Dear Colleagues,

We want to take this opportunity to thank the Stewarding Excellence Project Team for its diligent work and thoughtful review of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Public Engagement (OVCPE). We also want to acknowledge the detailed and comprehensive response received from the OVCPE. In developing some preliminary observations on the next steps in this area, we have relied on the Project Team’s report and OVCPE’s response, and the many comments received during this phase of the process.

As the Project Team stated, the importance of public engagement to a land grant institution is without debate. We remain mindful, however, of the caveat given by the Task Force for Civic Commitment in the 21st Century, that, "we lack an overarching collective identity, coordination, and sustained national visibility for our engagement programs." In the time since this observation was made, we believe that real progress has been made in the participation in and visibility of the campus’s overall commitment to public engagement. One recent example of this progress is the recent activation of the public engagement portal. Accordingly, we have concluded that it is essential that we maintain a central coordinating role for public engagement at the campus level. Restructuring of the OVCPE, however, is appropriate and necessary to maximize the effectiveness of that office and the public engagement activities across the campus as a whole. Public engagement activities must be funded by state funds and revenue generated from those activities. Thus, we find ourselves in a particularly challenging time as those funding sources are either decreasing or insufficient.

The overriding conclusion of the Project Team was that housing the functions of community engagement, sustainability, corporate relations, and economic development within the OVCPE was duplicative and that those functions should be aligned with other units also performing these services. We agree that there are cases where multiple well-intentioned campus activities engage with the same constituencies without significant coordination of effort. During the past eight years, functions have been added to the portfolio of the OVCPE in an ad hoc manner—more in response to a current need than to a strategic, long-term focus. A lack of coherence of the functions is a theme that runs throughout the Project Team’s observations about the OVCPE. The OVCPE should not be faulted for this lack of coherence. As more functions and duties were added to the OVCPE portfolio, the staff has been able to balance these added tasks with those roles envisioned during the creation of the OVCPE. The campus appreciates these admirable efforts. Nonetheless, the duplication of activities is inefficient and suggests that we lack an overall campus strategy with respect to our public engagement mission.

To address these concerns, we will take the following actions:

- create a more coherent portfolio for public engagement at the campus level;
- critically evaluate where on campus some of the current functions of the OVCPE should exist, with the possibility that discrete functions could move into the Office of the Chancellor;
- relocate the centralized corporate relations function and reassess the appropriate distribution of centralized vs. decentralized corporate relations responsibilities with the intention to retain the investment of resources at the unit level while maintaining a smaller coordinating campus level staff;
move toward a greater consolidation of the work of the Office of Sustainability with sustainability efforts elsewhere on campus;
• consult with the appropriate academic departments regarding whether the Illinois in Washington program should remain at the campus level or be housed within an academic unit;

We are currently reviewing other areas that share some of the missions currently housed in the OVCPE, e.g., Office of Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement (OVCIA) and University of Illinois Extension (Extension). A review of other public and private institutions reveals a central coordinating role at the campus or system level or other senior campus administrator, e.g., Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Northwestern, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ohio State, and Penn State. That review also reveals a close connection with Extension activities which are sometimes located in the same office, e.g., Purdue. Through our continued evaluation of the OVCPE, OVCIA and Extension, we anticipate identifying the units that have primary missions that are more closely aligned with their shared functions currently housed in OVCPE, OVCIA and Extension. As this restructuring is completed, we are committed to preserving the progress that has been made by the OVCPE in its public engagement activities. The Project Team said, “The Office of the Vice Chancellor for Public Engagement has a professional staff that works hard to provide many services that are important to the mission of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.” It is correct to state that the goal of improved public engagement has been met in all areas.

Building on the excellent work of the Project Team, we will charge a group comprised of faculty and staff that will examine public engagement activities and will consider whether a restructuring of OVCPE would benefit the campus. We request that this next step be completed no later than the end of the spring semester. Once these additional reviews are completed and determinations are made, there will be a full review of the staffing needs of the central campus public engagement office. Just as then Chancellor Herman relied on the recommendations of the Task Force on Civic Commitment for the 21st Century in re-establishing the Office of Public Engagement, we will rely on the guidance and wisdom learned through this Stewarding Excellence process in charting a new course.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Robert A. Easter
Vice President and Chancellor (Interim)

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