

Report of the  
Committee to Review the  
Office of the Vice President for  
University Relations

May 1, 1998

In carrying out these interviews the committee considered the guidelines established for reviews of central administration as described in the Operations Manual of the University. Based on these guidelines and the Office of University Relations Self-Study, the committee formulated the following set of questions to guide our information gathering:

1. Should there be a Vice President for University Relations?
2. If yes, should the office be structured differently?
3. To what degree does the office reflect the needs of the University versus the strength of the person in the top position?
4. What are the strengths of the office, and where are the problem areas?
5. How do you see the office responding to short-term versus long-term needs of the University?

The committee received a great deal of assistance from its external consultant Judy Jones, Interim Vice President for External Relations at The University of New Mexico. Vice President Jones visited the University February 22-24, 1998. She met with a number of people on campus, reviewed relevant documents, including transcripts of the committee's early interviews, and made a number of general recommendations. Her outside view of the workings of the Office of University Relations was an invaluable contribution to the work of the committee.

### Findings and Recommendations

In general, the findings of our committee would indicate that Vice President Rhodes and the units that report to her are doing an excellent job. There were very few complaints regarding staffing levels, available resources, and expectations of administrators. Nearly without exception the quality of work is first rate; people work hard with a high degree of professionalism and with real commitment to The University of Iowa. The units reporting to the Vice President for University Relations are extremely diverse, and each unit places

somewhat different demands on the VP's office. Because the units are so different and are relatively independent of one another, there is little shared vision regarding how they collectively advance the University's mission. The 1997-98 strategic plan of the Office of University Relations, which was based on the University's mission statement, does address future directions more explicitly and provides a road map of shared goals and responsibilities for that division. In addition, the current plan of the Vice President to form and convene monthly the Strategic Communications Forum (SCF) should also enable the office to be more proactive.

A number of significant accomplishments of Vice President Rhodes should be noted. There is universal admiration for the job she does as a spokesperson for the University. In this role she has the respect of not only the university community but also of the lay public, the media, and policy makers at the local, state, and federal level. She has become a trusted advisor to the President of the University, and the committee believes that this function of the Vice President for University Relations is an important one and should be encouraged.

#### Alumni Association and Athletics

The memorandum of agreement between the University and the Iowa Alumni Association, arrived at under VP Rhodes's direction, is critical to the long-term health of the Alumni Association and its relationship to the University. This agreement was a significant accomplishment of the Vice President and her office.

Although the placement at Iowa of men's and women's intercollegiate athletics as units within the Office of University Relations is somewhat unusual, it would appear to be working very well. This may be more a function of VP Rhodes's background and interest than of the organizational structure. The Committee believes that both men's and women's athletics are happy with the current reporting process. They are also happy with VP Rhodes's performance, and they believe the requirement that they report to a vice president serves as an important buffer when politically explosive issues arise. They believe that she is available to them as needed and that she carries out her duties as University spokesperson extremely well. The independence of athletic training and

athletic drug testing from the athletic department should be maintained. Although not expressed as a complaint, there was some concern about the difficulties that can arise when a program has to rely on someone outside the program to be the primary advocate for needed funding. But no one suggested that there should be any change in the current structure, and the committee concurs with that judgment. Given the public visibility of athletics, it is the committee's recommendation that all units associated with athletics should continue to report to the Vice President for University Relations.

### Broadcasting Services

At the present time there is some concern regarding the organization of Broadcasting Services and its placement in the University. Currently this unit has responsibility for video, cable, and radio, as well as satellite communication for the University. The 1996 review of Broadcasting Services seemed to the committee somewhat uninformed and narrowly focused on the radio stations. The November 1997 report on the radio stations seemed more beneficial. The committee also questions removing the video and cable responsibilities from Broadcasting Services and placing them under ITS. Organization should be based on function rather than reasons such as "things with wires should all go together." It is our recommendation that the current structure be maintained. It seems to be working well.

### Governmental Relations

Governmental Relations includes lobbying and communication with federal, state, and local governmental representatives. At the current time, the duties and reporting responsibilities of employees who are part of the University's governmental relations activities are not clear. This situation is due in part to a partial reorganization last summer that affected these employees. The committee learned that the reorganization was never clearly explained to the affected employees at the time it took effect and that this fact had some negative impact on morale. Because Frank Stork's position with the university has changed, it is now time to reconsider how governmental relations activities ought to be organized. The committee makes no specific recommendation as to organization but does suggest that any plans for reorganizing duties and reporting responsibilities be made in

consultation with the affected employees. Valuable employees with long-term experience should be consulted at the beginning of the process for their input. Communication of decisions to those affected should occur before any public announcements of changes are made. The committee has similar concerns regarding other recent reorganization decisions in offices under the Vice President. The committee also feels that VP Rhodes's office should continue its efforts to improve relations between the University and the city of Iowa City.

### The Clinical Enterprise

Overall, communication efforts from the clinical enterprise (UIHC and Health Science Relations) serve a valuable function to the units and to the University. These efforts could be strengthened considerably, however, by improving communication between units, by having a clearer vision of specific objectives, and by working to anticipate potential problems and opportunities before they require immediate attention. These concerns lead to the following recommendations:

Work to mend relations between UIHC and statewide news media. For example, recent articles in the media regarding transplant success rates, qualifications of emergency room personnel, nurses' unionization, and the accidental administration of chemotherapy drugs to a young patient all put the University in an unfavorable light. There needs to be clearer coordination and communication between top UIHC management and communicators, so that information is provided to the news media promptly, accurately, and in a forthcoming manner. Administrators should strive to provide information directly to the media about key policies, issues, and crises rather than filtering information through a communicator. Communicators should play more of a facilitator role in these situations, which will enhance accuracy and the credibility of both the institution and the information. This working arrangement should be accomplished through the joint efforts of top management at UIHC and University Relations. It is not clear that the public sees a difference between UIHC and the University at large, although the distinction appears clear to those inside the University.

Within Health Science Relations, there needs to be a careful assessment of objectives for communication about the four health science colleges. A larger vision of public relations objectives needs to be developed beyond the day-to-day activities, and this vision needs to be expressed in clear, measurable objectives. Opinion research should be employed to form objectives and to evaluate their success. Putting this effort into action will require strong communication across units, with a close, proactive news beat system to gather and disseminate information based on specific objectives. Channels of communication should be clarified between faculty/staff and communicators.

The role and job title of the Director of Marketing Development needs to be clarified within UIHC and the overall clinical enterprise. Careful attention should be paid to the connotations of "marketing" within this context and within the larger mission of UIHC and The University of Iowa overall. This clarification then needs to be clearly communicated to external constituencies, with an eye to the implications for long-term objectives and relationships.

The committee recommends that there be a greater integration of the various communication efforts within the clinical enterprise. All these communicators are seen as part of one institution from outside the university. In this light, an effort should be made to formalize communication channels with the Vice President for University Relations. This effort should be seen not as a task of revising an organizational chart but instead as a task of revising communication processes to enhance the attainment of goals of individual units and the University as a whole.

In general, journalists covering the University find University Relations to be helpful. This is especially the case for newer reporters who are just beginning to build a sense of key sources for interviews and information. There is a feeling, however, that information from UIHC—unlike that from other offices around campus—tends not to be prompt, accurate, or forthcoming in many instances. Our committee recommends that processes be developed for more effective information dissemination from UIHC, as well as building on the effectiveness already present in the other offices.

### Position of the Office of the Vice President for University Relations

One minor issue that came up during the review deals with the fact that the title "Vice President for University Relations" is quite similar to that of one of the reporting units, The Office of University Relations. This leads to confusion within the University and beyond regarding the structure of the office of the Vice President. The committee recommends that some consideration be given to a different name for the Office of University Relations (the unit containing the University News Service, Publications, and Arts Center Relations sub-units.)

Satisfaction with the level of communication with Vice President Rhodes varies quite widely among the units that report to her. The more autonomous units (such as Alumni Relations and Athletics) appear very satisfied with their level of contact; they appreciated not being micro-managed but felt that VP Rhodes was responsive and supportive when they needed her input. Other units, especially the more service-oriented ones (such as University Relations and Health Science Relations), feel the lack of close contact and hands-on guidance from the VP. Some described their position as "responsibility without authority." While these units appear to be very effective, the apparent lack of vertical communication and feedback leads to some long-term concerns about the operation of the office.

One source of concern is an emerging morale problem among valuable staff members. While VP Rhodes clearly cannot and should not play a more active day-to-day role in managing service units, the staff of those units do need a better developed conduit to her. In the past, the assumption had been that the directors of those units would provide this conduit, but in practice that did not occur. Staff were left making fairly significant decisions without the input they needed (at least indirectly) from VP Rhodes. We are encouraged by VP Rhodes's future plans to meet more regularly with directors of units and by plans to have a regular brown bag lunch session which any staff member could attend.

A second source of concern is that there have been missed opportunities for strategic thinking and collaborative planning for the University Relations function as a whole. Although individual units have instituted long-term planning activities for specific issues (such as use of resources), there is clearly a need for a more collaborative and proactive approach to many aspects of the University Relations function. The anticipation of issues and preparation of background papers dealing with likely questions is one example of a proactive approach in place. Examples of opportunities missed are more extensive integration of public opinion surveys with strategic planning for University Relations, and the synergy that might emerge among the very fragmented units under the Office of University Relations if more forums were provided for collaborative problem-identification and problem-solving. Another example may be the reevaluation of staff resources—for instance, how should the rapidly expanding need for computer-related expertise be addressed by units collectively, given that none can address this issue alone?

Once more, it should be emphasized that the gaps in communication between VP Rhodes and some units, and among units with shared interests (if not shared responsibilities), do not indicate a major problem. However, this is an area of concern, and improvement here may open up key opportunities that are not being taken currently.

#### Summary of Recommendations

1. Retain the position of the Vice President for University Relations (However, rename the Office of University Relations).
2. Retain the current structure in which men's and women's intercollegiate athletics report to the Vice President for University Relations.
3. Maintain the reporting of Athletic Training Services and Athletic Drug Testing to the VP for University Relations and continue the independence of these units from intercollegiate athletics.
4. Continue the ongoing effort to improve the internal communication between the Vice President and the reporting units.

5. Clarify the duties and reporting responsibilities of those employees who are part of the University's governmental relations activities. The committee believes that now is a good time to consider how governmental relations activities should be organized.

6. Clarify and integrate the communication efforts surrounding the overall clinical enterprise, especially that associated with UIHC, into the communication efforts of the University as a whole. The Office of the Vice President for University Relations should be central to this effort.

7. Consider possible negative effects on the functioning of Broadcasting Services before any changes are made in its structure or reporting arrangement, including the reassignment of video services to ITS.

8. Continue to incorporate specific outcome objectives through public opinion research that both focuses on and evaluates long-term strategic communication efforts.

The above recommendations follow from the committee's charge and the information gathered during the review process. It is important to emphasize that the committee does not consider the current situation highly problematic. However, we believe that these recommendations will strengthen a well-functioning and essentially sound office.