March 1, 2016

Dear President Turpin,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Institutional Strategic Plan Discussion Paper. On behalf of the Women and Children’s Health Research Institute (WCHRI), we would like to submit some ideas in response to the questions posed in the discussion paper.

What areas of strength differentiate the University of Alberta from other universities and are we ready to differentially support and promote our areas of excellence?

While the University of Alberta has many strengths and areas of excellence, there are some areas in which we are uniquely positioned at a national and international level to be leaders and to differentiate ourselves from other institutions. One such area is women and children’s health research. WCHRI (founded in 2006 with the partnership of the University of Alberta, Alberta Health Services, Stollery Children’s Hospital Foundation and Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation) is the only research institute in Canada, and one of the few in the world, to focus on women’s, children’s and perinatal health. We support women and children’s health researchers at the University of Alberta through a series of funding programs, partnerships, and research facilitation services. By nurturing and supporting our researchers, WCHRI has helped catalyze excellence in this field - as an example, WCHRI members did exceptionally well in the most recent round of CIHR Open Operating (Transitional) Grant and Foundation Scheme – Live Pilot programs:

- Out of the 14 Operating Grants awarded to University of Alberta faculty, nine went to WCHRI members.
- Four out of the five Foundation Scheme awards received by U of A faculty went to WCHRI members.

In order to continue this momentum and ensure ongoing innovation and discovery in this field, we need the University of Alberta to identify women and children’s health research as an area of research excellence. Our funding partners, who have provided over $40 million to the University of Alberta in support of WCHRI research over the past 10 years, are also keen to see the University highlight, promote, and support women and children’s health research in a more targeted manner. There are tremendous opportunities to harness this power of partnerships and have the University of Alberta recognized nationally and internationally as a leader in the field of women and children’s health research.
What incentives and supports do we need to put in place to take full advantage of the U of A’s diversity by facilitating and strengthening interdisciplinary and cross-faculty research and teaching initiatives?

WCHRI has considerable experience in this area as we are a mature cross-faculty institute that has been operational for over a decade. We currently have a membership of over 400 researchers (many of whom are national and international leaders in their field) from over 12 faculties along with several hundred trainees, non-academic affiliates, and members of the community. However, it is difficult to foster collaborative research across academic units and organizational structures that have different incentives, supports, and expectations of their faculty and staff members. One way in which the University can further support interdisciplinary research is through their research institutes. However, research institutes need clear direction in order to define their role within the context of other academic units such as faculties and departments (indeed this is one of the topic areas for the President’s Visiting Committee to the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry). Some examples of research institute roles may include: facilitating research activities through core services; building capacity within the field by offering events and networking opportunities; advocating for discipline specific research platforms, programs and policy; training the next generation of researchers; translating research findings and knowledge to support evidence informed practice and policy; communicating research outcomes to stakeholders, community, and government; ensuring effective accountability reporting and stakeholder engagement. The University may also want to adopt one or more frameworks in order to evaluate researchers and research institutes in ways that go beyond the traditional academic research outputs of funding and publication. Frameworks such as the AIHS Health Research to Impact Framework, take into account the complex nature of research activities and the broader impact that research can and should have within society - advancing knowledge, building capacity, informing decisions, improving and impacting health, and driving socio-economic prosperity through the diffusion of innovation. Developing a more robust, supportive and accountable research governance structure will certainly yield positive results and increased innovation. Adopting broader assessment and evaluation models will very likely incentivize researchers to build programs of research that are collaborative and interdisciplinary.

In what areas does the U of A have the greatest potential to demonstrate and provide national leadership?

The University of Alberta has many areas of strength to draw upon; however, we should focus our efforts on identifying areas where we can uniquely contribute to national initiatives and where we have opportunity to do so. One such opportunity is for the University (through WCHRI) to be a leader in national pediatric clinical trials by
collaborating with the KIDSCAN initiative. KIDSCAN is a critically important opportunity that will build upon existing infrastructure and investment in Canada to enhance research and improve the evidence base on which treatment decisions are made for children in our country. Currently led by the Maternal Infant Child and Youth Research Network (MICYRN), KIDSCAN is targeted to be a network of clinical trial sites that facilitates multicenter drug trials across Canada through a national coordinating center and platforms of trial expertise. The network’s primary purpose is to work with sub-specialty networks and industry to catalyze studies in pediatric disease. WCHRI, in partnership with the Northern Alberta Clinical Trials and Research Centre (NACTRC), is well positioned to build upon our current strengths in pediatric clinical trial coordination and data management expertise in order to play a leading role in this initiative.

We thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the University of Alberta dialogue around the institutional strategic plan. We hope to remain engaged in this important initiative as it unfolds. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the ideas we’ve presented in more detail, please let us know as we would be happy to continue the conversation!