways to identify and serve our joint interests and goals.

The campus allocates approximately $875,000 in General Revenue Funds to support the Institute’s degree and non-degree programs. The removal of the Human Factors degrees and the Pro Pilot Curriculum from the Institute would eliminate the administrative functions and costs. The cost savings associated with the proposed changes to the academic curricula will depend upon whether the degree programs are moved to another unit on campus or eliminated. Savings will also accrue to the campus because the continuation of a flight certification program will require that it be self-supporting within an appropriate time frame. The cost savings associated with removing the Human Factors programs and the Pro Pilot Curriculum and with changes to
non-degree flight program will be between $500,000 and $750,000. Additional savings may accrue from the retirements or resignations of Human Factors faculty since those lines may lapse to the campus upon vacancy. Finally, depending upon the outcome of our review of the feasibility of a non-degree certification program, it is possible that the campus will realize other benefits associated with the disposition or alternative use of the Institute’s real and other physical assets. Under any of these scenarios, the savings associated with our recommended changes to the Institute of Aviation will be substantial.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Easter
Chancellor and Provost (Interim)

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