

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NMSU Research Environment Survey: Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses

Over the past several years, the NMSU Research Environment Study has sought to understand and define aspects of the working environment that affect scholarly research at New Mexico State University. This study was undertaken by the NMSU SCORE Program (Support of Continuous Research Excellence) and is funded by the National Institutes of Health (Grant #GM S06-008136). From October to December, 2006, a formal web-based survey was administered on a voluntary basis to researchers on the NMSU main campus.

Of the total 266 survey participants, 70% were tenure-track faculty and 19% were professional research staff. Most have long experience at NMSU (54% with nine years or more), and most (74%) receive extramural, competitive grant funding. ***Of the total number of NMSU researchers with external grant support, approximately 80% are represented in the Research Environment Survey results.*** This includes nearly all of the funded researchers from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Physical Science Laboratory, about 85% of those from the College of Agriculture and Home Economics and about 65% from the College of Engineering.

A report characterizing the quantifiable results of the survey was released in September 2007, entitled “*NMSU Research Environment Survey: Analysis of Quantitative Survey Responses*”. It is available online at <http://research.nmsu.edu/score/> and the Executive Summary has been included in the Appendix of this report.

In the present report, qualitative analysis of the narrative survey responses is presented for eight open-ended survey questions, using a recently improved text-analysis application. Great care has been taken to preserve the anonymity of survey participants, who were identified by college only, and whose written responses were excerpted into categories and paraphrased, so as to remove any characteristic vocabulary or syntax. The volume of original text to be paraphrased was impressive, and the detailed nature of the answers indicated that participants took seriously this opportunity to speak out about their concerns and about their ideas for improving various aspects of their working environment. Although the text analysis allowed semi-quantification of the data in tabular and graphic formats and thus permitted cross-college comparisons, ***the essence of this report lies in the individual paraphrased comments themselves.*** The following outline distills from those comments the repeatedly encountered ideas and suggestions for change in the research environment.

Recurring Themes and Suggestions for Improvement

- 1) NMSU researchers would like administrators at all levels to have a greater understanding of their work, which in turn could lead to more effective communication and increased potential for research progress.
- 2) Upper administrators can enhance the research environment by:
 - Increasing their understanding of nationally competitive research and formulating a clear vision of future research directions
 - Developing more active, ongoing communication with researchers and allowing faculty input in decision-making
 - Recognizing and appreciating productive research scholars
 - Supporting and investing in research
 - Emphasizing quality (excellence) of academic programs rather than numbers of students and faculty
 - Acknowledging and responding to the ongoing deterioration in morale at NMSU
- 3) Reorganization and streamlining of grant management processes (accounting, purchasing, hiring) is needed to eliminate impediments and to enable researchers to focus on their work.
 - The “Banner” system is considered by many to be a substantial hindrance to research progress.
- 4) Re-evaluating the levels and distribution of indirect costs could potentially improve NMSU’s research capacity and morale. The following suggestions were made:
 - Overhead should be shared with the departments and researchers who obtained the funding, to enable successful research projects to flourish.
 - Indirect costs should support research rather than administrators’ non-research-oriented projects.

- Loss of overhead by the departments is crushing the research and teaching missions of NMSU, according to a number of respondents who consider the situation critical.
 - Overhead rates are considered excessive by many researchers relative to the quality of administrative services received.
 - Full accountability for overhead funds should be provided; this is currently not the case.
 - Optimizing overhead rates should increase the competitiveness of external grant proposals.
- 5) Comments on faculty hires and salary were permeated by concerns about fairness and faculty burn-out.
- Replacement of vacated faculty posts is critical so that remaining faculty do not feel overburdened.
 - New faculty hires should be targeted strategically in promising research areas.
 - Salary savings funds should be redirected from the upper administration to the departments.
 - Funds for faculty salaries could be retrieved by reducing mid-level administrative positions and by cutting bonuses to upper administrators, about which bitterness was voiced.
 - Salary levels should be comparable to those at peer institutions; NMSU lags behind.
 - Ensure that salary increases are merit based and equitable within departments and across campus.
- 6) Teaching loads greatly concern all (except PSL) researchers, but particularly the humanities faculty.
- Reduce teaching loads to levels comparable with those at peer institutions.
 - Release time from teaching should be provided when external grants or fellowships are awarded.
 - Formal credit should be conveyed to faculty who mentor graduate student research.
- 7) Effective support for graduate students would benefit research programs across campus.
- Providing tuition waivers will increase NMSU's competitiveness for quality graduate students.
 - Ensuring multi-year institutional commitment of funding to students is important. Otherwise good students leave to go elsewhere or never come to NMSU.
- 8) Cross-disciplinary research clusters will require substantial institutional commitment and funding to be successful.
- Input from the research community is needed for identifying specific research questions.
 - Many faculty are not in favor of clusters as delineated because they are either excluded from the current cluster topics or are engaged in external collaborations within their discipline.

Although the above outline attempts to encapsulate the recurring themes encountered among the respondents' comments, it does not fully convey the depth of concern and the desire for improvement represented in the comments, *per se*. It is hoped that administrators at all levels will read the individual comments in this report in their entirety and heed the voices that are seeking recognition and input. **Taken as a whole, the material in this report not only complements the original quantitative survey analysis, but more importantly it conveys specificity to the quantitative data and provides concrete suggestions for improving the NMSU research environment.** Some items in this outline should be relatively amenable to change; for example, increased recognition of scholarly achievements and better communication between administrators and researchers. President Cruzado's weekly memos to, and her requests for input from the NMSU community serve as appreciated steps in this direction. Other changes will be less immediately tractable, such as the complex task of restructuring grant management procedures and the re-evaluation of salary levels. However, at the time of this writing, initial plans are in progress on both of these fronts. The SCORE Program staff is hopeful that this report will serve a timely and useful role in the administrative transitions and reorganization currently underway. Together with the preceding quantitative report, it will serve as a baseline for tracking future improvements in the research environment at New Mexico State University.

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