

EXCELLENCE MATTERS
A WORKING PAPER FOR UCR 2020
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Excellence is the vision and key strategic goal in *UCR 2020*, permeating the other strategic goals of access, diversity, and engagement. It was described as follows by the academic excellence subcommittee:

In the tradition of the University of California, academic excellence has historically been defined in terms of research, teaching and service. Today, UC Riverside expands these terms to also include creative and scholarly activity, the teaching and learning environment, and engagement of the community, both regional and global. Academic excellence is the basis of UCR's contribution to the future needs of the state, nation, and indeed the world, and also for receiving (and deserving) support from our stakeholders. It entails aiming high and not being satisfied with a level of quality any less than that of the best programs anywhere.

Excellence is a recurring theme throughout the strategic plan. It also emerged independently – and repeatedly – in a faculty survey that was conducted as part of the strategic planning process.

Why does excellence matter?

Academic excellence is the hallmark of a major research university. Achieving academic excellence brings major research grants, national and international awards, private investments through philanthropy, and national and international recognition. It positions the university to be highly competitive for both resources and people. Excellence generates support from and engagement with the community, in the broadest sense of the word, and attracts both industry partners and academic collaborations. Well-regarded universities are viewed as a resource for decision-makers, who use research-based knowledge as the basis for informed policy making.

Excellence also enables an institution to draw the best faculty, students, and staff. Their accomplishments, in turn, burnish the university's reputation for excellence. This circular relationship is particularly important for faculty. The better the university's reputation, the better the faculty it can attract. The better the faculty, the better the university stacks up against commonly accepted indicators of excellence, as described below. And the better it can compete for resources. Indeed, a high correlation exists between the prosperity of a university and its reputation for academic excellence.

Academic excellence may also be equated with intellectual vitality. The quest for excellence creates an environment that is intellectually stimulating, challenging, and rewarding. It fosters a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives and creates the opportunity for unique synergies to occur. Colleagues seek out others who can bring new concepts, approaches, or technology to

bear on an academic pursuit. A university with a culture of excellence is dynamic and forward-looking, often on the leading edge of research and creative activity.

To achieve and support excellence, the entire university structure must be properly aligned. It starts at the top, with excellent campus leadership. It also requires sound, future-oriented structuring of college and departmental boundaries, and these require the critical mass necessary to be competitive. The university's administrative structure also must foster educational and scholarly activities that will promote excellence in both developed and newly emerging areas. And, as suggested in *UCR 2020*, the campus must put in place programs, policies, and practices that will lead to enhanced excellence in graduate and undergraduate education.

Students choose a university based largely on its reputation. Through a focus on excellence, UCR can attract high achieving students. So, too, do staff value excellence. The university excels when it attracts highly skilled, dedicated staff whose hard work and commitment contribute to its mission.

Philanthropists also are motivated by excellence. They make their investment decisions in areas of distinction that excite their passions and fulfill their dreams of giving back to make a difference for others.

The 80+ faculty participating in the strategic planning process and 309 faculty participating in the related survey voiced strong support for the aspiration for excellence at the University of California, Riverside. While their reasons varied, their emphasis on excellence as a value was consistent. According to the narrative responses to the survey, faculty desired to reach a high standard of excellence, for which they felt it was necessary to:

- Increase research productivity.
- Enhance the research infrastructure.
- Hire highly competent professional staff.
- Create the critical mass necessary to support training grants.
- Recognize scholarly contributions.
- Stimulate intellectual vitality.
- Revitalize programs and centers/institutes.
- Reach a high level of competitiveness.
- Establish a faculty reward system based on visibility and prestige of publication records; value quality over quantity.
- Have strong leadership and decision-making.

These characteristics were seen as being both a result of, and essential factors in contributing to, academic excellence.

Peppered throughout the survey narratives were phrases such as: “prestigious,” “high impact,” “prominent,” “top-tier,” “cutting edge,” “outstanding,” “vital,” “competitive,” and, repeatedly,

“excellence”: “cultures of excellence,” “national excellence,” “striving for excellence.” Clearly, this is widely viewed by UCR faculty as a goal worth attaining.

What, then, are the measures of excellence?

The academic excellence subcommittee of the strategic planning process wrote in one of its reports, “We must endeavor to measure what we value and not simply value what we measure.” The report went on to say that such accountability allows UCR to assess its programs and to make the case for others to invest in the campus. Many different indicators may be used to assess achievement; some more effectively evaluate certain fields of scholarship than others. Measures of grant support, for example, are more readily applicable to the sciences and engineering than the humanities and arts. For this reason, rigid formulae are not as useful as the recognition that evaluation will inevitably involve multiple metrics and elements of subjectivity.

As indicated in *UCR 2020*, an important and commonly accepted measure of academic excellence is achievement of a profile equivalent to a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU). The first- and second-phase indicators for AAU membership include:

- Competitively funded federal research support
- Membership in the National Academies
- National Research Council faculty quality ratings
- Faculty arts and humanities awards, fellowships, and memberships
- Citations: the U.S. University Science Indicators
- USDA, state, and industrial research funding
- Doctoral education, including graduate students per faculty member and number of graduate degrees awarded
- Number of postdoctoral appointees
- Undergraduate education, including average SAT scores of entering students, six-year graduation rate, and undergraduate student diversity

Other criteria may also be important to consider, particularly for purposes of strategic implementation. These include:

- Distinctiveness of a program – Is the program making contributions to research or scholarship that are not being made elsewhere?
- Opportunities for preeminence – With some additional investment of resources, can a program realistically be expected to attain preeminence? Is it already close?
- Attractiveness to students – What does student choice – at the graduate, professional, and undergraduate levels – say about the reputation of a program?
- Contribution to the community – Does the program comport with UCR’s land grant mission of making a difference on issues of relevance to society?

And, for UCR, a distinguishing characteristic of excellence is diversity. This includes not only diversity of people, but also of ideas, perspectives, backgrounds, experiences, and programs. Diversity has become woven into the fabric of the campus, and is having a positive influence on scholarship and creative activities.

Other criteria may also be developed as part of this strategic plan. Departments, for example, must hold themselves to the highest benchmarks of excellence, measured against their highest ranked counterparts nationally or internationally. Some programs at UCR have already attained distinction, and must work to maintain or even advance that stature. Others have yet to reach the level of academic excellence to which they aspire; these units must establish goals and metrics as well as strategies to achieve the desired standing. A culture of excellence must permeate UCR's teaching and research enterprises.

Similarly, it is important for individual faculty members to uphold high standards of excellence for themselves and, through the merit and promotion process, for one another. They must actively embrace their roles in teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, research and creative activity, and service to campus and community. Excellent professors stay up on the latest literature, participate in the national societies/conventions and, most importantly, publish in the top journals and with the top book publishers in their fields. Research or creativity activity is their passion. They are also passionate about teaching and work hard to provide students with challenging and engaging classes. They pursue single and multi-investigator grants and have collaborations with colleagues on campus, nationally, and internationally. And they fulfill the service mission, both through university service and through community engagement. Departments, deans, and personnel committees uphold these standards by promoting only faculty members who have performed at high professional levels.

And, just as faculty must hold themselves to high standards of performance, so too must UCR's administrators and staff. Standards have been developed to regularly assess performance and to help set goals for future achievement.

In the end, excellence matters. It matters to the reputation and goals of the institution, but it also matters to the satisfaction and intellectual fulfillment of the faculty, students, and staff of the University of California, Riverside. It is important to UCR's alumni, parents, donors, elected officials, and community at large. It promotes a sense of community, an intellectually rich environment, and a climate that is both dynamic and caring. Such an environment promotes respect for the individuals – the students, faculty, and staff – who are committed to excellence in their areas of responsibility and in their relations with one another. This translates into a campus culture of appreciation for those who model the values of excellence in their everyday work. It makes UC Riverside a rewarding place to be.

Ultimately, excellence is vital to the achievement of UCR's tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service.