UIC Leadership Retreat
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Building a Culture of Excellence and the Risk of Risk Aversion
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Good morning! I am delighted to welcome you to the 2016 Leadership retreat. We have what I hope will be an interesting morning ahead of us. This event has historically been hosted by the provost, prior to the new structure and the Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs being put in place, and we will continue that tradition for the most part this year and probably shift it around more next year. You will get a chance to hear from Bob Barish in a moment.

I arrived at UIC on February first and spent the last six months drinking from the proverbial firehose. I want to thank all of you for aiming it right at me! Seriously, I felt so warmly welcomed here, as I know Bob did too, more than I had imagined, and I am very grateful to so many of you for meeting with me, individually and in groups, and patiently explaining, and in some cases explaining again, the ins and outs of your work and of UIC.

In thinking about how to structure today’s event, I looked over the agendas from previous leadership retreats, which included presentations and panel discussions about student success, diversity, innovation, measuring outcomes, and strategic planning. These are all critical aspects of our success now, and going forward. In fact, a lot of time and planning was devoted last year to these issues by several excellent campus-wide committees appointed by the Chancellor, and there are additional important issues receiving significant attention. We have a robust student success initiative, a new strategic priorities document, a new strategic plan for the University of Illinois system, a thoughtful resource planning document, an enrollment strategic plan, an African American student success report, and a new teaching initiative well underway. There is ongoing work by another committee creating a facilities master plan.

Rather than have this gathering today focus on a discrete topic in higher education as it has in the past, I decided I would rather share some reflections on my first six months at UIC and talk about Building a Culture of Excellence and the Risk of Risk Aversion. That topic will then be explored by our guest, Dr. Arin Reeves, a consultant and expert on leadership and organizational analysis and change. There will then be the opportunity for you to provide input on the issues raised.

I would like to talk for a moment about some of what has been accomplished in the past 6 months from the perspective of academic affairs. We have a new dean of the honors college, Dean Ralph Keen, and a new vice provost for undergraduate affairs, Dr. Nikos Varelas. A search for a newly created vice provost for international affairs is underway. These last two hires will create an opportunity to realign and improve student and faculty support services from my office, and although there is a long history of collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, I am determined to build better bridges and we are working with student affairs on mechanisms for doing that.

My office has adjusted a few policies to create more efficiency in business operations and to ensure that we keep pace with our competitors with respect to faculty hiring and retention. These changes, done in consultation with VCHA Bob Barish, benefit the whole campus, east and west. In February, we launched an online faculty-offer approval process for administrative and tenured hires that narrows the average university approval time from an upper limit of two weeks to less than a week. We
eliminated the requirement for Provost and VCHA approval of faculty counter-offers so that it is easier and quicker to provide counter offers to faculty in order to retain them. We also eliminated the requirement that a faculty member have a written offer from another institution before receiving a counter offer.

We created an expedited offer letter process for lateral faculty that allows for tenured offers to occur on a conditional basis, clearly subject to a tenure vote and other administrative approvals. We have initiated exit interviews for all faculty who are choosing to leave UIC, whether for a position elsewhere or to retire. This will be an important data set for self-reflection and improvement. We are in the process of crafting a plan to reopen the cluster hire initiative in a way that can simultaneously achieve our goals of institutionalizing transdisciplinary collaboration, hiring underrepresented faculty, and responding to our instructional needs. We are also going to create a leadership academy for underrepresented faculty to introduce interested faculty to higher ed administration, and we are working on establishing mandatory training for members of search committees. These are just a few of the initiatives that my office will be leading in the coming year. There are all kinds of exciting things happening in the colleges and I feel incredibly grateful to have come into this position when there is such a strong group of deans leading our colleges.

VCHA Bob Barish and I came into a new structure for UIC and we have dedicated ourselves to making it work. We meet often and consult at least several times each week on various issues ranging from collaborative grant applications, to faculty retention efforts, to budget priorities, and more. We are doing a monthly feature in UIC News called East meets West, which features interdisciplinary projects involving researchers and students from the east and west side of campus. I attend the Health Sciences Deans Council meeting each month and each time it has led to some new form of collaboration, or a new way to grow cross-campus interdisciplinary activities. Just last week, for example, as an outcome of a presentation by the postdoctoral student organization, Bob, Mltra Dutta, and I agreed that we need to increase our support in of this organization, particularly around non-academic career mentoring and services.

I don’t need to tell you that the faculty at UIC is outstanding and there is important and foundational research and scholarship going on here. And most of you here today - the deans, associate deans, directors, heads and chairs – are not only academic leaders committed to excellence but scholars in your own right. A few examples of recent faculty accomplishments include:

- Luis Alberto Urrea, professor of English, was chosen as one of five finalists for the 2016 PEN/Faulkner award.
- UIC is partnering with Northwestern University and the University of Chicago to enroll 150,000 Illinoisans in the national Precision Medicine Initiative to develop individualized care. The Illinois consortium is receiving over $50 million dollars from NIH for this project.
- The Cure Violence initiative, founded by Public Health professor Gary Slutkin, was ranked fourteenth of the top five hundred NGOs in the world.
- A potentially revolutionary “artificial leaf” from UIC’s College of Engineering was recently created that cheaply and efficiently converts atmospheric carbon dioxide directly into usable hydrocarbon fuel, using only sunlight for energy.
- Professor Tony Tasset’s colorful, 80-foot-long “Artists Monument,” with the names of four hundred thousand artists inscribed on it, has been on display in Chicago’s Grant Park since February of 2016.
• UIC College of Dentistry students achieved a 100% pass rate on critical board exams, and performed significantly higher than national average on the basic science and clinical science exams.
• UIC’s College of Education launched a Boys College Summer Literacy Institute in July, led by dean Alfred Tatum and with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

VCHA Bob Barish is now going to talk for a few minutes about what is going on in the hospital and clinics.

[presentation omitted]

This is a small sampling of excellence at UIC, with apologies for all of the wonderful things we left off this list. None of these accomplishments is really surprising to me. I came here in large part because it was clear that this is a strong research institution with an excellent faculty, and then I was so impressed with the culture when I visited last October. The same mission was articulated by everyone, in essence, that we are an urban Research One university unlike any other because we are dedicated to engaged research – doing and using our research out in the world and seeking solutions to real-world problems, and we offer opportunity to a wide variety of students who might not find access to it anywhere else.

There are two things, however, that I did not expect to find here. The first was the financial situation we are now in. Chancellor Amiridis and President Killeen assured me back in November before I accepted the job, that once some date in January 2016 passed (I think it was the date for candidates to file for election), the legislature would pass a budget and this mess would end. No one had the imagination to predict that we would be dealing with the situation in which we now find ourselves. We currently have a stopgap budget from the state to get us through December 2016, but we do not know what is going to happen with the second half of the FY17 budget (that is, January through June of 2017) and, because we did not receive the full budget for 2016, we now have a $125 million-dollar cash deficit from 2016. We are still hopeful that the state will fill that deficit, but in case it does not, we are instituting measures to ensure that we have the cash available if the worst case scenario comes to pass. I won’t belabor this point, if you don’t already know about it you will learn soon enough, and just say that the university is doing everything possible to move our friends in Springfield, but the truth is that we at UIC simply don’t control that situation. There is really not much we can do about it. My preference is to focus our efforts here and with all of you on the things that we can control.

The other unexpected thing that I discovered over the past six months, and the focus of the rest of this talk, is that there is a very strong aversion to risk built into our culture here. This aversion to risk appears in several different guises, in some ways it is built into our structure, and my observation is that it is fairly pervasive. It is not a personal attribute of individuals on campus by any means, but it is present, we live with it. And I would submit it is hurting us and threatens our future.

One manifestation of this risk aversion is bureaucracy. I have heard story after story of situations where a decision to hire was made but an offer letter wasn’t completed for months, and sometimes that was too late; where someone was hired but couldn’t get on payroll by their start date; where faculty decided not to apply for grants because it was too complicated to get through the IRB or get the grant out of UIC; where a grant was awarded but it took so long to hire personnel off the grant that the grant was lost or unused; where it took two years to renew a contract with an outside vendor or consultant so we lost opportunities to move forward on initiatives, or to bring in students, or
revenue. Just last week, someone told me that the provost has to sign off on a form when a staff member wants to get reciprocal parking. I’m looking into that one.

Much of this bureaucracy is documented now in the excellent report submitted by the Chancellor’s Resource Strategy Committee. Members of that committee spent months studying this issue and interviewing folks from all over the university and have produced not only a diagnosis of some of our problems, but implementation steps, including the creation of a process improvement unit whose charge is to find places where there are inefficiencies and redundancies and come up with solutions. We are working on getting that up and running.

Moreover, under the leadership of Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for human resources, Michael Ginsburg, real change is occurring in HR to improve support services and provide transparency; modernize technology; provide better training opportunities for new and existing staff; and streamline and modernize hiring processes and policies. HR has launched the UIC HR Welcome Center, which provides general information and guidance regarding HR-related functions. HR has also focused on improving communication and collaboration with Deans, Vice Chancellors, the Faculty Senate, and other campus and university units involved in human resources functions to create greater transparency and collaboration. HR is working on several initiatives involving streamlining processes, updating HR systems such as Banner and HireTouch, and creating job aids and training to assist faculty and staff who are involved in HR processes. The goal is to reduce the number of steps in the hiring process and allow faculty and staff to onboard employees more efficiently and quickly.

Similarly, our new Director of Institutional Research, Bill Hayward, has instituted a service orientation toward all requests, and is committed to quickly filling requests, particularly from faculty who need information for grant-writing and research purposes. I have already heard very positive reviews of this approach from faculty. I am in the process of re-aligning some of the activities of the vice provost offices so that it is clearer to faculty and students where they need to go and to whom they need to talk for information and services. There are other examples of process improvements happening in other vice chancellor offices to address similar issues.

Risk-aversion is related to bureaucracy. A complicated bureaucracy makes risk-taking difficult because by its nature, bureaucracy is conservative – it conserves the status quo by slowing down change, progress and experimentation. People and institutions express their preferences as much by what they choose to do as what they choose not to do, so both creating, supporting and tolerating this bureaucracy is a choice, not an inevitability. This is not a choice by any individual (most people find this incredibly frustrating) - but by the institution. And the choice to tolerate bureaucracy includes within it a choice to shift power to those who run the bureaucracy and away from those who are ultimately responsible for the health of the institution.

There are other manifestations of risk aversion that can’t be directly traceable to bureaucracy. And it isn’t all bad. One appropriate way to be cautious is with deliberation, and deliberation is key to shared governance. This university has a strong culture of shared governance, something I embrace because it is fundamental to academic freedom and the best part of our culture, and it is done well here. This faculty is deeply committed to this institution, and it is the faculty that does the real work of the university so their perspective is critical. I have seen great examples of this in these first six months. The Chancellor’s committee on resource strategy, as I already mentioned, did outstanding work that resulted in a set of recommendations that we are beginning to implement. The Chancellor’s Strategic Priorities Committee also worked in an open and collaborative way and created a thoughtful consensus.
document fleshing out the Chancellor’s four pillars; and the Enrollment Management Task Force and the Committee on the Recruitment of African American Students similarly fulfilled their charges and provided us with roadmaps to the future.

I have seen the results of the work of SCEP and that committee’s dedication to maintaining excellence in our academic programs; and I have witnessed the dedication of the Senate Executive Committee, which is a truly deliberative body in the best sense of the word. I was also very impressed with the college executive committees with whom I met last spring, as well as the Committee of Associate and Assistant Deans (CAAD), the Diversity Advisory Committee, several search committees, the committees working on the Shorelight rollout, and the committees preparing for our upcoming accreditation. All of these bodies, and these are just a few examples, demonstrate the value of deliberation and collaboration, and they are getting things done.

So deliberation can be a good thing, but it can also be a way of being risk-averse, of putting a premium on deliberation that winds up preventing the original goal from being achieved. Deliberation can take the place of action – not necessarily intentionally, but as a byproduct of a thorough and time-consuming review. We have all been on committees that work hard over a long period of time, produce a report and action plan, and it sits on a shelf. I won’t belabor this point, you have all probably been there. This kind of activity substitutes deliberation for action, and is another manifestation of risk aversion.

Another manner in which I have observed risk aversion here is what I call the default answer. Too often when a new idea is surfaced, the first thing that is considered is why we can’t do it. I have seen this in meetings and several different people have told me about instances when that they wanted to do something and they were told there was a policy against it, but no one could actually produce the policy. Sometimes we seem to make up ways to say no and to slow down innovation.

I have not been able to figure out a way to really nail down this aversion to risk, but I have felt its presence, and more revealing, when I have talked about this to faculty and administrators over the past month or so, I have gotten vigorous nods of agreement, sometimes accompanied by eye rolls and heavy sighs. I actually take this reaction as a good thing, because it reveals a shared understanding of the culture and a desire to change. Various explanations for this culture have been suggested to me, including that much of our aversion to risk is the result of historical mistakes – risks that should not have been taken – which led to sanctions and then over-correction through excessive regulation. Others have said it is related somehow to an inferiority complex in relation to Urbana. We have nothing to feel inferior about.

What is, then, the risk of risk-aversion? The risk of risk aversion is that it doesn’t account for what will happen if we don’t take risks. Risk aversion is a way of maintaining the status quo by focusing on all of the bad things that can happen if we try something new – we might not succeed, we might violate some policy, we might get sued, we might not have enough money sometime in the future to sustain the enterprise. It is an approach to change that puts fear first, and opportunity second. If the focus is always on how to avoid what could possibly go wrong if we try something new, then we do not put our attention on what we can gain if we try and succeed.

So the risk of risk-aversion is that we will not fulfill our promise. We have a shared mission that is deeply felt and taken seriously. We have worked hard to set our priorities, we have the talent and loads of human capital – people with highly specialized skills and knowledge capable of great things. We
have staff who are dedicated to this institution, and we have students who are eager to learn and in
great need of an education and experiences to improve their lives and the lives of their families.

What we don’t have is money. We have some, but we don’t have nearly enough to make money
the driving force to allow our faculty, our students, and our institution to reach their potential. In fact,
one could argue that to get more money, in the form of federal and foundation grants and to inspire our
alumni and friends who are in a position to be philanthropic towards us, we need first to take more risks
and show that we can do and be better.

Another risk of risk aversion is that we will fall behind. We are in a time of great change - in
higher education, in technology, in health care and the underlying science of health care, and in the
politics and demographics of our country and of the world. We don’t even know what our everyday
lives will be like in five years – how we will run our households, what device we will carry in our pockets,
what kinds of cars we will drive. But there are a few things we can be pretty sure of: people and
communities are becoming more urban; there will be increased diversity in our country, more
immigrants, more and faster change in all aspects of our lives and in science, technology, and health
care.

So we, right here at UIC, have an amazing opportunity because as a large, diverse, research
institution anchored in one of the great world cities, we are right now perfectly positioned to lead
change, to take smart and calculated risks on small and large scales, and to define higher education for
the future.

This is not an original or new idea. It is already written in the Strategic Priorities, which states
that we must strive to be on the cutting edge of scholarship and research and create a culture of
innovation. It is also part of the Strategic Framework for the University of Illinois, which was recently
adopted by the Board of Trustees. That document says that we will “[b]uild a system-wide culture of
innovation, collaboration, entrepreneurship, and thoughtful risk-taking.”

These are easy words to say and to write, and my guess is that few people in this room would
disagree with them. But the question is how do we operationalize this? How do we build a culture
where thoughtful, strategic risk taking is encouraged and supported? How do we hold ourselves and
each other accountable? How do we support each other in these endeavors? And how do we get this
done in the context of serious financial constraints?

I have been thinking about this all summer. I don’t have an answer, but I want to share a few
thoughts. After that, Dr. Arin Reeves is going to talk from her perspective and offer some strategies.
She is also going to touch on how creating a culture of strategic risk-taking goes hand-in-hand with
creating a culture of inclusion. Then we are going to ask all of you to share your own perspective.

Here are some thoughts, not well formed, but hopefully a start.

We need to develop a default of yes. I don’t want to say no to our faculty, and I don’t want to
say no to our students either. We have to focus on those things that we as leaders have at our disposal
to motivate our faculty and students, and clear the way so that they can achieve their ambitions. This is
our primary job. And this isn’t all about money. University faculty almost by definition are people
motivated by things other than money – whether its personal ambition in their area of expertise,
helping others thrive through education, or creating knowledge to better the world. Many of our faculty,
particularly in the health sciences, the professional schools, and the hard sciences could be making more money through an alternative career path. They chose not to. So did I. Just last week, Dr. Jeffrey Selingo put it this way in the Chronicle of higher education: “The biggest hurdle to change in higher education is not a lack of money, shared governance, a reluctant faculty, or tradition. It’s leadership.”

So what does a default of Yes look like from our perspective, as leaders?

- First, it means cutting through bureaucracy and creating avenues for opportunity. VCHA Bob Barish and I have talked about the fact that it is our job, and therefore your job, to unleash the power of UIC and we can’t do it with all of this bureaucracy weighing us down.
  - Having a system of rapid responses, whether it is in terms of hiring, processing grants or IRB applications, or responding to student requests and needs. Part of rapid response may involve reworking some processes, as we have already started to do, so that when we require information, we ask for what we need, no more, no less.
  - creating more opportunities for collaboration among researchers. This is something Bob Barish and I will continue to work on this year.
  - celebrating faculty and student success and achievement. Encouraging everyone to share their successes and having systems, within departments, colleges, and the administration to share this information and get it out.
  - Reading regulation and policy with an eye toward allowing, not impeding, progress.
  - It means sitting in a meeting and first asking not why something can’t be done, but how it can be done.
  - Changing policies that need changing. Last week, I had my quarterly meeting with the university auditors. I asked them to estimate what percentage of UIC policies are required by federal or state regulation and what percentage were our own creation, not required by anyone or any entity outside of UIC. Their estimate was that fewer than 50% of UIC policy is dictated from outside UIC. So that means we have the ability to change more than 50% of our policies. Think about that. That is a huge amount of control over how we run our university and how we respond to and create change.

- Being a culture of Yes also means having a culture of high expectations
  - We have to hold ourselves, our staffs, and each other to high expectations, no matter what position we are in. And I understand that that means me too, including what I have talked about today.
  - Teaching has to be outstanding. We have to demand this and we have to reward it. One excellent resource for this in the Teaching-Learning Communities, about to begin its second year with an emphasis on new technology in teaching, offering workshops and videos for faculty who want to develop new skills or improve their teaching.
  - Every department and college needs to have tenure and promotion standards that are clear and rigorous and we have to enforce them. But we also need to make sure they are fair, and that they are rewarding what we think should be rewarded today, here and now, given the kind of university we want to be. If your tenure standards in your department are not doing that, then talk to your faculty about changing them.
  - We have to hold the hospital and clinics to high expectations not just in terms of the quality of care, but also in terms of how we treat our patients. We want them to have their expectations met. Making changes, like the time it takes to make an appointment, as Bob just mentioned, is one important example of this kind of thing.
● Finally, a culture of yes means understanding and leaving behind in the dustbin of history the unreasonable fear of failure and censure born of past mistakes for which we have suffered repercussions. We do not want to repeat those mistakes and healthy analysis of risk is critical, but we can do this in a streamlined and smart way without being weighed down by excessive regulation. In the words of one of the great philosophers of our time, Queen Elsa from Frozen, Let it go, let it go.

Of course I am leaving out a lot of specifics. I would not presume to give specifics that apply to everyone in the room. I know some of the specifics of the things that I can control, but you are the experts in your departments and colleges, so you know where your own policies are putting up roadblocks, or not reflecting or supporting the potential and goals of your faculty. And you know where, outside of your own department or area, roadblocks created by others are harming you. You, in the context of our shared governance system, need to fill in the details. That is your role as leaders.

So before turning this over to Dr. Reeves, I will end with one caveat and a final note about the risk of risk aversion. The caveat is that I am not talking here about being rash, about doing things that put people or programs at great risk. I think you all understand this but it is worth saying. I am not talking about financial or social irresponsibility. We can’t support every good idea and we can’t violate the law or even contemplate such a thing. There is a spectrum here, and my point is that we have swung way too far in the direction of aversion to risk and we need to swing back the other way. And it is in our power to do it.

And this leads to my final note about the risk of risk aversion. I believe that if we don’t change this culture now, it is a recipe maybe not for disaster, but certainly stasis and decline. We have very few levers to pull in the challenging economic and political situation in which we now exist. Change in higher education and in health care are going to continue apace no matter what we do. And the millennials are going to just keep coming, until they change into another generation that is equally mystifying and even more removed from how all of us grew up and received our education. The question is, what aspects of this do we control, or can at least affect? And do we as leaders have the will to get out of our comfort zone and take some chances, without success guaranteed? I can tell you, in case you haven’t noticed, that just giving this kind of a talk felt to me like a great personal and professional risk because it is not the kind of talk I am particularly comfortable or accustomed to giving, especially to an academic audience. But my last six months here, and my own growing devotion to this institution and its people, made me believe it was necessary, and worth the risk.