February 12, 2010

ISU Faculty and Staff

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing with my weekly update on matters affecting Academic Affairs and the University in general.

I am delighted to report that we have just received word from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities that this body has officially reaffirmed ISU’s accreditation. The NWCCU specifically noted ISU’s progress in “strengthening collaborative internal communication.” I would like to thank the many faculty and staff who worked so hard to bring about this very positive result.

At the Fall Academic Assembly, I announced that we would propose instituting the rank of Distinguished Professor at ISU. I am pleased to report that draft guidelines for such a rank have been prepared and are posted on the Academic Affairs website for review. Please send any input to provost@isu.edu.

As you know, on November 4, 2009, President Vailas announced at a public forum of all university personnel that he would direct Academic Affairs to form at least three task forces to consider potential consolidation of academic units within Academic Affairs. The task forces were to examine possible reorganizations of three clusters of units: 1) the College of Pharmacy and the Kasiska College of Health Professions; 2) the College of Engineering and the disciplines in the sciences; and 3) the College of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences absent the disciplines in the sciences.

The objective of this exercise was threefold: to reorganize units in such a way as to increase efficiency and streamline operations; to enable Idaho State University to emerge from a period of fiscally challenging times academically stronger, not weaker, than it had begun; and, if possible, to realize a financial savings that could be applied to the state’s substantial and ongoing budget cuts of higher education.

I appointed chairs of three task forces, and later a fourth, and charged the chairs with selecting committees of no more than a dozen faculty from the affected areas who would engage in an open and transparent process of assessing potential consolidations. Each group was to hold at least one open forum to solicit input from faculty and staff. Each task force was to appoint liaisons to the other task forces so as to facilitate inter-committee communication. The task forces were to have broad latitude in how they conducted their business and in what they examined and why.

The task forces worked diligently from November to February. They submitted their reports in the first week of February. They took their charge seriously: together the 36 faculty on the four committees spent an impressive 3,011 hours of faculty time on reorganization-related meetings. As a campus community, we should all thank them for their tireless work and dedication.

After analyzing the reports and weighing the recommendations and institutional needs, Academic Affairs has synthesized from them a balanced and unified campus plan, which I presented today at a University-wide forum. We have created a dedicated campus reorganization website that contains the plan, the task force reports and other documents so...
that all campus constituents can have access to all relevant information, including a video of
the open forum for those who were unable to attend. The website address is
http://www.isu.edu/acadaff/organization/. We have also made available a dedicated email
address so that faculty and staff can provide input on the proposed plan: provost@isu.edu.

Let me give you some of the highlights. In order to achieve its goal of moving forward as a
strong doctoral research university, ISU will need to make substantial adjustments in its
structure. Currently, our departments and colleges are small by most measures, and this
adversely affects such things as faculty workload. The smaller the aggregate across which
workload must be managed, the more difficult it is for units to adjust workload in order to
lighten loads for research-productive faculty.

As an illustration, consider the size of our colleges by tenure-track faculty in comparison to
those of our peers. In comparison to ISU’s institutional peers, the College of Arts and
Sciences has fewer tenured and tenure-track faculty members (190) with the exception of
North Dakota State University. The Arts and Sciences colleges in several of our peer
institutions are substantially larger. Montana State has 290, Nevada-Reno has 343, and Kent
State has 388.

Our College of Education has 34 faculty, while Montana State has 56, Northern Arizona has
118, and Kent State has 130. In the case of the College of Engineering, all of ISU’s peer
institutions with engineering programs are more than double the size of ISU’s program. If we
look only at institutions that are similar in terms of enrollment—such as, Montana State
University, North Dakota State University, University of Wyoming, and Wichita State
University—the number of tenured and tenure-track faculty are twice to four times the size of
ISU’s engineering faculty.

These data clearly demonstrate that ISU has not positioned itself to be efficient in terms of
allocation of resources, including human capital. If we are to protect our programs and our
faculty, we must reorganize in a manner that allows us to meet all of our professional
obligations. First and foremost, we must meet the needs of our students through the most
efficient and effective employment of our core faculty. Then, if we are to meet our aspirations
of obtaining “research high” status, ISU must find ways to give faculty and students the time
they need to be productive scholars and efficient teachers. The proposed administrative
reorganizations will help us achieve those goals.

Universities across the nation are considering implementing or have recently implemented
academic reorganizations. Arizona State University recently announced its second
reorganization within a six-month period. As with ISU’s plan, the general goal of many of
these reorganizations center on streamlining administrative infrastructures and processes to
become more efficient and more effective.

This streamlining will enable our institution to function more flexibly and more nimbly in
challenging economic times, specifically in the face of decreasing state support. These
administrative changes will further buttress our shared commitment both to protect and to
empower ISU’s core faculty. To sum up, although the projected savings from the proposed
reorganization (between 1 and 1.5 million dollars) represent a substantial contribution to ISU’s budget givebacks to the state, most importantly, this reorganization is a way for us as an institution to cut strategically, as opposed to cutting across the board. As a result, ISU will likely emerge from the budget cuts better and stronger as an institution.

A detailed description of the plan is posted on the reorganization website. Here is a brief outline:

The task force on Pharmacy and the Health Professions recommends creating a Division of Health Sciences headed by an executive dean. The division would comprise a College of Pharmacy, School of Nursing, School of Rehabilitation and Communication Sciences, and the Kasiska School of Health Professions. I have accepted the proposed structure with one minor adjustment: the Office of Medical and Oral Health was moved from a stand-alone unit to a unit within the Kasiska School of Health Professions.

The task force on science and engineering examined the possibility of combining the College of Engineering and the departments of science within the College of Arts and Science into one College of Science and Engineering. The task force presented a number of recommendations, including conducting thorough program reviews; conducting a nationwide search for a founding dean; forming an executive committee as soon as possible; sharing staff across the college; maintaining departmental structure; ensuring that tenure, promotion, and annual review begin at the departmental level; and developing faculty-sponsored, college-wide research colloquia to promote interdisciplinary interactions and research projects. I have accepted all of these recommendations.

The task force felt that it would be best if reorganization occurred after program review had been conducted; however, I strongly believe that program review could proceed simultaneously with, and would likely enhance, reorganization efforts. The task force also felt that the initiation of the reorganization should follow the hiring of a founding dean; however, I believe that initial reorganization efforts should proceed immediately, given both the reorganization efforts in the other colleges and the institution’s pressing short-term need to meet fiscal challenges. Nonetheless, I certainly remain open to initiating a search immediately so that a founding dean could take over from the interim dean as soon as possible.

The Academic Affairs plan proposes a College of Science and Engineering headed by a dean with the assistance of a strong executive committee. The college will comprise two schools: the School of Engineering and the School of Mathematics and Sciences.

The task force for arts, humanities, social sciences, and education recommends creating a College of Arts and Letters headed by a dean with the assistance of a strong executive committee. It further recommends that the college would comprise a School of Fine Arts and Humanities and a School of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

I have accepted the task force’s proposed structure, with one change; the College of Education will be included as a school within the new College of Arts and Letters. A main goal of the campus reorganization effort is to create units that have the size and strength to succeed and
thrive in an atmosphere of reduced and ever-decreasing state funding. I strongly believe that
the College of Education would be too vulnerable if left on its own within the new campus
organization and given the poor fiscal situation in the state. The faculty of the College of
Education share many research and curricular connections with faculty within humanities and
social sciences, and it makes sense that ISU capitalize on these synergies.

My report is due to President Vailas by March 1. I hope you will take the time to carefully
review the proposed reorganization on the dedicated website listed above and to provide
thoughtful input on the dedicated email address listed above.

As usual, I will give you periodic updates on University and Academic Affairs issues as news
becomes available, and I invite you to contact me or the staff in the Office of Academic
Affairs if we can help you in any way.

Cordially,

Gary A. Olson
Provost and Professor