To: UCM Senate faculty

From: Gregg Camfield, Interim Vice Provost for the Faculty

Re: Strategic Academic Focusing, Next Steps

UC Merced, with 200 ladder-rank faculty, is about two-fifths the size of the next largest UC campus (Santa Cruz) and less than one eighth the size of the largest (UCLA).[[1]](#footnote-1) Even when we reach our 2020 target of about 400 senate faculty, we are likely to continue to grow, though how quickly depends substantially on how well we can attract funding—from the state, from the federal government through grants and financial aid, from private foundations, through partnerships with private industry, and through the growth of our endowment.[[2]](#footnote-2) No matter how quickly we grow after we reach the 2020 goal, we will find ourselves better positioned to advance all of our academic initiatives if we can present to all of our constituents a cogent picture of the work we do.

Thus the Strategic Academic Focusing Initiative workgroup has asked faculty to envision their scholarship and creative activity as a shared enterprise, first through group-based proposals, next by asking members of those groups to collaborate on larger-scale proposals. The SAFI workgroup then reviewed these round-two proposals to find clusters that might be the basis of our final research themes.[[3]](#footnote-3) These clusters are not yet actually research themes, however, as they do not represent an effort by the faculty to build intellectual coherence out of the raw material. At this stage, then, we must begin to build that coherence.

I have outlined five tasks, which we must at least begin to work on before we can respond to the next call for FTE with the intentional clarity that will enable us to build a distinctive campus profile. What is most important about this list, however, is that each step is more or less part of a recursive process. As the campus continues to grow, we will learn much about how best to build these areas, how best to govern them, and how best to use them to bring in external resources. The external contexts will change, too, as we and other researchers build knowledge and experience in each of these research areas. Thus, it is most important for us to address the first task right now, responding to the others mainly as they illuminate our work on the first. After we gain clarity in refining the research themes, we can address the other areas with greater care over time.

N.B. Most of the content required in this step is present in the various previous proposals. Our task is to push it to a higher level of generality in order both to inform FTE and infrastructure planning and to enable us to present our campus to external constituencies.

1. To refine the five general research groupings so that each represents a clear area of focus, a distinctive theme that can be cogently and concisely articulated. Each should clearly identify what is at stake, i.e. what are the significant research questions, problems to be solved, services to be performed, value to be added to the valley, the state, and the world. Sufficient clarity will help us to:
   1. Articulate the research theme concisely to external and internal constituencies, which will in turn enable the entire campus to
   2. develop a faculty hiring plan (see Task V below)
   3. facilitate recruitment of graduate students
   4. direct fund-raising efforts
   5. plan the correct scale for appropriate support systems, such as technological infrastructure, research support systems, technology transfer support, internship support, post-doc support, graduate student support, etc.
   6. design and secure the space we will need to support our teaching, research, and service
2. To explain the context of efforts to develop research programs in each theme
   1. 2009 Vision statement. Provost Peterson began our current focusing exercise by referring to the 2009 document, asking faculty to investigate continuities and changes. <http://academicpersonnel.ucmerced.edu/pdf/090421-strategic-academic-vision.pdf>
   2. Undergraduate education. The current balance between ladder and contingent faculty is inappropriate and unsustainable. Any hiring plan must account for the long-term teaching mission of the entire campus, not just in undergraduate majors, but also in general education and elective courses. Please consider:
      1. Opportunities for direct student engagement in the research agenda(s)
      2. The possibility that these research themes might provide a workable structure for UCM’s vision for a 21st century undergraduate education—what relationships exist between this research area and what is essential to the education of our undergraduate students?
      3. The appropriate balance of faculty effort between research in thematic areas and programmatic needs that fall out of the research foci but are nonetheless central to the functioning of a major research university
   3. Funding
      1. What is the relationship between student FTE and faculty FTE for this theme? Are there plans for new majors, minors, grad programs, professional programs?
      2. Realistically, how much of the research agenda can be supported
         1. by government grants?
         2. by private foundations?
         3. through public/private partnerships?
         4. through gifts?
   4. Current strengths and synergies. Where do we have critical mass of intellectual and support resources to move quickly? What additional key hires would leverage our current strengths?
   5. Current weaknesses. Are there significant weaknesses that would impede the development of research in each theme? What would it take to overcome such weaknesses and over what time?
   6. State of the field: mature fields tend to be high profile, highly prestigious, and slow to accept newcomers. New fields are more accessible, but may never “pan out.” Some old fields are in flux that might provide us opportunities to become well known.
3. Measures of and plans for measuring success. Some measures of success (egs., AAU membership, hosting a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa) are too far off to be reasonable criteria for the success of this plan. Some shorter term measures are already taken, but are not currently aggregated or disaggregated in ways that would help us understand how well any one area of research is developing. But the principle of peer review on which higher education is based means that some rigorous review of each theme will be requisite down the road. Please propose how best to measure success. We will undoubtedly use, *as appropriate*, some combination of the following:
   1. Research productivity (data collected in the personnel process, and the Academic Personnel Office can aggregate the research output of individual faculty members by their affiliation with a research theme. Criteria by which to analyze these data need to be outlined.)
   2. Student success
      1. Graduation rates and time to degree for undergrads and grad students (monitored by institutional research and reported in IPEDS data and in accreditation, but current methods would make it difficult to track by research theme. Moreover, the appropriateness of using any of these data will depend on a number of choices made in Task II and Task IV)
      2. Placements of graduates
   3. Post-doc placements

Again, this list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. Refine and expand as you see fit.

1. Develop an administrative structure or mechanism for each group. The simpler the better, unless Task II yields strong connections to educational programs such that a robust administrative system is needed. The current need is no more than to articulate how to mediate FTE requests between By-law 55 units, graduate groups, and faculty engaged in the work of the thematic cluster so that we can develop and maintain some kind of coherence within a theme. (After the last town-hall meeting, one faculty member suggested that each theme have a steering committee composed of the chairs of each constituent By-law 55 group. Another two suggested that the themes merely be used as guidance by any By-law 55 group that wishes to propose a hire that fits into any theme.)
2. Develop a Faculty Hiring Plan for the theme, considering:
   1. Fundamental research needs
   2. Applied research needs
   3. General teaching needs (coverage of undergrad curricula, graduate curricula)
   4. Specific teaching needs (theme-specific graduate advising, off-campus field work and internship supervision, etc.)
   5. Faculty governance needs (eg faculty/administrators for personnel groups, ORUs, centers, grad groups, etc.)

For each of the five themes, I will post this document on the UCF proposal site. Currently, the work-group is drafting descriptions for each theme. I will add these when they become available. I will also post further documentation on how the various proposals might connect to the various themes.

I ask faculty who see themselves as working within any theme to post comments on this material, using the five tasks I enumerate above to guide the commentary. Responding to these drafts and comments, I will develop an agenda for five meetings, one for each research theme, to be scheduled in the week after Thanksgiving break. By the end of these meetings, we will have, at minimum, a clear, concise description of each theme. We also should have sketched out how to carry forward on-going planning for each theme.

1. <http://legacy-its.ucop.edu/uwnews/stat/headcount_fte/apr2014/welcome.html>. I’ve used internal data to give a current UCM ladder-rank FTE count. The data available at this URL are for April 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Originally, UCM was slated to reach 25,000 students and 1,000 ladder-rank faculty. The 2020 plan takes us to about 10,000 students and 400 ladder-rank faculty. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These five are: Chem/Bio/Materials; Computation/Analysis/Big Data; Entrepreneurship and Management; Sustainability; and Research for Community and Social Benefit. In addition, campus growth will include FTE allocated to foundations needed by any major university. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)