Dear Colleague,

I am writing today to share with you a proposal that is intended to redefine the manner in which our University conceives of academic leadership and selects individuals to serve in such roles. The impetus for this proposal originated from comments that were voiced during the AAUP’s open forum that was held in April of this year regarding the Comprehensive Plan for Academic Reorganization. The overarching theme during this forum, and the common thread that bound a majority of the diverse comments together, was that of “leadership,” particularly the culture of leadership and the desire of faculty to be given greater voice and direct involvement in the selection process. In light of these comments, this proposal was thoughtfully developed and refined over the past several months by a group of concerned faculty members who regard the reorganization initiative as a unique opportunity to redefine the relationship between faculty members and those who serve in academic leadership roles. Specifically, the proposal outlines three objectives:

1. To dispense with the notion of administrators as "bosses" or "adversaries" and, instead, to culturally redefine the role as that of a "service leader among professional peers."

2. To establish provisions which allow the faculty body to have greater voice and direct involvement in the selection of its academic leaders.

3. To create specific leadership development initiatives that convey the core values of shared governance and collegiality within our University, while at the same time providing professional growth opportunities for those serving in leadership positions as well as others who aspire to such service roles.

Please review the proposal, openly discuss its merits with your colleagues, and feel free to contact us with any questions or suggestions. The proposal will also be presented to the Faculty Senate with the goal of soliciting additional input and perhaps then forwarding it as a recommendation for implementation to the Provost. We are sincerely hopeful you will agree that the ideas it contains have strong merit for further improving both the culture and future of our University.

Respectfully,

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REDEFINING THE CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI:
A Proposal to Supplement the Plan for Academic Reorganization: Vision 2020*

The Comprehensive Plan for Academic Reorganization recently presented to The University of Southern Mississippi campus community represents a historically unprecedented opportunity to fundamentally redefine the existing culture of academic leadership and significantly influence the institution’s evolution into the future. This document proposes a reconsideration of the organizational paradigm that for many years has unnecessarily restricted the manner and mechanisms by which key academic leadership roles have been both conceptualized and filled within the University. More specifically, this proposal is squarely based upon the long-standing principles of shared governance, transparent decision-making, and mutual trust, all of which are hallmarks of progressive and successful universities. By incorporating these simple principles using the multi-stage process described below, all segments of the university community will be more fully vested in the institution’s success, thereby better positioning it to withstand the myriad external forces confronting the future of higher education in the state and nation. The newly-conceived philosophy of academic leadership that is borne from this historical reorganization has the potential to dispel the notion of faculty administrators as “adversaries” or “bosses,” establishing instead a transformative culture where such roles are conceived of as “service leaders among professional peers.”

The Proposed Selection Process for Academic Leadership Positions

The proposal that follows is intended to outline a process by which the faculty has direct input into the nomination, screening, and selection of its academic leaders, thereby minimizing concerns associated with the consolidation of academic authority. It has been written in a manner that provides the flexibility necessary to accommodate the highly varied nature of academic leadership roles within the University’s existing and future organizational structure.

1. Faculty Nomination of Candidates for Academic Leadership Positions:

When the University community seeks to fill academic leadership positions (e.g., Dean, Associate Dean, Chair and Executive Director, Associate Chair and Executive Director, Department Chair), all members of the Corps of Instruction who work within the affected organizational unit (hereinafter referred to as “the relevant faculty”) will be afforded the opportunity to openly nominate candidates from among the faculty ranks. For the majority of academic leadership positions,

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nominated faculty candidates should occupy the rank of tenured associate professor or professor. Relevant faculty members will be allowed to nominate internal candidates from a list of all eligible tenured associate professors or professors within the affected organizational unit. The nomination process can be easily facilitated using existing university resources in a manner similar to the electronic election process currently used for various faculty governance bodies. The Office of the Provost, in conjunction with representative faculty advisory bodies, will administer, supervise, and tabulate the results of the nomination process. The eligible faculty members who receive the greatest number of nominations (perhaps, but not necessarily, three by convention or as determined appropriate by each unit) will be asked if they wish to be considered further for the position. If one or more are unwilling to do so, the eligible faculty member with the next greatest number of nominations will be asked if s/he is willing to be considered. This process will continue until either the target number of eligible candidates (three by convention or as determined to be appropriate by each unit) who are willing to be considered is identified or until the list of eligible faculty is exhausted.

2. Faculty Screening of Candidates for Academic Leadership Positions:

All of the faculty candidates who emerge from the internal nomination process described above, as well as any qualified external candidates identified through traditional means such as selection by a search committee, will be engaged by the relevant faculty through a formal presentation and an open forum. The purpose of the formal presentation and an open forum is to allow all eligible faculty-nominated and external candidates to share and discuss with the relevant faculty their leadership philosophy, strategic vision, and long-term goals for the position and organization.

3. Faculty Selection of Academic Leaders:

Upon conclusion of the screening process, all relevant faculty members within the affected organizational unit will be allowed sufficient and reasonable time to deliberate each candidate’s merit and qualifications and then vote for a preferred candidate by electronic means. If a singular candidate receives two-thirds or greater of the vote (a supermajority), that candidate will be recommended by the relevant faculty body to the Dean and Provost for further consideration in the selection process. If no candidate receives a supermajority, then the top two candidates will be recommended to the Dean and Provost for further consideration in the selection process. While the nomination, screening, and selection processes described above support the principles of shared governance, transparent decision-making, and mutual trust, relevant faculty within the affected organizational unit must acknowledge that such recommendations are advisory in nature and that final decision-making authority within Academic Affairs rests with the Provost.
4. Term Limits for Service in Academic Leadership Positions:

Service in the academic leadership role of Dean, Associate Dean, Chair and Executive Director, Associate Chair and Executive Director, and Department Chair shall be limited to a four-year term with the possibility of an additional, one-time four-year extension. In no instance shall an individual serve in the same academic leadership position for more than two consecutive four-year terms. At the start of the fourth year of an individual’s term of leadership service, the selection process described above will be repeated (beginning no later than the first month and concluding no later than the end of the sixth month). If a new individual is selected to serve in the leadership role, s/he will work alongside the incumbent leader during the remaining months in the capacity of “leader-elect” with the goal of facilitating a seamless transition. It is generally anticipated that the leader-elect: (1) will not possess official authority during the transitional period, and (2) should be released from other research, teaching, and service obligations so that s/he may “shadow” the incumbent and become fully immersed in the new leadership role.

Supporting the Plan to Redefine the Culture of Leadership at The University of Southern Mississippi Through Leadership Development Initiatives

In order to facilitate the proposed transformation in how the University conceives of and selects faculty members to serve as leaders among professional peers, additional consideration must be given to the manner in which such talent is not only identified and cultivated, but also provided with the necessary resources to prosper and eventually return such investment to the institution. To achieve this vitally important end, a concerted effort should be undertaken to establish leadership development opportunities that capitalize upon the talent and potential that currently exists within the faculty ranks.

Proposed Leadership Development Initiatives:

The Office of the Provost will identify and engage a core number of highly motivated faculty members who are committed to redefining the culture of leadership at USM and charge the group with organizing and implementing an internal “Academic Leadership Institute” (ALI). The Institute can operate under the purview of the existing Center for Faculty Development and is consistent with Dr. Amy Miller’s plans for creating a “Faculty Leadership Institute.” Within this context, the programmatic ideas that follow provide additional substance and detail regarding how the ALI can progress toward the goal of timely realization. Specifically, the Institute will serve the following immediate functions:

1. Organizing and implementing a mandatory “Leadership Orientation Series” that will expose all Deans, Associate Deans, Chair and Executive Directors, Associate Chair and Executive Directors, and Department Chairs (regardless of past experience) to the fundamentals of leadership within the culture of USM. The
orientation series will provide an overview of academic leadership expectations from various organizational perspectives so that the role is clearly articulated and properly understood at the outset of service. Particular attention should be given to conveying that the role is that of a "service leader among professional peers." This can be accomplished by instilling an appreciation for the rights / interests of staff and faculty, the importance of collegiality and mutual professional respect, the practical necessity of cooperative shared governance, and an awareness of the generally accepted standards of academic freedom. Faculty and staff representatives from relevant governance bodies, committees, and advocacy groups should be actively involved in the development and delivery of content.

2. Creating and delivering a required “Leadership Enhancement Series” for all Deans, Associate Deans, Chair and Executive Directors, Associate Chair and Executive Directors, and Department Chairs (regardless of past experience). Participation by active academic leaders occupying such roles should occur on a quarterly basis throughout the term of service. The series will most likely include various seminars, lectures, independent / group activities, and workshops. While the series is primarily intended for those who will be selected to serve as new academic leaders under the Plan for Reorganization, such seminars, lectures and workshops should also be made available to the larger faculty community as a proactive means for cultivating future leaders.