To: University of Vermont Faculty and Staff

From: James Burgmeier, President, Faculty Senate
      Jane Knodell, Interim Provost & Senior Vice President

Subject: Transdisciplinary Research Initiative Implementation and Further Discussion

Last year we engaged in critically important work that will advance our mission of creating, transmitting, and applying knowledge that will be consequential and beneficial to our students, Vermont, and the larger society; will help us realize our vision to be among the nation’s premier small research universities; and will strengthen the University’s current position and secure its future in an increasingly challenging and competitive environment. This memo outlines preliminary plans that will keep our three initial transdisciplinary research initiatives moving forward. An equally important focus this year will be to continue our dialogue with the Faculty Senate and the campus community about how we can continue to focus and strengthen our scholarly activities.

May 20 Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee Report
We are extremely grateful to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Transdisciplinary Research Initiative for its thoughtful and substantive work. The Senate will take up the report this fall and identify the recommendations of highest priority that will provide the basis for conversations about the next steps of what we see as an iterative and continuing process. This would include, we believe, decisions about the timing and organization of the next call for transdisciplinary research proposals. Given the feedback we received last year, we suggest that the next call for proposals should occur no earlier than fall 2011. This will enable us to use academic year 2010-11 as a period of reflection and discussion. In addition, we have much to learn from the implementation of the three initial Spires and this will inform future plans.

Implementation of Three Initial Spires: Complex Systems; Food Systems; and Neuroscience, Behavior and Health

Steering Committees
We will convene three faculty-led steering committees to guide the implementation phase of the three initial Spires. Steering committees will interact regularly with both the Senate and the Council of Deans, reporting on activities and seeking advice. The administration will work closely with the Faculty Senate and others to define the functions of the steering committees and determine their optimal composition. It may be useful to begin by sharing our early thinking with you.

Steering Committee Functions
The primary function of the steering committees is to provide leadership and proactively cultivate cross-campus collaborations and transdisciplinary research teams and projects. Steering committee functions may include:
Strategic Planning/Goals/Metrics

- Develop more detailed plans for research and graduate education projects
- Establish near-term goals (e.g., for a 3-year horizon, updated annually) the achievement of which will clearly support the long-term goal of national recognition
- Work with the administration, deans, and the Research, Scholarship and Graduate Education Committee to develop short-term and long-term metrics to measure progress and success
- Share insights that will inform faculty staffing/hiring discussions among the deans and Provost

Participation and Communication

- Cultivate cross-campus participation by providing faculty with opportunities to network and engage; coordinate communication relative to intellectual opportunities/projects
- Facilitate communication of Spire-related activities across campus
- Organize seminars, talks, and invited lectures which might serve as catalysts to the formation of transdisciplinary (TD) research teams
- Participate in TD tenure-track recruitments as members of search committees, attend job talks, meet with candidates
- Participate in periodic joint steering committee meetings

Other Activities

- Identify and develop engaging graduate and undergraduate educational experiences within the transdisciplinary area
- Write grant proposals (team and/or “Center” proposals)
- Identify and allocate steering committee resources

Steering Committee Composition

It will be important to assemble balanced groups of faculty members that represent a variety of scholarly perspectives, approaches and fields. Since we will need to supplement internal resources with external resources, it will be essential to include faculty members with a demonstrated record of building programs and with success in attracting external support. Selection of the steering committee chairs will also be of critical importance; we seek visionary intellectual leaders who will serve as true transdisciplinary scholars and foster the growth of the Spire in a collaborative way.

Steering Committee Selection Process

We envision a selection process similar to the TRI working group selection process. Faculty members will self-nominate, or be nominated, and we will gather information regarding interest in serving as Chair. We would then consult with Faculty Senate leadership, faculty, the deans, and other leadership groups to gather advice and counsel upon which final selection decisions, including the selection of the Chair, would be based.

While it is likely that some (perhaps many) members of the working groups will be appointed to the steering committees, we do not presume that all working group members will have the time, energy or interest to devote to this phase of the process. Thus, we will assemble these groups from scratch, but we seek continuity in membership from last year’s working groups. We will put out a call for nominations soon, which will include information about administrative support and other resources available to the Steering Committees.
Conclusion
All of these matters will be discussed at this year’s initial meetings of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee and the Research, Scholarship and Graduate Education Committee. Please share any feedback you may have with these groups.

We enter this implementation phase with great enthusiasm, and look forward to the early, tangible results of a process that is rooted in commitments we have made to ourselves through our shared governance system that called for us to “focus and strengthen research, scholarship, and the creative arts,” and to do so by creating a “roadmap and a process to measure success and allocate resources to mutually enhance research foci and graduate education.”

cc:  Student Government Association
     Graduate Student Senate
     Board of Trustees
     Alumni Council