Terms of Reference for the
Action Team on Crosscutting Campus-Wide Research Themes

Purpose of Aspire 2020

Aspire 2020 is a bold planning initiative for scholarship on the Norman Campus including Norman Campus Programs at OU-Tulsa. It centers on the goal of Becoming the Nation’s Foremost Public Comprehensive Research University of Our Size, and involves three objectives: Transforming our Research Culture, Transforming our Research Engagement, and Transforming our Research Competitiveness. Aspire 2020 will not create a written plan, but instead will serve as both a practical framework as well as a philosophy for continuously advancing our research and creative activities. New practices and paradigms created as part of Aspire 2020 will help the University of Oklahoma achieve its full potential as one of the Nation’s research powerhouses. For more information, visit http://aspire2020.ou.edu.

Action Teams

Foundational to the success of Aspire 2020 is active engagement by faculty and administrators from every college, department and research unit. Action Teams, facilitated by faculty, are the mechanism for this engagement. For a period of approximately 2 months, starting April 15, the first three Action Teams will meet to address a specific topic and develop a set of prioritized actions leading to measurable outcomes in support of the three goals listed above. Participation in Action Teams is open to everyone and no registration or application is needed; simply attend the meetings. Summaries of each Action Team meeting will be placed in a web-based discussion forum on the Aspire 2020 site so faculty can post comments and suggestions and view the same from their colleagues.

Charge to the Action Team on Crosscutting Campus-Wide Research Themes

The Crosscutting Campus-Wide Research Themes Action Team will consider the value proposition, possible constructs, and expected outcomes of broad research themes as a mechanism to build awareness of programs across campus, facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, position faculty for external funding, and position OU to address some of the Nation’s most significant intellectual and cultural challenges.

Action Team Leadership

The Research Incentives and Rewards Action Team will be co-led by Professor May Yuan (Geoinformatics Program and Center for Spatial Analysis) and Dr. Heather Basara (Center for Applied Social Research).

Background on the Use of Crosscutting Campus-Wide Research Themes

Several universities have established broad imperatives, areas of distinction, or themes around which to focus some of their research activities and thus investment of resources. One such example is Oregon State University, which on its web site notes that: “Oregon State is differentiated from other universities in part through its focus, current strengths, and great potential in five multidisciplinary academic thematic areas that integrate the mission of teaching, research, and outreach that is our charge from the people of Oregon. These robust intellectual themes, which respond to the unique challenges of Oregon’s future, are integral to our vision, and constitute signature academic priorities that define the University. Accordingly, while OSU will progress in many areas, it will prioritize its academic resources and investments on:

- Understanding the origin, dynamics and sustainability of Earth and its resources
- Optimizing enterprise, technological change and innovation
• Realizing the potential of the life sciences and the optimal delivery of public health services in healthy environments
• Managing natural resources that contribute to quality of life and sustainability
• Building and maintaining a strong curriculum and basic inquiry in the arts and sciences

Oregon State has now moved to “Areas of Distinction” that include: Advancing the Science of Sustainable Earth Ecosystems; Improving Human Health and Wellness; Promoting Economic Growth and Social Progress.

It is important to note that broad research themes, such as those noted above and to be considered by this Action Team, are not meant to represent exclusive areas of investment by an institution; indeed, the pursuit by individual faculty of their own creative ideas is the foundation of the modern research university and will not be compromised or displaced. The University of Oklahoma subscribes fully to this notion. Consequently, crosscutting campus-wide research themes may or may not be appropriate for OU, but even if they are, they might be pursued with objectives different from those of other institutions.

Shown below are sample research themes for OU to help stimulate discussion: they do NOT represent themes under consideration but rather were crafted based upon existing strengths at OU and, in most cases, involve topics that are broadly engaging across physical science, engineering, social sciences, and the fine arts and humanities. They are provided solely as a means to stimulate conversation, and individually seek to express areas that engage virtually every program on campus:

• Understanding and communicating potential impacts of local and regional climate change
• Improving the quality and availability of water
• Predicting the fate of ecological systems and understanding their relationship to sustainability and economic security
• Advancing the science, engineering and economics of sustainable energy
• Applying arts and humanities to advancing the quality and security of life
• Advancing the technology and affordability of health care
• Understanding the evolution of societies toward extremism
• Cascading failures in physical and social systems

Questions to be Addressed

The work of Action Teams is guided by a number of questions, and shown below are possible questions to be addressed by the Action Team on Crosscutting Campus-Wide Research Themes. Answers to some will influence whether others remain valid or new ones should be added at the discretion of the Team.

1. What should be the value proposition, mechanism for implementation, number, frequency of revision, and expected outcomes of crosscutting campus-wide research themes if such themes were used at OU?
2. What alternatives exist to achieving the same outcomes in support of Aspire 2020 objectives?
3. Can research themes be crafted that involve virtually every discipline or college on campus, or would themes having a more narrow focus (e.g., one in physical science, one in life science, one in arts and humanities) be more effective?
4. Should at least one theme, or perhaps all, include topics that engage elements of the Health Sciences Center?
5. If OU chose to implement three research themes, what should they be and why?
6. How could such themes, if implemented, be aligned with the research agendas of the State and Nation and thus position OU faculty for success in garnering external funding?
7. What resources would be required to support crosscutting campus-wide research themes and what metrics should be used to assess their effectiveness?

Process and Timeline

The Action Team should meet weekly, starting the week of 19 April 2010, to ensure an ability to complete its work by 15 June 2010. Concise summaries of each meeting will be posted to the Action Team forum on the Aspire 2020 web site to ensure broad faculty participation. Support for the Action Team will be provided by the Office of the VP for Research.
Other Materials

Action Team co-chairs and VPR Office staff will provide on the Aspire 2020 web site additional resources relevant to the topic being studied.

Expected Outcome

The Action Team is expected to provide to the VP for Research a set of actionable recommendations including priorities, resources needed, and metrics for assessing progress.