UM realigns some administrator posts

By Jacob Barker

The University of Missouri System is getting a new administrator to oversee two previously separate departments and eventually take over President Tim Wolfe's initiative to develop campus-specific strategic plans.

An announcement released yesterday said the UM System will begin a nationwide search to fill a new position: vice president for academic affairs and research. Steve Graham, who is the existing senior associate vice president for academic affairs, and Mike Nichols, the vice president for research and economic development, will report to the new vice president.

Those two departments "embody the essence of the university's core mission areas," UM System spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead said. Placing someone in charge of both of those departments will allow for greater collaboration between the two and allow the system to "perhaps be more nimble in the pace of change in higher education," she said.

"Having this position that encompasses both of those realms will really allow the university to kind of adapt," Hollingshead said.

Changes in the higher education realm, such as a declining pool of federal research funding and the rise of online learning, among others, have prompted Wolfe to push the system and its four campuses to develop strategic plans that identify a specific area in which each can become a global leader. That process has been overseen from the UM administration side by Nikki Krawitz, the vice president for finance and administration.

Krawitz, though, is retiring in June, UM announced yesterday. The new vice president will take over her duties overseeing the strategic planning process.

Although it might sound like administrator-speak, the strategic planning process could hold real consequences for the system's campuses. Wolfe has said he plans to withhold as much as $40 million in state money and reallocate it to the campuses based on their strategies and goals.

The strategic planning process is in full swing, and each campus is supposed to complete a five-year plan by June. That makes Tom Phillips, an MU professor of biological sciences and co-chairman of the MU team for system strategic planning, less worried about the process being thrown off by the turnover.
"In terms of the strategic plan, the process for what each of the four campuses are supposed to be doing is scheduled to be done about the time" Krawitz "is leaving," he said.

The departure of Krawitz, who has been at her post for more than 16 years, means the system will have to search for another vice president while it looks to fill the new academic affairs and research position.

Hollingshead said the priority will first be on finding someone for the newly created position before it begins looking for a successor for Krawitz. The search for the vice president of academic affairs and research should begin soon.

Wolfe also announced he would combine the system's government relations and strategic communications departments. Steve Knorr, the current vice president for government relations, will head the new University Relations department.

In April, Wolfe axed an associate vice president of strategic communications position after Cindy Pollard left it to work for the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities.

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MU study on BPA yields different results

By Catherine Martin

Recent University of Missouri research could not replicate results of a previous study linking exposure to the chemical bisphenol A — commonly known as BPA — to obesity and diabetes.

At 2 weeks old, mice with yellow coats at the University of Missouri Animal Science Research Center already show a genetic predisposition to obesity compared with their healthier, darker siblings, researcher Cheryl Rosenfeld said. The mice are key to studies on the possible health effects of the chemical bisphenol A.

The original study, conducted by researchers at Duke University and the University of Michigan, used mice to look at the effect of maternal nutrients and environment on offspring. It used mice with yellow or brown coats: Yellow mice tend to go on to become obese and develop diabetes, while their genetically identical brown siblings lead a healthier life.

That study found that when the mother mouse was exposed to BPA — a chemical found in some plastic bottles, receipt paper and other consumer projects — and genistein, found in soybeans and sold as a dietary supplement, the number of yellow offspring increased dramatically.

However, the MU study, which used 10 times the number of mice, did not find the same connection.

That doesn't people mean should stop worrying about BPA, though, said Cheryl Rosenfeld, associate professor of biomedical sciences in MU's Bond Life Sciences Center.
"I don't want to lead anyone to believe BPA is not toxic," Rosenfeld said. "In no way am I saying BPA is safe and ... people shouldn't worry about it anymore."

Instead, she is saying that coat color alone cannot be used to evaluate the toxicity of BPA. That's not to discredit the previous group's work, which has been cited more than 200 times, she said.

"It was great. It attracted a lot of media attention," she said. "We're just saying, 'We can't reproduce the earlier findings.'"

Because the recent MU research didn't get the same results, Rosenfeld said, they can't make any conclusions about whether BPA does lead to obesity.

Rosenfeld and Frederick vom Saal, a curators' professor of biological sciences at MU and a leading expert in BPA research, plan to wrap up a study within the next year that should determine whether there is a connection.

Vom Saal was among the first scientists to come out with research against BPA. His research eventually linked its use in baby products to abnormal cell development that leads to early puberty, diabetes and cancer.

Another MU study found male mice indirectly exposed to the chemical in the womb grew up to be less attractive to females and less capable of navigation. Those studies, among others, are why people should still be concerned about BPA, Rosenfeld said. The MU lab has found links to behavior and reproductive deficiencies, especially with exposure to the chemical during early development.

There has been a public call to remove BPA from various products. In July, the federal government banned BPA in baby bottles and sippy cups.

Appleton Papers, the nation's largest manufacturer of thermal paper often used for receipts, dropped BPA from its formula in 2006, said Bill Van Den Brandt, manager of corporate communications for Appleton.

"After reviewing toxicology reports and available studies, we concluded that removing BPA from our thermal products was the responsible thing to do," he said. He said he didn't expect the results of the MU study alone to have a significant effect on public perception of BPA.

Rosenfeld said her lab is continuing to look at the effects of BPA on behavior, including parenting behavior. It will be the first study that focuses on both maternal and paternal behaviors in the mice, she said.

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Pressing issue has a happy ending

By MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS

After all the controversy last year over the closing, reopening, revamping and relocating of the University of Missouri Press, it seems everyone connected with the operation may finally be in a happy place.

The late May announcement that University of Missouri System administrators would shut down the more than 50-year-old MU Press caused what was probably the school’s largest protest movement of 2012. The flap, playing out in Facebook and Twitter, captured the attention of The New York Times, which in the end quoted system president Timothy M. Wolfe as saying early missteps were made in not involving authors, other university publishers and the press staff in the system’s attempt to reinvent a press that would be more profitable.

Now that the problem with the press seems to have been resolved, save the profits, the university system has declined to grant interviews with those who mishandled the initial decision, fearing it would rehash details of what the system’s spokeswoman said was merely “an evolutionary process.”

The press’s new editor in chief is Clair Willcox — the same editor in chief who initially was laid off with his 10-member staff and then was brought back under pressure from university staff, faculty, alumni and authors.

MU Press authors from across the country threatened to leave with their books. The reputation of the press, even if it survived a restructuring to put greater focus on digital publishing, was about to take a plunge. The university begged authors to hang on, promising change was coming.

Willcox was returned to the helm, and authors came back on board — claiming victory on their “Save the MU Press” Facebook page.

The University of Missouri in Columbia, which now has jurisdiction over the press, released a new document from MU provost Brian Foster about the press and its future.

As the university tries to adapt the press to technology changes in media and scholarly publishing in a way that allows it to become financially stable, Foster suggested it also:

• Re-engage authors, especially those who have been unsettled by the recent bad publicity and apparent instability of the press.

• Continue to publish print books as the press expands its already substantial list of digital editions and explores other new media opportunities.
• Continue to pursue a high-quality, rigorous acquisitions process.

Foster said university administrators had learned a lesson in involving key faculty and staff in decisions affecting programs at MU. And, he said, they saw clearly “how far beyond campus we reach people.”

“We have found there are many different perspectives on many of our programs, and that is true for the University of Missouri Press,” Foster said.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

MU Extension Council election in progress

By Grant Hindsley
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COLUMBIA — The Boone County MU Extension Council is conducting its annual election of council members through Jan. 22.

The council provides input and direction to the MU Extension educational programming in Boone County.

Any adult Boone County resident can vote. Votes can be placed online at the MU Extension website, requested over the phone, via email and in person at the Boone County MU Extension office, 1012 N. Highway UU.

To request a paper ballot, call 445-9792 or email andersonfr@missouri.edu with your name and address.