

State of the School

Address by Bart S. Ng, Acting Dean, at the 2008 School of Science Fall Convocation

August 18, 2008

Good afternoon. I would like to welcome everybody to the 2008 School of Science Fall Convocation. I want to extend a special welcome to Dean Uday Sukhatme, whom we proudly count as one of us! As Executive Vice Chancellor, Dean Sukhatme will be speaking to us later in the program about IUPUI's academic plan as well as the role of the School of Science in that plan.

The beginning of every academic year is always a time of excitement and anticipation, and perhaps even more so this year. Given the fact that I am the 4th person standing before you wearing the title of dean, interim dean, or acting dean within the past 4 years, I am sure that all of you will have questions and concerns about the current state and the future of our School. There is no way of getting around the fact that our School has just come through a rather rough patch, and events of the past several years have had a deleterious impact on the morale and confidence of our faculty.

So let me get straight to the point and address what I am sure is the topmost concern on everybody's mind—the fiscal health of our School. Before I go further, I want to take this opportunity to publicly thank Dean Bill Bosron, my immediate predecessor, for the outstanding job he did in stabilizing and then turning around the budget of our School. Owing to a modest increase in our enrollment, new income generated by some much needed laboratory fees, additional start-up funds made available to us by Dean Sukhatme, plus some tough cost-cutting undertaken by Dean Bosron, we will begin this fiscal year with a great deal more budgetary flexibility than we have had in any of the past three years. In short, our School is no longer in deficit. Rather than dazzling you with numbers, let me share with you how I plan to use our new found flexibility to move the School forward in the coming year.

As I am sure all of you are keenly aware, the School has been steadily losing tenure-track faculty for the past ten years. The size of our tenured and tenure-track faculty went from a high of 124 in 1997 to a low of 106 in 2007. And with a recent death and several late resignations, we will begin this year with only 102 tenured or tenure-track members, despite the addition of several new hires. This period of significant faculty attrition coincided with a period of nearly steady and then growing enrollment, and the expansion of several of our academic programs. While we are most appreciative of the contributions of the large number of lecturers on our faculty, we cannot possibly sustain our academic and research programs, let alone raising them to the next level, without aggressively rebuilding the strength of our tenured and tenure-tracked rank.

I have therefore asked that we immediately begin the search for *at least* six tenured or tenure-track positions primarily in Biology and Chemistry—where we have suffered the greatest loss of faculty due to the large number of recent resignations—and for the newly

approved doctoral program in Biostatistics. There will also be several additional searches in Psychology and Mathematics to fill positions left vacant by retirement, death, or change in assignment. I have every intention to make more faculty lines available as we gain confidence in our income and expenditure projections.

For the upcoming searches, I have asked that the rank and tenure status of all positions be left open to ensure that we will attract the strongest possible pool of candidates. It is my strong belief that a synergistic mix of senior and junior appointments is crucial if we are to elevate our research programs quickly to the next level, especially in Biology and Chemistry.

Surely, the task ahead of us will not be an easy one. However, with challenges also come opportunities. Later you will hear from Jim Murphy—our new Associate Dean for Research—that our School was able to substantially increase our external funding this past year despite our shrinking faculty. This perhaps is indicative of the quality of our recently appointed faculty, many of whom have contributed disproportionately to this increase. You will also hear from our colleague Prof. Kathy Marrs about the enormous strides we have made in the area of STEM education. All these are hopeful signs. Despite recent setbacks, our School is on the move again and there is much to celebrate.

The upcoming searches offer us a chance to enhance significantly the strength and quality of our faculty and our academic programs. I should add that our recruitment effort should not and must not stop at the end of this academic year even if we succeed in filling all the positions that our current budget could support. With the help of Dean Sukhatme, I will continue to make our case to the central administration and the IUPUI community at large that a strong School of Science is critical to the mission of our campus, and that IUPUI as a whole will benefit from additional strategic investments in our School. I am indeed very optimistic that, by working with campus administration, we can develop a plan to ensure that resources will be in place for us to continue to make long-term investments for next several years so that we can secure the foundation for an ever stronger and intellectually vibrant School of Sciences for years to come.

Even as we look forward to a brighter fiscal future, we must reexamine the way we have been managing our fiscal resources. To put it mildly, our existing fiscal management capability is barely adequate to keep us out of trouble. In fact, this glaring weakness has undermined much of our past strategic planning effort. The lack of transparency and clearly articulated budgetary priorities often led to confusion and at times even created a sense of mistrust among some departments.

During the next 6 months, with the assistance of Dean Murphy and in consultation with our School's Steering Committee, I plan to put in place a number of new procedures and policies to ensure that we will use and invest our resources for maximum return in the future.

A taskforce has been hard at work this summer on a new policy for graduate student funding. One of the provisions of this new policy is being implemented as we speak.

Starting this fall, those of you who are providing tuition remissions to students from your grants will be billed only at the in-state rate, regardless of the residency status of the student. By my estimation, this change would result in at least \$150K of savings a year to the current grant holders in the School, which they can then use to further their research. By doing so, I also want to remove any hidden financial disincentives that could subtly discourage our faculty from going after the best qualified graduate students nationwide for cost reasons.

In the same spirit, we will examine and develop policies for the distribution of lab fees and indirect cost recovery, the clear accounting of return on our start-up investments, and the long-term maintenance and replacement of shared research equipment and facilities. My ultimate goal is to develop an efficient budgetary structure with built-in incentives that would encourage faculty productivity and promote growth in our graduate programs as well as our core research enterprise.

Along with our faculty, our staff will be encouraged to develop a greater sense of common purpose. An energetic staff with a clear sense of mission is critical to our School's day-to-day operational success.

I have been encouraging the departmental fiscal officers to meet regularly as a group to share information and learn from each other the best practices that could help improve the operation of their respective departments and the School. I have also asked the student service personnel and advisors from all departments to do the same. I have initiated similar conversations with some of our IT staff as well. I am confident that, with encouragement, our staff can become the best source for creative ideas on how our School can provide better services to our faculty as well as our students.

Budgetary and organizational challenges notwithstanding, we must never lose sight of the fact that our core mission must still be science education delivery and the creation of scientific knowledge. In this regard, I must challenge our faculty to think broadly about how we can best position our School in research and education in the 21st century given that advances in science are increasingly dependent on interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration, driven in no small measure by breathtaking developments in the computational and imaging arenas, and the evolution of biology from a highly descriptive discipline to one with clearly elucidated basic principles that can explain how life forms of this planet are organized.

So, how can we create a culture in the School that would truly encourage, support and value interdisciplinary research? How can we effectively prepare our graduates for work and further study in highly collaborative and interdisciplinary settings? I am raising these questions not because I have ready answers. Rather, I believe that we must collectively address these questions head-on and soon if our School is to create a distinctive identity that would allow us to stand out from the crowd. I know quite a few of our faculty are already reaching out across departmental and school boundaries. As we recruit new

faculty in the coming year, I challenge the chairs to take full advantage of any opportunities that could further extend our School's interdisciplinary reach. For my part, I will set aside a sum of money for the establishment of a School of Science Interdisciplinary Lecture Series to encourage the joint invitation of speakers by two or more collaborating departments for the purpose of promoting interdisciplinary research and curriculum development. With the formation of an Honors College now a certainty, and as IUPUI continues to attract more and more well prepared students, our School must rise up to the challenge of creating a strongly interdisciplinary science curriculum that is worthy of our best students.

I began this talk by saying that we must move aggressively to rebuild our tenured and tenure-track faculty. The quality of the faculty we hire in the next few years will be a vital determinant on whether we can build a first-rate School of Science at IUPUI. We must adopt a prospective stance that every new appointment is an opportunity for us to redefine the future of our School and must therefore be approached with utmost care and attention. For every new appointment, we must aim to meet or exceed the standard set by previous appointments. However, building a strong faculty requires more than just effective recruitment. Once appointed, all faculty members need to be helped to grow professionally, and more importantly, they need to be encouraged to meet continuously higher standards. In short, the chairs, assisted by the senior members of every department, should support and prepare all incoming and current faculty members to work in an environment of rising expectations. This is the only way any school or university can improve continuously and stay competitive. Indeed, during the recent President's retreat, President Michael McRobbie was emphatic that all school deans take their fiduciary responsibility seriously in making academic personnel recommendations and decisions to ensure that their actions will result in a progressively stronger faculty. I urge everyone to take heed of President McRobbie's message.

There are many other aspects of our School's operations which I have not touched on today. For example, I haven't said a word about how we need to rebuild our connections with the Indianapolis community and how we must enlarge my resource base to include philanthropic sources. But I probably have already gone on for too long. I am sure that there will be many other opportunities in the coming months for us to continue this conversation when I come visit your department, or speak with the School's Steering Committee, or even meet with some of you individually.

So in closing, I just want to assure our faculty and staff that THE STATE OF OUR SCHOOL, IN EVERY RESPECT, IS GOOD. However, we can build a far stronger School of Science if we collectively commit ourselves to going forward, always keeping in mind that academic excellence must be built from the ground up and from within, and that it must be the ultimate objective and the anchor of everything we do.

Thank you very much. I wish everyone a GREAT YEAR.