Q&A with Dean Harriet Nembhard
Hosted by the Engineering Staff Advisory Council on April 27, 2021
58 participants

Welcome
ESAC president Jacob Heiden apologized for the Zoom issues to begin the meeting, and he thanked staff members for attending the Q&A and submitting questions or comments in advance. ESAC will be holding elections in May, and staff are encouraged to nominate themselves or a colleague. Jacob also acknowledged other ESAC councilors and advisors, as well as welcomed and thanked Dean Nembhard for her collaboration with staff since starting at University of Iowa.

Dean Nembhard reiterated thanks to staff members for being active, important parts of our college. She thanked ESAC for our care of the college and providing this opportunity to connect. These Q&As with staff create a foundation to gain understanding of what is happening and what is needed for staff in the college.

Year Reflection
Jacob Heiden: Reflecting on this past year, what are you most proud of?
Dean Nembhard: I am very proud of how we have persevered and made progress on delivering on our mission in the face of so many challenges that could have derailed us. The pandemic, budget shortfalls, and reckoning around racial injustice will require our continued and collective work. I am most proud of how we have worked to address these challenges while taking care of the people in our community—especially those most affected by these challenges. As much as they are challenges, they have become points to rally around to push us to be proactive (vs. reactive).
We know this has been a year like no other for our students, faculty, and staff. Under the leadership of Associate Dean Grosland and her team, we offered collegiate workshops focused on course design and technology support for undergraduates so that we could fully embrace technologies that enabled remote instruction, ensuring that the student experience remained vibrant. With respect to graduate students and research, with the leadership of Associate Dean Udaykumar we had a virtual Research Week and Research Open House. We had more than 40 alumni—many of whom had not been involved with the college—to serve as poster judges. Now we are poised to ask some empowering questions: How might we take laboratory concepts that are virtual to now push ahead the curve? How might we continue to engage more of our alumni in our research activities? How do we bring the power of our discipline to bear on society’s biggest challenges?

Jacob Heiden: What has been the biggest learning curve since becoming dean of the college?
Dean Nembhard: There is certainly a lot to learn. The biggest learning curve has been the different systems and processes that govern the university and collegiate financial planning and academic policies. To serve the College well I have spent quite a bit of time understanding the way these processes are handled here as well as reflecting on how they differ from those at my previous institutions—and why. Every new leader is part archeologist. Along those lines, I have also done quite a bit of reading and reviewing of archival records, books, magazines, and files. I’ve often said that leadership is the narrative you can tell about the organization and the relationships you can build with the people in it. With the way we have had to work, while I have met most everyone in the college at least on one virtual Zoom meeting, I haven’t had the same opportunities to get to know people. I am looking forward to spending part of the summer learning more about our community.

Open Question from Audience: The college submitted several P3 and Jumpstart proposals that were rejected by the VPR as "noncompliant by including non-tenure track faculty members as Co-PIs". This has left many staff questioning the value the University places on our contribution to the research enterprise. How can the college advocate with the VPR and reassure research staff that our contributions to the University's research mission are valued?
Dean Nembhard: The internal process for how ideas should be solicited, and funds distributed is new for the college and campus. I was candidly heartbroken to see how that unspooled these last few days. Proposals required a fast
turnaround with an April 15 due date. There were many rejections because staff were in a PI or Co-PI role. I think it was hurtful across campus and that message has been heard. I plan to connect with the OVPR and I hope there will be a chance to reverse or remedy this issue by providing a grace period to revise or reconsider these proposals. Certainly our staff researcher’s expertise is critical to our mission.

Pandemic

Katie Schnedler: What are ways you have, or you could, encourage leadership to address burnout in staff?

Dean Nembhard: I think we are all rightfully and understandably exhausted. We are so fortunate to have a number of resources available to us through campus partners. Mental Health in particular continues to be a concern during the pandemic, so we always try to highlight resources like the Employee Assistance Program and some of the other resources the LiveWell unit has published. I am working with a panel of deans outside UI to address how we can continue to attend to mental health needs that have emerged. Another element that impacts burnout is just work/life balance in general. Staff with children at home experienced new challenges of trying to juggle roles as parent, teacher, caregiver and employee. Hopefully much of that is past us now but we continue to encourage staff to communicate with their leadership when struggling or when new needs/issues arise. Burnout might come from something a bit broader such as staffing reductions: Unfortunately, as is the case across higher ed in general, resources are limited, and those limitations are likely to be sustained. So we all learn to get by with less -- less funding, less staffing, etc. That is really, really, tough. However, that doesn’t mean everyone takes on more work – it might mean, though, that we will need to shift our priorities, stop doing some things, and some of us may need to do different work sometimes. The key here is to be flexible and be nimble. No one loves change but we must learn to expect it and be ready to pitch in and adapt so that we don’t burnout.

Katie Schnedler: Due to the pandemic, it is understood the student enrollment for 2021-2022 is down, not only at the University of Iowa, but also across the country. Due to low enrollment, what do you see as the financial state of the college?

Dean Nembhard: Enrollment is currently trailing where it was this time last fall across the university as well as in engineering. At the same time, we are striving to make up ground. This has been a unique admissions cycle. In a typical year, we would have a good idea about the size of the incoming class by now. The office of admissions continues to report that the one constant is that students are waiting until the last minute; there is a reluctance to do anything early as there is little incentive for doing so. ‘Test optional’ meant that a number of students were aspirational as to where they applied. Students applied to schools that they may not have otherwise. This, however, has resulted in huge waitlists at some universities. The college is holding the door open for the late deciders. The enrollment will have a financial impact on the college. We are doing active work to make sure enrollments go back up. Efforts to increase enrollment included a university administered ‘intent to enroll survey’ and reached out to the ‘maybe’ students via phone. Moreover, the college participated in a postcard project, sending a postcard to all students who were admitted, but had yet to accept. Thanks to those of you who participated in the project. Hand in hand with tuition revenue from enrollment is the student financial aid that is provided to support that enrollment. I am on the Budget Model Refinement Workgroup on Student Financial Aid. The university provides ~$100M in SFA and our college accounts for a large share (~$11M). We are looking at the mix of need-based and merit-based aid.

Katie Schnedler: Can you outline the process that is underway for the “return to work” plan this fall? Are there dates we should have on our calendars?

Dean Nembhard: Some people may be anxious to get back in the office. As communicated earlier this month, the college is working on a return to campus plan. Our goal is to have those guidelines and a framework for this transition ready for release by the end of the spring semester. Between now and then we have a working group of leaders from the Dean’s office gathering input from various units within the college as well as reviewing other information like the UI’s faculty recommendations and guidelines regarding meetings, for example. The UI return to campus date is August 2 so that is likely to be our official date as well, but some people will want to or need to return sooner based on operational, research, or student demands. There will also be some phasing in for the return so we don’t have a flood of people all appear on August 2. What we need to determine, though, is what all needs to happen to get there, and which roles/units will need to begin returning sooner. Guidance will come after those details are worked through.
Staffing

Michelle Reyes: *Can you talk more about the creation of the two new positions—Graduate Admission and Budget Coordinator—and how those were prioritized? What are the plans for filling the College’s current vacancies?*

Dean Nembhard: I recognize that we have had some staff positions lost across the college. The strategic plan is our foundation in which to draw our priorities from. In collaboration with the DEOs, Associate Deans and Sr Staff, we had a prioritization process to identify operational needs that were mission critical and/or not being fully met. That resulted in a list of 100 things, which sounds overwhelming but there were some themes in that data – specifically around graduate programs and financial planning. Our graduate program has contracted and has faced additional challenges over the past decade. We must turn around our graduate programs and grow it through more effective and robust recruiting. This was consistent with the recommendations from the Graduate Program Design Team that did significant work studying how we can improve our graduate programs throughout the graduate student life cycle. Similarly, the finance and budget position was identified based on multiple observations to help our college deal with several financial challenges and complexities over the next few years. These include working with new collegiate applications (e.g., iPLAN), calculating research expenditures, standardized reports on unit budgets to DEOs, UICA account reports, research grants, and financial management. Every vacancy is opportunity to be more strategic in our hiring. There is more work to do in the graduate student support functions and research administration. HR and Marketing/Communications functions are also on my radar.

Michelle Reyes: *Do you see any staff reductions, due to furloughs, in the upcoming year? Do you see for potential raises, as salaries were frozen last year?*

Dean Nembhard: Earlier this spring I worked with our central finance and budget personnel to position ourselves to provide raises in FY22. I have shared that there will be salary increases however, the amounts have not been determined as we are still developing the FY22 budget. Regarding furloughs, it is important to me to prioritize avoiding those. I have no plans for furloughs in FY22.

Michelle Reyes: *We are a small college with small staff to begin with. And we leverage small size as much as we can, with an emphasis on stakeholder (i.e., student) satisfaction. How do the new positions interface with our stakeholders?*

Dean Nembhard: Students are at the core of what we do and why we are here. The Graduate Program Design Team reviewed the entire graduate student life cycle to determine where support resources are needed. This support will require critical infrastructure to build out and reenergize our graduate program. It is unclear if this position will meet directly with students, but building the program is tremendously critical to our mission and rankings. The finance position is important for allocating our resources according to the Strategic Plan. While not student facing, being able to know where we have money and more intently allocating funds to support students and where we need to prioritize fundraising efforts will have a positive impact on students.

Vision

Travis Greenlee: *In what ways would you like to see collaboration across college departments and centers?*

Dean Nembhard: The teaching, research and outreach of the College of Engineering has the potential to impact a billion people in the years to come. Our work in engineering for better health, engineering for the environment, and engineering with AI and autonomous systems has the potential to improve quality of life for millions, if not billions of people. These efforts will impact, transform, and improve the health safety, and security all over the globe. As a small college, we must work together in a concerted, strategic manner to be effective. On various aspects, including teaching and research, we must look for opportunities be nimble and proactive. We must encourage and incentives collaboration in our curriculum and in our research. The advisory board and employers want our MS and PhD students to do work with impact, work in teams, and be lifelong learners. How can we cultivate relationships with these external partners? One model is the NSF Smart and Connected Communities, a civic innovation challenge. How do we bring powerful engineering teams together to address water management, affordable housing, and power consumption? We have work to do offer a more modern and interdisciplinary curriculum. Where are the opportunities to strengthen our
undergraduate curriculum? We also have to plan to pull ahead of our competitors. One example is our multi-year funding to support graduate students and the infrastructure to support them along the way.

**Travis Greenlee: Thinking to the future, what area(s) are you hoping to focus on in the next couple years?**

Dean Nembhard: There are two parts of the plan that are with me always: providing an environment in which all members of the collegiate community can thrive, are welcomed, and supported; and to provide a transformative and personalized educational experience that prepares students to be ethical, globally aware citizens. We are our people. Recruiting future faculty, staff, and the next generation of students will be key. I will be especially involved in the faculty recruitment and in systematic approaches to reducing the disparities in all areas. There are several unknowns with our incoming students. Associate Dean Grosland is working on systems to support them. For example, what is their level of college preparedness? How this situation has affected, and will continue to affect, students' learning? What accommodations will need to be made? During normal times, the transition to college can be overwhelming for some students. We have learned lessons in this last year, and we have an opportunity to transform our classroom, curricular, and co-curricular experiences. Faculty are sharing best practices and compiling resources. We are thinking about how we teach and use technology in the classroom along with student’s desire for increased flexibility, hybrid instruction, and additional advising opportunities. We also know there is so much currency for engineers in their co-curricular experience. Mentoring, leadership, and impact opportunities come from being in student organizations or undergraduate research teams. With courses being more commoditized, experiences will become more and more important. Lastly, I would like to expand our partnerships with industry, agencies, alumni, and foundations. We have tremendous opportunity to establish our narrative for the next capitol campaign. We need to be ready to set our direction for the college with the new UI president.

**Open questions**

**How can staff support you as Dean?**

Dean Nembhard: Staff are wonderful and staff leaders provide good support systems. I look forward to in-person “Monday morning meetings” with the Dean’s Office staff when it’s safe to do so. I am looking forward to supporting our leadership team. I would like staff to help spread optimism, fully engage, and think positively. Staff can help critique, think through things, and help us come up with new alternatives.

**As a Dean, post pandemic, what are you looking for in new UI president?**

Dean Nembhard: Being able to continue to evolve and innovate in the face of the constraints. It is important to me, but also for the entire UI campus leadership. Our next leader needs to really understand the mechanisms and interconnection of campus systems. There has been a lot of discussion about budget and new budget model and how it does not affect all colleges the same. I have said in various meetings that equality and equity are not the same. Equally does not mean equity. Our students are different. Student aid is different. I have had enough experience across higher ed to discern these sorts of differences will be important. I am looking for the next leader to advance the mission and role of higher ed to further reduce disparity and advance society.