

***THE HIGHEST ORDER OF EXCELLENCE***

**A Planning Framework**

**2005 – 2010**

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*as of November 12, 2004*

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***I. Northwestern: Interdisciplinary by Tradition and by Design***

It is no accident that Northwestern University excelled in building, among other things, an incomparable interdisciplinary tradition. It began with simple values: directness, preference for analysis over ideology, and purposeful ambition. Though its funding was private, its founders were civic-minded pioneers, highly engaged in fashioning a new society in a new world. Education of the citizenry was essential to their plan, and this university was to bring “the highest order of excellence” in learning to the Northwest Territory of a developing nation. From these roots grew a city and a university embracing diverse views and welcoming provocative debate wedded to intellectual rigor.

Today Northwestern University, in Evanston and Chicago, is a progressive, innovative institution where committed scholars and teachers pursue cutting-edge work in many forms, a

**The Highest Order of Excellence  
1997 – 2003**

As it approached its sesquicentennial several years ago, Northwestern took stock of its position among the nation’s research universities and resolved to accelerate efforts to achieve the very highest level of distinction. By bringing its undergraduate tuition levels from near the bottom of a group of private peer institutions to the median, it generated immediate unrestricted revenues to invest strategically in undergraduate programs and services. At the same time, a \$1 billion comprehensive fundraising campaign was launched to build endowment and infrastructure, and to help seed new research initiatives. Thanks to the energy and institutional commitment characteristic of the university, \$1.55 billion was raised. Guiding all of these activities was *The Highest Order of Excellence*, a planning framework published in 1997 that identified collaborative traditions as a distinctive institutional advantage.

In fall of 2003, with much accomplished and resolve still strong, the University commissioned a new round of conversations to update the “highest order of excellence” vision. As in the earlier document, the aspirations set forth here represent a flexible set of strategies and a framework for leveraging strengths, addressing areas of weakness, and developing those aspects of our teaching and research programs that give us distinction.

vibrant microcosm of a creative world. In this mid-size research university, eleven independent academic schools, each with relatively small academic departments, offer programs high in quality and spanning a remarkably diverse portfolio; the environment for cross-fertilization of ideas is rich and challenging yet collegial. One of the nation’s premier universities, connected by both geography and programming to one of the nation’s great cities, Northwestern has exemplified in recent years what can be accomplished in an institution unfettered by ideology and determined to improve.

Northwestern is one of the few special places in academe where faculty and students eagerly look beyond their own ideas and individual spheres of inquiry, identifying ever broader and more significant intellectual agendas and searching out collaborators in

order to pursue them. Collaboration and cooperation are hallmarks of Northwestern culture,

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characterizing interactions not only between disciplines but also between scholarly research, teaching, and real-world practice. At its heart Northwestern is an open community of learners, where status as undergraduate, graduate, faculty, staff, or alumnus matters less than curiosity, passion, and commitment.

Here the interdisciplinary fields of materials science, biomedical engineering, African studies, and performance studies were pioneered. Here the seeding of new urban policy research efforts in the 1960s by the Ford Foundation took root and flourished. Here an upstart school of management rose to prominence because its emphasis on teamwork anticipated cultural shifts in the workplace. Here a small school of education defined an innovative mission and now is a national leader in thinking creatively about the interface of human cognition, human development, and social policy. Here scientists in materials engineering, chemistry, and medicine were among the early investigators of molecular structures and behaviors having implications for human tissue regeneration, clinical diagnostics, and nanoscience.

Northwestern students have led the nation in collegiate debate tournaments and writing competitions. They've sustained one of the nation's most distinguished records of student-athlete attainment. They've initiated model co-curricular activities ranging from theatrical productions to one of nation's largest and most successful charity fund-raising events. They have launched two student-run, peer-reviewed journals for undergraduate scientific research.

Though our interdisciplinary tradition is rich and was deliberately strengthened as a result of implementing the original *Highest Order of Excellence* framework, many among us believe it is still too difficult and time-consuming for faculty and students to negotiate old academic and administrative structures in order to innovate and excel. In updating and refreshing the framework, we address key remaining challenges.

Described in the pages that follow are broad, flexible ideas aimed at moving the University toward an overarching interdisciplinary vision. We value a continuing spirit of collaborative, pioneering creative work and learning at the overlapping edges of academic disciplines. We appreciate the creative tension between strong disciplinary and interdisciplinary pursuits; and we intend to maintain a sound balance between interdisciplinary programs and seasoned disciplinary ones. At the same time, we expect the boundaries of academic disciplines to change over time as they are influenced by what was once interdisciplinary. We aspire that Northwestern will be the university of choice for the most talented faculty and students sharing this vision.

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For logical flow and ease of presentation, we describe our vision in three parts<sup>1</sup>: *Faculty and the Environment for Creative Work*; *Students and the Environment for Learning*; *The Enabling Infrastructure*. In each we present a brief background assessment, a statement of objectives, and a framework of key strategies for achieving them (with occasional sidebar detail). It is our intent, following dissemination of this document, that specific actions to implement this vision be developed with broad community participation and efforts to integrate all the parts.

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<sup>1</sup> For those who would like more background on how interdisciplinarity currently figures in Northwestern's culture, an abstract from the self-study prepared for the October 2004 accreditation visit of the Higher Learning Commission, as well as the complete report, is available at [ URL ].

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## ***II. Faculty and the Environment for Creative Work***

As we move forward, we continue to seek new paradigms for the intellectual activity of the faculty. We want to leverage our size, diversity, and interdisciplinary culture into competitive advantages that lead to reputation gains. We want to attract scholars who enthusiastically contribute to a deep tradition of collaboration, and to retain faculty because they greatly value the kind of cutting-edge connections that are made here.

### **Experiments Yielded New Connections**

Creative research – often interdisciplinary in nature -- has been especially robust among Northwestern faculty since 1997 when the original *Highest Order of Excellence* described a set of strategies to intensify pioneering work across traditional academic borders. A good deal of this activity was stimulated and supported by experimental mechanisms established by the University administration, like the provision of special funds to support cross-disciplinary presentations and dinners (Domain Dinners), to seed cross-school curricular collaborations, or to provide incentives for departments to look beyond local optimization and traditional interests in faculty hiring. Many of those experiments have matured into valued elements of Northwestern culture.

More than a dozen important faculty recruitments were made expressly to build on and strengthen ties among schools or prominent disciplines. Sponsored research grew 79 percent from 1998 to 2003, with medicine, science, and engineering awards leading that growth. Five new cutting-edge interdisciplinary research centers were established. Thirty-seven members of the Northwestern faculty were elected to major academic honorific societies; new hires brought the number to forty-six. Some three dozen new companies were launched so that novel technologies based on the research of Northwestern faculty could benefit society.

We are committed to building and **institutionalizing sustainable processes** that will stimulate promising experiments, provide clear pathways for obtaining institutional support, and promote open and objective decision-making about how to invest institutional resources. As an institution, we greatly value constructive change, and we are unabashedly ambitious. We particularly seek, therefore, projects that have the potential to transform the work of our faculty – perhaps, indeed, of the institution as a whole.

Strategic and potentially transformative initiatives can take a number of different forms, from the establishment of entirely new centers or institutes to the reorganization or redesign of existing programs. The creativity and insights of faculty members will drive these developments. High expectations and **standards for performance** will be set for both new

centers/institutes and existing ones; less productive centers and institutes may be reorganized or closed. Procedures for regular review will be established to ensure that such decisions are informed and timely. Academic departments must evolve, too. Each will be expected to be appropriately reflective about its academic enterprise, with the ability clearly to articulate how its current approach to its discipline fits with the University's ambitions and with best practices in

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the field. The faculty-driven Program Review process will continue to be the chief venue for these kinds of evaluations.

**Examples with  
Transformative Potential**

**Ongoing Programs**

At the forefront of what has been heralded as “the next great industrial revolution,” Northwestern’s Institute for Nanotechnology serves as an umbrella organization for research efforts related to the precise controlling of matter at the molecular level. It not only houses state of the art characterization facilities, but also provides administrative support for individual and group efforts addressing key problems in science and technology at the nano scale.

The Program in African Studies and the Center for International and Comparative Studies, ongoing programs with distinction and unrealized potential, recently received investment commitments with the arrival of new and energetic leadership. They are developing projects around such important and interrelated issues as the international context for homeland security, the ethics of humanitarian intervention, and the growing development gap between rich and poor countries.

In the life and biomedical sciences, we intend to focus additional investment in two or three areas where we have the potential to become the very best in the world. A task force is working to develop a unified strategic plan that optimizes internal resources and positions us to secure funding from the National Institutes of Health and other major funding agencies. Though the plan is not yet complete, sufficient progress has been made to warrant the commitment of substantial resources for an Institute for BioNanotechnology in Medicine and for a Chemistry of Life Processes Institute.

**New and Emerging Initiatives**

For three years following a Domain Dinner presentation on “complexity,” a core group of faculty sustained grassroots research efforts with personal commitments and modest funding obtained from their home schools. In response to a well-developed concept and business plan presented during the winter of 2004, the University has now committed start-up funding for an Institute on Complex Systems.

“Complexity” research encompasses an extraordinarily diverse set of phenomena – biological, social, economic, political, commercial, and creative – in which new approaches to studying systemic organizing principles transcend traditional disciplines.

A proposal is being developed for a new humanities initiative.

A proposal is being developed for an interdisciplinary initiative in music cognition (drawing upon faculty in music, psychology, and neuroscience); an Art and Technology Center (bringing together faculty from the visual and performing arts as well as computer science) was recently launched; and a Center for American Music Theatre has been given seed funding. The Center will create alliances between faculty in the performing arts of theatre and music with researchers in such fields as

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Further advancement of these transforming strategies will require adjustments to how we organize ourselves to recruit new faculty, invest in new initiatives, and evaluate existing programs. Strategies for accomplishing this follow:

- **Increasingly link faculty recruitment to interdisciplinary strategic initiatives.**
  - Primarily using existing faculty lines, we plan to create **a special pool of 30 faculty lines for the appointment of faculty whose work involves broad, multi-disciplinary areas** identified as priorities for the University.
  - Systematically share and coordinate hiring plans among deans to promote collaborative searches across school and department boundaries.
  - Encourage the recruitment of clusters of faculty - scholars who have formed, or will form, cohesive and productive research teams.
  
- **Create ongoing budget lines for seeding and launching new academic initiatives; raise awareness of these opportunities**
  - Support networking mechanisms, such as the highly successful Domain Dinners.)
  - Earmark funds for new investment in specific projects/concepts
  - Dedicate staff to facilitating communications, networking, and project start-ups
  
- **Establish formal criteria and a decision-making structure for new investment decisions**
  - Establish regular channels for proposal submissions and funding decisions
  - Ensure that the review process is open, competitive, and expertly judged, and that there is timely action in decision-making, with final authority residing with University senior leadership.

General Criteria for  
Strategic Initiatives

Is the focal area critically important to the success of the University?

Is it potentially transforming; will it allow us to become the leading program among peer institutions?

Does it successfully raise funds to support itself?

Does it draw new kinds of exceptionally talented faculty and students?

Does it lead to new curricular development?

Does it strengthen the Northwestern "brand"?

Does it influence others beyond those participating in the initiative itself?

Does it make an impact on the outside world?

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- Emphasize “fit” with existing culture, potential for Northwestern to take a lead position in a field, and connections to important societal problems
  
- **Establish formal criteria and a decision-making structure for elimination** of practices/projects that are not aligned with an overall institutional strategy of balancing breadth and diversity of programming with depth and distinction in selected domains.
  - Use both the ongoing Program Review process and ad hoc faculty advisory groups to gather information and make recommendations
  - Ensure broad participation and timely action in decision-making, with final authority residing with University senior leadership
  - Evaluate against “fit” with existing culture, potential for Northwestern to take a lead position in a field, and connections to important societal problems

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***III. Students and the Environment for Learning***

We envision a future Northwestern in which students have **more unifying experiences and ways of belonging to the University as a whole** in addition to their home school or department. New knowledge about human development and learning, new communications technologies, and evolving social, economic and political dynamics in the world make this a

**Notable New Programs**

Collaboration and cross-fertilization have flourished in the faculty research milieu, and we have examples of imaginative, transformative interdisciplinary inventions in the undergraduate learning environment as well. The Integrated Science Program has drawn outstanding freshmen to our campus for more than 25 years; its alumni have enjoyed unusually high success in academe and the professions. The Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences Program and the American Studies Program have enjoyed similar sustained success. PhD-level interdisciplinary training programs have been particularly successful in the life sciences.

A number of notable new programs emerged as part of the original *Highest Order of Excellence* plan, including half a dozen new cross-school academic majors and minors such as Art and Technology, Transportation and Logistics, and an Honors Program in Engineering and Law. New curriculum development in fact was a requirement of the cross-school initiative grant process, and these successes spur our desire to extend interdisciplinary learning opportunities to much larger numbers of students. In addition to new curriculum options, new undergraduate advising practices, a new graduate financial aid policy, an institutionally funded undergraduate research grants program, and an office to support students competing for prestigious external fellowships, were established.

tremendously exciting time to focus on curricular design and teaching practices. We want Northwestern to be a place where the art of teaching is understood, nurtured, and practiced – where the **quality of classroom teaching is consistently high and curricula are compellingly constructed and periodically reconsidered.** We want students not only to gain breadth of knowledge and mastery of their major area of study, but also to experience the joy and passion of exploring and taking intellectual risks, of **immersion in an intellectually and/or artistically challenging project**, of finding first-hand the connection between the classroom and citizenship in the world, and of feeling that they are members of an intellectual community in which they can **share these experiences.**

Specific strategies for realizing this vision include:

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- Providing an opportunity for every interested undergraduate student to enjoy the experience of **immersion in a challenging, intense exploration of a well-focused project**. We propose a student/faculty task force develop the program details, based on a set of general directions provided by the Faculty Visioning Group.
- Developing courses which, through the exploration of a broad problem or issue from multiple perspectives, would provide **introductions to the modes of thought of broad categories of academic discourse**. **Such courses might replace a portion of the current distribution requirements**. We propose a student/faculty task force to develop the details, based on general directions from the Faculty Visioning Group.

**General Direction for Undergraduate Immersion Experiences**

Full-time over a period of at least one academic term

Formal proposals required from students; each proposal must gain the approval and supervisory commitment of a member of the Northwestern faculty

Interaction in an organized face-to-face or on-line community throughout the experience (e.g., weekly dinners for on-campus students involved in similar experiences, moderated online discussion groups for students at remote internships)

Reflective papers submitted at the conclusion of the experience.

Example ideas: Proposals built on existing programs such as supervised practicums, co-op work experiences, and internships, highly structured study abroad programs or co-curricular work, research apprenticeships, the preparation of a major artistic performance or portfolio, activities organized under the Office of Student Affairs, or on entirely new and exploratory concepts. A new academic program such as a Theme Year, in which course selections, co-curricular activities, and/or fieldwork are all organized around a broad societal issue, might also be developed and could be elected as an "immersion" option by a group of students.

**General Direction for *Modes of Thought* Undergraduate Courses**

Four courses would be offered, and students would be required to take three, on the assumption that they would take those outside the anticipated major area of study:

Modes of Thought: The Sciences  
Modes of Thought: The Social Sciences  
Modes of Thought: The Humanities  
Modes of Thought: The Arts

The courses would be created by committees of prominent faculty in each area. They would be taught as large lecture courses by exceptional faculty, accompanied by small discussion sections of 15 – 20 students. The lecture portion of the course would present major modes of thought in each domain, focusing on contemporary questions, concerns, or problems and the ways in which various academic disciplines approach/address those matters. The sections would provide opportunities for students to use the methods described in the lectures, under the guidance of a faculty members, postdoctoral fellows, or advanced graduate students.

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- Encourage more cross-department and school teaching and programming. Appoint a faculty/dean task force to propose methods for **creating an interdisciplinary teaching pool by eliminating redundancies in current course offerings and curricula.**
- Encourage **new designs in PhD student training**, consistent with new interdisciplinary research initiatives.
- Encourage **new designs for intellectual community-building**, i.e. undergraduate-graduate-faculty interactions and team-building.
- Refine admissions strategies to incorporate these new opportunities<sup>2</sup>
  - **Analyze criteria for undergraduate and graduate admission**; review components in assessment of applications to include criteria relevant to the interdisciplinary initiatives above.
  - Employ a variety of **new and personalized strategies to recruit more effectively the top rated candidates** to Northwestern.

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<sup>2</sup> Full text of the subcommittee report on “undergraduate student quality” is available at [ URL ]; Northwestern NetID required for access.

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#### IV. *The Enabling Infrastructure*

Teaching, learning, and creating new knowledge constitute the primary mission of academe, but pursuit of these endeavors in the contemporary world requires a robust organizational infrastructure and skilled management of the resources that support the mission. Higher education in America is a highly competitive enterprise, allowing those who are smart

and nimble to succeed. Its external environment imposes myriad regulatory requirements, compliance with which is challenging given the inherently decentralized nature of research universities. And much of this plays out in a public platform with evolving social and cultural complexities.

Now positioned among the nation’s leading research universities – ground shared with several institutions that are wealthier, longer established, or more distinctively defined – Northwestern must continue to plan intelligently and act boldly if it is to consolidate its position among the very best universities.

Little was said in the previous strategic plan about overall staffing as an element of infrastructure. Belatedly and under pressure due to tremendous success in attracting sponsored research, we recognized the need to recalibrate, reorganize, and strengthen administrative support for the faculty research enterprise. It is clear that more needs to be done in a number of additional areas.

Because of the vital role academic and

institutional support personnel play in facilitating *every* aspect of living and learning in a scholarly community, we need to rethink the models of staffing and support now used in the

##### **Early Focus on Facilities and Systems**

Concerted work on attention to the “enabling infrastructure” began with the original *Highest Order of Excellence* vision. Consistent with that planning framework, Northwestern embarked on a robust program of building new academic, residential, and recreational facilities, as well as successfully moved to advance the use of electronic technology and multimedia capacities for teaching and learning and to upgrade classrooms accordingly. Three major new administrative information systems were implemented, and a modestly staffed office of “change management” was established to facilitate selected administrative reengineering projects.

Additional University-level initiatives currently in progress include:

- enhancement and integration of information systems supporting management reporting for sponsored research projects
- replacement of the University financial information system,
- creation of common definitions and a centralized warehouse to facilitate access to data, as well as integration, analysis, and reporting of data for decision-making
- definition of research planning metrics
- implementation of a professional development program for faculty serving as department chairpersons or center directors
- restructuring of financial aid and other central administrative functions for graduate education
- consultation with outside professional campus

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University, and experiment with new approaches that will bring higher levels of specialized expertise to the operations of the University.

Key new strategies for enabling faculty and student success<sup>3</sup> include:

▪ **Realign administrative functions to better encompass support for complex interactions and incubation of new programs**

- In the short term, develop a “concierge” function, coordinated by the Provost’s Office, to assist faculty with developing ideas and implementing initiatives; charged with [see sidebar]:
- Over the longer term, implement fundamental change in organizational culture, including following through on recommendations from the Task Force on Administration Infrastructure Planning, such as:
  - Begin a series of pilots and experiments with **alternative administrative support models** (pooling IT resources for four basic science departments is a current example) that would replace the proliferation of small, self-contained academic units with inadequate, generalist staff support with groups of higher-skilled specialist staff serving multiple units.
  - Support and reward a strong orientation to **excellent customer service** and quality outcomes. It is important that administrative staff members are well aware of best practices in their field and encouraged to bring such approaches to their work at Northwestern. To foster learning about and development of best practices, create a fund to support site visits at peer institutions.

**General Concept for a Faculty Concierge Function**

Solicit proposals and coordinate evaluation

Serve as a “critical hub” for information about faculty research interests

Serve as a “critical hub” for information about support services, including funding sources, event production, staffing, business-related research, budget planning, visitor accommodations, external relations, etc.

Negotiate to build networks of internal support services to meet project-specific needs

Assist faculty in developing plans for full implementation of a project beyond its pilot phase, including outcome measures and timetables for evaluation

Assume centralized responsibility for setting in place all the business operations necessary to launch a project, including planning for successor management and/or closure

<sup>3</sup> Full text of subcommittee reports on “administrative infrastructure planning” and “internal communications” are available at [ URL ]; Northwestern NetID required for access.

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- Develop new mechanisms to identify, adequately compensate, reward, develop, and retain exceptional administrative managers
  - Clarify and strengthen institutional expectations for the recruitment, management and development of staff; emphasize accountability for good managerial practice at the dean and vice president level.
  - Identify barriers to collaboration (e.g., ownership issues, silos, support, budgetary structures, complexity, inertia, etc.) and set priorities for removing them.
  - Develop and implement an annual, comprehensive process for gathering feedback from deans, vice presidents, and their staffs on the value and quality of services they receive from central administrative functions.
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- Identify ways in which the central administration can facilitate and support various individuals' and groups' efforts to create a stronger sense of **campus community**.
  - Implement recommendations from the Task Force on **Internal Communications**:
    - Provide multiple levels and formats for general news to internal audiences. Emphasize content that promotes a sense of community as well as disseminates routine information.
    - Formalize orientation and training on key University communications channels and best practices in business communication
  - Refine policies and procedures to support **integration of communications** and reinforcement of University-level brand identity in a decentralized environment.

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***V. Achieving Our Goals***

Potential new revenues from patented research have raised expectations for spending and investment, but prudent stewardship dictates that such windfall dollars be used to maximum advantage – to promote long-term institutional stability and to provide continuing support for experimentation and innovation. Specifically, we expect that the revenues currently anticipated from commercialized research will be deployed to finish the existing program of facilities construction; to build endowments for research support, graduate financial aid, and facility renewal and replacement; and to invest selectively in “transforming” strategies. We will continue to look to philanthropy, strategic internal resource allocation, and enlightened management practices to sustain momentum along our advancement path.

Our vision for the University’s strategic direction during next five years is increasingly clear. Nonetheless, there is, as always, room for refinement and a great need for many people throughout the University community to participate in planning discussions and implementation. We value and encourage the kinds of collaborative work and intellectual debate that both serve and epitomize this vision. We welcome comments on this framework and proposals consistent with its intentions. We look forward to working with faculty, staff, students, alumni and trustees as we seek to fulfill our shared ambitions for our University.

Feedback is welcome at: [nu-provost@northwestern.edu](mailto:nu-provost@northwestern.edu) or 1-5117 and at [mmccoy@northwestern.edu](mailto:mmccoy@northwestern.edu) or 1-4335.

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*Highest Order of Excellence II***

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**Shuming Zhang, graduate student**

**FINAL DRAFT**  
*as of November 12, 2004*

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**Undergraduate Admissions  
Planning Group**

**Rebecca Dixon, chair**  
associate provost, *University Enrollment*

**Yip-Wah Chung**  
professor of materials science and engineering  
*McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science*

**Alan Cabbage**  
vice president, *University Relations*

**Kathleen Galvin**  
professor of communications studies, *School of  
Communication*

**Richard P. Honack**  
chief marketing officer, *Kellogg School of Management*

**Jen Meyers**  
student transitions coordinator, *Student Affairs*

**Abe Peck**  
professor, *Medill School of Journalism*

**Carl Petry**  
professor of history  
*Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences*

**Eric Zaslow**  
associate professor of mathematics, *Weinberg College of  
Arts and Sciences*