

February, 2007

Dear MSU Faculty and Staff:

Greetings from the Office of Research and Economic Development! I hope that your semester is going well, and that you were able to enjoy some of the MSU Birthday festivities. In this letter, I want to make you aware of several initiatives that are under way in our office, as well as to discuss some benchmarking data as a precursor to developing a strategic plan for research at MSU.

We have been working on changing the Office of Research and Development website in order to provide information that will be useful to the university research community. All communications and presentations that I make are now posted on the website, and can be either downloaded or used for reference at <http://www.research.msstate.edu/personals/schulz.php>. As an example, my presentation related to university benchmarking is located on this site, as well as copies of my monthly "Dear Colleague Letters". This month, we are pleased to also introduce our first "Security" newsletter. If you go to our main research page (www.research.msstate.edu) and click the "Security Newsletter" at the bottom of the page, you can download a PDF file of the newsletter. If you have any questions or concerns related to facility or data security, please contact our Facility Security Officer (Neil Lewis, nelewis@info.msstate.edu).

I am a significant proponent of strategic planning to develop a roadmap that provides a clearly articulated vision and direction for any organizational unit. The first part the development of a strategic plan is to do a thorough benchmarking analysis to ensure a clear understanding of our current situation. If we don't do a thorough assessment of where we currently are, it is very challenging to develop a realistic plan to move us towards the future.

So, where do you go to get reliable data for benchmarking? The Center at the University of Florida (<http://thecenter.ufl.edu/>) was founded to assess the performance of major research institutions, and compiles information from a variety of sources to do so. Additionally, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching ranks academic institutions (<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp>), placing them in broad categories that emphasize the overall mission of the university. Between these two data sources, it is possible to develop a general overview of where Mississippi State ranks nationally in terms of research standing.

In terms of our classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, we are currently ranked in the Research University – High Activity category, along with the University of Mississippi, the University of Arkansas, the University of Alabama, and Auburn University. The remainder of the SEC schools are ranked in the Research University – Very High category. This determination is made primarily through the production of doctoral students and research funding. Thus, as measured by

the Carnegie Foundation, we rank in the lower half of the SEC in terms of research funding and doctoral student production.

In order to put our rankings in context, it is important to select some appropriate benchmarking institutions to use for comparison purposes. In the peer-plus category (i.e., those institutions that would be consistently ranked significantly higher than we are), I chose the University of Florida (which also is an SEC school), and Texas A&M University (which is one of the leading land grant universities in the nation with a very strong engineering and agriculture emphasis). For peer institutions (i.e., those institutions which are similar in size, level of state support, and aspirations), I chose Clemson University, Auburn University, and Louisiana State University. While Auburn and LSU are significantly larger than MSU, we compete with these institutions for funding, students, and faculty. Clemson is nearly identical to MSU in size, scope, and national reputation. Additionally, the peer institutions are all located in states that have not historically supported higher education to the same level as our counterparts in the Northeast or Midwestern parts of the United States.

In terms of overall research funding, Mississippi State ranks among the top 80 institutions nationally, and has been at this level for the past several years. This is an outstanding accomplishment, and is a testament to the quality of our faculty in terms of proposal and grant writing. In faculty awards garnered, doctoral students graduated, and postdoctoral students mentored, we rank among the top 150 institutions nationally. In terms of doctoral students produced and post-doctoral students supported, we essentially rank behind all of our peers and peer-plus universities used in this benchmarking study. For additional details and historical trends, see the PowerPoint presentation entitled “Research at Mississippi State University – Benchmarking”, which can be downloaded from: <http://www.research.msstate.edu/personals/schulz.php>

So what does all of this mean? I think the most significant conclusion of the benchmarking study is that we need to be putting as many resources as possible into building our doctoral programs. If we are able to increase the number of doctoral student graduates, then we should see concurrent increases in peer-reviewed publications, in awards garnered by our faculty members, and in patent applications. In short, I believe that Ph.D. students are really the key to moving us forward as a research university – both in terms of our Carnegie Classification and in terms of our overall national ranking and reputation.

While I think it is clear what we need to do, the pathway forward may not be as clear. I have had the opportunity to present this data to several groups on campus (University Senate, Faculty Research Advisory Committee, and Center Directors), and there have been several comments that have come up frequently. First, this must be a strong collaborative effort between all of the key research players on campus, including the Office of Research, the Office of the Provost (including Graduate Studies), and the Division of Agriculture, Forestry, and Veterinary Medicine. Second, while stipends paid from research grants are nationally competitive, our state funded graduate student stipends are not even regionally competitive, making it difficult to attract the best

graduate students. Third, we have significant teaching loads in some units, making the advising of graduate students very problematic. While none of these things are insurmountable, they will need to be addressed if we are to move forward with research at MSU.

One of the most impressive aspects of our faculty at MSU is that we have a great number of creative problem solvers. Over the next two months, I want to engage in discussions with as many campus groups as possible to find innovative and creative ways to increase both our research funding and our doctoral program enrollments. There are no easy answers, but I believe that if we have an open and honest dialog, that collectively we can identify key barriers to increasing our research capabilities, and develop an effective strategic plan to overcome those barriers.

As always, I welcome your comments, criticisms, and suggestions.

Go Dawgs!

Kirk.