March 23, 2020

Dear President Richards and Members of the Board,

I would like start by thanking the board for all their work on behalf of the state of Iowa’s regent institutions. I joined the University of Iowa Staff Council in 2017 at a time when we were struggling with de-appropriations on a seemingly annual basis. A combination of economic factors and efforts by University administration has helped to stem these reversions, but these positive changes are thanks in no small part to the leadership and advocacy of the Board of Regents. Salary increases for staff were almost nonexistent a few short years ago, and while they have not been as substantial as we would hope for since, the trajectory has been positive.

As I write these comments, the world around us is changing dramatically due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the change is coming so fast that it is possible that much of what I write now will not be applicable by the time the board convenes. Given this backdrop, it is difficult for me to assess and address salary issues and it feels as though it wouldn’t even be appropriate. Instead, I make a plea for you to protect the positions and interests of regent institution staff as what is sure to be a new economic reality takes hold in the coming months and years.

Since the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 was first reported in the state of Iowa on March 8, 2020, University of Iowa staff has been on the front lines dealing with the crisis. Staff at the State Hygienic Laboratory in Coralville ran the first tests and continues to be responsible for all statewide COVID-19 testing. University of Iowa Health Care workers admitted Iowa’s first patient stricken with the disease a few days following the first positive tests. Information technology services and academic support staff from across the institution have quickly mobilized to transition to online and virtual learning platforms to battle community spread in Johnson County and around the state. Both faculty and staff researchers, while ramping down most research projects, have ramped up projects investigating the coronavirus to help in the effort to fight the global pandemic. Additionally, staff from every corner of the university has transitioned to working remotely and continues to be reassigned to temporary positions to help in the effort.

Understanding that an uncertain economic future will follow this pandemic, I ask you to remember these efforts of the regent institutions and their employees. The efforts to date have been nothing short of remarkable. I ask that you do all you can to protect the livelihoods of staff during the crisis and later as we attempt to get back to normal business operations and find positive ways to reimagine employment at our
state institutions. While a robust salary policy would be welcome, it would be naïve to expect, so I ask that we work together to find creative new ways to benefit our employees and their families.

Consider benefits such as discounting or providing free tuition for employees and their dependents. The economic impact report commissioned by this board and released in the fall of 2019 demonstrates the importance of our universities to the state economy and employment rate, and the continuing education of our system’s employees and their families will help drive recovery in the wake of this crisis. Also, consider uniform policies that encourage and promote flexible work arrangements where possible. Presently, employees who are able are working in this capacity and will provide an excellent case study in how effective broad application of the practice can be in the future and the kinds of benefits it can provide. In addition, please continue to review policies related to catastrophic, sick, and parental leave and how to make these benefits more flexible. Parents who are now staying home with children who are out of school need the ability to focus on numerous priorities, not to mention those who are or may be dealing with illness in the near future.

We will learn much about ourselves, our business, and ways in which our work can be altered to benefit both employees and the efficiency of our institutional operations in the coming months, but one thing we already know about is the resiliency of our employees. From the 2008 flood to the Great Recession to the COVID-19 pandemic we now face, the University of Iowa has risen to all challenges and made itself stronger as a result. I know this will be no different, and I know I speak on behalf of my fellow UI employees when I say I look forward to working with you and our institution’s administration throughout this crisis and into the recovery.

Thank you again for all that you do for the students, faculty, and staff of the University of Iowa and for the residents of our state.

Sincerely,

Michael Weaver
President, University of Iowa Staff Council