



# *The University of Vermont*

October 2, 2009

To: The Faculty of the University of Vermont

From: Jane Knodell, Interim Provost and Senior Vice President  
Domenico Grasso, Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

Subject: Transdisciplinary Research Initiative: Announcement and Call for Nominations

We write today to announce the University's Transdisciplinary Research Initiative, and to invite your participation in shaping the research and scholarly future of the University of Vermont. In this letter we explain the goals of the initiative, describe its central elements, and issue a call for nominations to working groups that will move the initiative forward over the coming months.

## ***Our Goals***

The goals of this initiative are to bring greater focus, distinction, and intentionality to the University's research and scholarly enterprise; to enhance opportunities for faculty to participate in quality research and graduate programs; and to energize the culture of graduate and undergraduate education at UVM by making all of the resources of the University available to advanced students and by enriching the possibilities for undergraduate research. These are important ends in themselves, but they will also allow us to maintain the University's competitiveness and success trajectory in an increasingly challenging higher education landscape.

Our faculty is one of enormous talent, ingenuity, and dedication. As a relatively small research university, however, we cannot be preeminent in all areas. We must focus in order to excel. Through this initiative, we will identify those research and teaching areas that hold the strongest potential for distinction, and use these results to guide future resource allocation. This initiative is a call for the engagement of all faculty members who are active in research, scholarship, and creative endeavors – whether they are working in disciplines that are well-funded, or not funded at all, by external agencies; and whether or not their appointments are in units that currently offer graduate programs. As a faculty, our scholarly efforts take a variety of forms, and so may the programs that result from this initiative.

## ***The Process***

In partnership with the Deans and the Faculty Senate leadership, we have identified eight transdisciplinary topic areas from which our specific emphases are likely to arise. Our selection

was based on an assessment of our current faculty strengths across departments, schools, and colleges. Our approach was a practical one: in light of limited resources, it will be more cost-effective to build on areas of current strength than to establish new strengths.

By mid-October, following the call for nominations we issue today, we will form working groups composed of faculty members and Deans. The task of each group is to identify a particular “spire of excellence,” within its broad transdisciplinary topic area, in which we can position ourselves to vie for national distinction (See attached *Transdisciplinary Research Initiative Working Group Charge*). The group will then develop a proposal that makes the case for the selection of the spire of excellence as one of a limited number of areas in which we will invest.

The eight transdisciplinary topic areas are:

1. Biological Sciences & Bioengineering
2. Complex Systems
3. Culture & Society
4. Environment
5. Food Systems
6. Neurosciences: Basic, Behavioral, Clinical, Developmental
7. Policy Studies
8. Public Health/Sustainable Health/Health Policy

***The selection of a limited number of transdisciplinary spires of excellence does not mean that all other research efforts on campus will cease, nor does it diminish the value of other scholarly activity.*** Since selection of the spires of excellence will be based, in part, on current faculty strength, it is our expectation that the spires will be supported by the research and scholarly agendas of a great many of our faculty. Similarly, we expect that the dialogue and activity that arise from the process will provide principles around which other faculty might choose to renew and re-envision their scholarly activity, and they might contribute to a spire of excellence in the future. For some faculty members, however, a direct connection between a spire and their research may not exist. We would fully expect these faculty members to continue the passionate pursuit of their scholarly agendas. At the most modest end of the spectrum, the University's investment in this work may be limited to supporting the portion of a faculty member's effort devoted to research.

It is our expectation that over time our spires of excellence will bring such distinction to the University that our revenue base will grow, providing additional resources in which we will all share. To ensure this, we will assess the success of the chosen spires of excellence as we consider future rounds of investment.

Admittedly, this undertaking would be eased by an infusion of new resources to support its implementation. The economic realities of the foreseeable future preclude this, yet we are not excused from our responsibility to pursue a strategic vision that best utilizes our extant resources. In fact, the challenges we face are further calls for clear programmatic focus and the thoughtful and disciplined allocation of resources. We will all benefit from the greater competitiveness and stability our institution will achieve as a result.

We are committed to a transparent process. The Office of the Vice President for Research has developed a [website](#) that will provide members of the University community with information about the initiative and answer questions. In addition, the Office of Institutional Studies and the Office of the Vice President for Research will assist the working groups with the collection of information and data needed to develop strong proposals.

We have approached this project with a genuine spirit of inquiry. This will be a process of analysis, reflection, discussion, and evaluation. We hold no pre-determined outcome. In fact, we await the results of the working groups with great enthusiasm since it is possible that we have aggregate scholarly strengths at the University of Vermont that we have made apparent neither to ourselves nor the world.

Looking ahead, the initiative consists of the following central elements:

- Appointment of members to the eight working groups (week of October 19)
- Working groups develop proposals (October – mid-January)
- Completed proposals submitted (by January 15)
- Review of proposals by internal and external advisory groups (February-March)
- Selection of Spires of Excellence (April-May)

### ***Call for Nominations***

We invite members of the University of Vermont faculty to nominate themselves to serve on one or more of the transdisciplinary working groups. Your self-nomination should consist of:

- A letter of interest including:
  - Identification of the working group(s) in which you are interested;
  - An indication of whether or not you are willing to lead a working group;
  - An indication of whether or not you are a Faculty Senator;
  - For Senators: an indication of any standing Senate committees on which you serve; and,
  - A statement of the qualifications you bring to the project.
- A curriculum vitae

Please e-mail your nomination as ***a single attachment*** including your letter of interest followed by your curriculum vitae, to Associate Provost Rachel Johnson ([Rachel.Johnson@uvm.edu](mailto:Rachel.Johnson@uvm.edu)), by 4:30 pm on Monday, October 12.

If you have questions, please send them to [spirequestions@uvm.edu](mailto:spirequestions@uvm.edu). We'll answer them as quickly as possible, and will post many of them on the Frequently Asked Questions section of the website hosted by the Office of the Vice President for Research. In addition, we will continue to attend College and School meetings, as well as meet with faculty leadership groups as the initiative progresses.

We hope that you share in our enthusiasm for this initiative. Its scope and timeframe are indeed ambitious. Given the quality of our remarkable faculty here at the University of Vermont, we have no doubt that, together, we can achieve our goals. Thank you in advance for your participation.