Introduction

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The following papers each address an aspect of the subject of the twenty-first ann-
nual research policy retreat hosted by the Merrill Center: University research
planning in the data era: Working with the levers and pulleys that tie together research
information, from big data to local details. We are pleased to continue this program that
brings together University administrators and researcher-scientists for informal dis-
cussions that lead to the identification of pressing issues, understanding of different
perspectives, and the creation of plans of action to enhance research productivity
within our institutions. This year the focus was on opportunities and challenges of big
data for research in public universities.

Our keynote speaker for the event
was Dr. Michael Huerta of the National
Library of Medicine, National Institutes
of Health. He is helping to lead the insti-
tute’s Big Data to Knowledge (BD2K) ini-
tiative which will support research and
development in the area of data science
and associated technologies. Import-
antly, BD2K will also work to change pol-
cies and practices at NIH to raise the
prominence of data in the biomedical re-
search enterprise by increasing data shar-
ing, supporting community-based stand-
ards efforts, and making data sets discov-
erable, citable, and linked to the scientific
literature.

Benefactors Virginia and Fred Mer-
rill make possible this series of retreats:
The Research Mission of Public Universi-
ties. On behalf of the many participants
over two decades, I express deep grati-
tude to the Merrills for their enlightened
support. On behalf of the Merrill Ad-
vanced Studies Center, I extend my ap-
preciation for the contribution of effort
and time of the participants and in partic-
ular, to the authors of this collection of
papers who found time in their busy
schedules for the preparation of the ma-
terials that follow.

Twenty administrators, faculty, and
students from five institutions in Kansas,
Iowa and Nebraska attended in 2017,
which marked our twenty first retreat.
Additionally, two executives from the
American Speech-Language-Hearing As-
sociation attended this year. Though not
all discussants’ remarks are individually
documented, their participation was an
essential ingredient in the general discus-
sions that ensued and the preparation of
the final papers. The list of all conference
attendees is at the end of the publication.

The inaugural event in this series of
conferences, in 1997, focused on pres-
sures that hinder the research mission of
higher education. In 1998, we turned our
attention to competing for new resources
and to ways to enhance individual and
collective productivity. In 1999, we exam-
inied in more depth cross-university alli-
ances. The focus of the 2000 retreat was
on making research a part of the public
agenda and championing the cause of re-
search as a valuable state resource. In 2001, the topic was evaluating research productivity, with a focus on the very important National Research Council (NRC) study from 1995. In the wake of 9/11, the topic for 2002 was “Science at a Time of National Emergency”; participants discussed scientists coming to the aid of the country, such as in joint research on preventing and mitigating bioterrorism, while also recognizing the difficulties our universities face because of increased security measures. In 2003 we focused on graduate education and two keynote speakers addressed key issues about retention of students in the doctoral track, efficiency in time to degree, and making the rules of the game transparent. In 2004 we looked at the leadership challenge of a comprehensive public university to accommodate the fluid nature of scientific initiatives to the world of long-term planning for the teaching and service missions of the universities. In 2005 we discussed the interface of science and public policy with an eye toward how to move forward in a way that honors both public trust and scientific integrity. Our retreat in 2006 considered the privatization of public universities and the corresponding shift in research funding and infrastructure. The 2007 retreat focused on the changing climate of research funding, the development of University research resources, and how to calibrate those resources with likely sources of funding, while the 2008 retreat dealt with the many benefits and specific issues of international research collaboration. The 2009 retreat highlighted regional research collaborations, with discussion of the many advantages and concerns associated with regional alliances. The 2010 retreat focused on the challenges regional Universities face in the effort to sustain and enhance their research missions, while the 2011 retreat outlined the role of Behavioral and Social sciences in national research initiatives. Our 2012 retreat discussed the present and future information infrastructure required for research success in universities, and the economic implications of that infrastructure, and the 2013 retreat discussed the increasing use of data analysis in University planning processes, and the impact it has on higher education and research. The 2014 retreat looked at the current funding environment and approaches which could be used to improve future funding prospects. The 2015 retreat addressed the opportunities and challenges inherent in innovation and translational initiatives in the time of economic uncertainty that have an impact on goals to enhance research productivity. The 2016 retreat focused on the building of infrastructure to meet the changing needs in research.

Once again, the texts of this year’s Merrill white paper reveal various perspectives on only one of the many complex issues faced by research administrators and scientists every day. It is with pleasure that I encourage you to read the papers from the 2017 Merrill policy retreat on: University research planning in the data era: Working with the levers and pulleys that tie together research information, from big data to local details.