UC Merced Selected for National Workgroup on Community Engaged Scholarship

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MERCED - The University of California, Merced, was founded with the commitment to apply its globally focused research to help meet urgent regional needs related to education, poverty, medical care shortages, population growth and air pollution. The campus' teaching, research and public service activities aim to understand and improve the conditions of the Central Valley.

This month, faculty and staff are joining an innovative national effort to improve how universities ensure effective relationships and positive impacts for the communities that they serve.

Two UC Merced faculty members, a staff member and a community partner will attend a charrette, or collaborative planning session, "Faculty for the Engaged Campus," sponsored by the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health from May 28 through 30 at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. This program is part of a larger effort of the Department of Education to improve postsecondary education. The Merced team will be part of a select national workgroup advancing how institutes of higher education select, prepare and support faculty teaching, research and public service to be of greater value and impact to communities.

"UC Merced's location in the Valley creates mutual benefits - a resource for the community and a wealth of research questions for our investigators," said UC Merced Vice Chancellor for Research Samuel J. Traina. "Many researchers find that the questions and problems faced by the local region are the same problems faced globally, so that research aimed at global issues also can have a local impact."

More than 100 campuses applied to participate in the charrette. UC Merced is one of only 20 chosen, and the only institution from California that will be represented.

"This is an area where UC Merced will be distinguishing itself," said Professor Robin DeLugan of the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts. "The charrette offers us an opportunity to evaluate what we have and find out where we need to fill in gaps to support and motivate community-engaged scholarship especially by talking with other research institutions who are participating like Northwestern, the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, the University of Minnesota and the University of New Mexico."

DeLugan will attend the charrette along with Dean Maria Pallavicini of the School of Natural Sciences; Jorge Aguilar, who serves as associate vice chancellor for educational and community partnerships and special assistant to the chancellor; and Stergios Roussos of the Community Partnership Alliance in Merced.

"UC Merced's participation in this faculty development project for CES reflects and reinforces its commitment as a state and national leader for how institutes of higher education benefit communities," Roussos said.

"The charrette will help us learn ways other leading universities establish programs, policies and practices that support how faculty engage communities' needs and resources in their daily work," DeLugan said, "This will include ways to make sure that research supporting our region is valued in the tenure process, for example."

DeLugan explained that Community Engaged Scholarship (CES) is a term used by educational leaders to define a new approach to how institutes of higher education fulfill their objectives for education, research and public service. Faculty training and support are at the heart of CES; without faculty who can understand and lead CES efforts, most universities are unable to be effective CES institutions.

She noted that there are two important parts of connecting faculty teaching and research with the community - making faculty aware of the benefits of regionally-engaged scholarship, and making community entities aware of the potential for working with a campus like UC Merced when research expertise is needed. Roussos' presence as a community representative in the delegation is a key advantage for UC Merced, she said - it will help ensure that UC Merced and its prospective partners are addressing both sides of the awareness equation.

Towards that goal, DeLugan and Aguilar are also working with CURAJ (Community-University Research & Action for Justice), an initiative to foster collaborations of university research and local community expertise to improve the well-being of the disadvantaged populations in the Central Valley. After the May charrette, they will be preparing for a fall CURAJ Action Summit that will bring community organizations together to learn how to draw on faculty research expertise.

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