STRATEGIC PLAN

Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBS)
(Updated October 2012)

I. Background

The GSBS has a longstanding policy of developing annual goals for each academic and fiscal year (September 1 – August 31) and holding itself accountable for reaching, or attempting to reach, those goals. It is important to develop goals that pertain to important endeavors and may improve the school in the context of its vision and mission. Therefore, in this annual update we outline new or updated goals for the GSBS for FY’13 and beyond, and we provide information about goals achieved during the previous academic year (FY’12).

With direction from President Callender, annual institutional, mission area, and individual entity strategic planning goals are required. GSBS entity goals fall under the Institutional and Academic goals and must align with them. They also are timed to align closely with the timeline for annual institutional budget preparation and submission each August to the UT System and State. The state biennial budgetary Fiscal Years FY’12 & FY’13 run from September 1, 2011 to August 31, 2013, coincident with our academic years (fall, spring & summer) 2011-2012 & 2012-2013. This updated version reports our progress since the last update in September 2011.

It is essential that all GSBS goals fall within the published mission statements of The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) and the GSBS. These mission statements are listed below:

A. Current UTMB Mission, Vision and Values statement

Our Mission

UTMB’s mission is to improve health for the people of Texas and around the world.

Our Vision

We work together to work wonders, as we define the future of health care and strive to be the best in all our endeavors

Our values

Our values define our culture and guide our every interaction.

• We demonstrate compassion for all.
• We always act with integrity.
• We show respect to everyone we meet.
• We embrace diversity to best serve a global community.
We promote excellence and innovation through lifelong learning.

B. GSBS Mission statement

The Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Texas Medical Branch advances human understanding and knowledge in health-related disciplines through scholarly teaching and research in the biomedical sciences, promoting excellence in academic pursuits and activities, and developing individual leadership, communication, motivation, and scholarship in all students.

II. GSBS Goals for FY’13

1. Invest in our #1 asset, our people

Strategy: Work with new Provost to search for, identify and hire a new Dean of the GSBS

The current vice president and dean has been dean since 1996, and he is planning to retire during this academic year. A new Executive VP/Provost/DOM took office Oct 1, 2012. The institutional plan is for the Provost to form a search committee in early Nov 2012 to identify and hire a new VP and Dean of the GSBS as soon as possible.

Strategy: Increase the total number of Presidential Scholars to 12

In 2010 Presidential Scholarships were established that are designed to recruit annually some of the most promising first year GSBS students in the basic sciences who are US citizens or permanent residents (eligible for NIH training grant support). The scholarships provide an additional $5,000/year (plus fringe benefits) of stipend for up to 5 years and up to $3,000 for a one-time relocation expense. Currently a total of 10 Scholars are enrolled, and the goal is to recruit 2 additional Scholars who will enroll in fall 2013 and bring the total to at least 12.

Strategy: Address areas of concern expressed by office staff in a survey of employee satisfaction

Implement an Action Plan to address staff concerns that emanated from a 2011 Morehead Survey that dealt extensively with issues contributing to faculty/staff satisfaction in the workplace. Following that survey, GSBS leadership developed 3 separate action plans designed to address concerns of the office staff regarding perceived impediments to employee advancement and better workplace satisfaction. One plan was addressed and evaluated in FY’12, and a second will be addressed and evaluated in FY’13.

Strategy: Design and implement a plan to better communicate important institutional initiatives to all GSBS constituents – faculty, staff and students
Institutional leadership notes that important behavioral and professional expectations designed to improve quality and performance by all employees and students are not always effectively communicated throughout the organization. Therefore the President and Executive VPs have directed all entity leaders to develop and implement a plan to achieve more effective communication throughout their constituents as one of their mission area goals for FY’13.

2. **Advance our quality and value in education, research and health care**

**Strategy: Enhance marketability of GSBS predoctoral and postdoctoral students**

Neither UTMB nor the GSBS has developed formal job counseling or job search assistance for graduate students or postdocs. This is partly due to financial constraints and partly because historically faculty mentors primarily prepared their students and postdocs only for research careers in academia. In recent times, academic positions have become scarcer; fewer than 25% of current PhD graduates eventually secure academic positions, and then only after an increasingly lengthy postdoctoral training period. However, overall unemployment is low among PhD graduates, the GSBS does sponsor events that highlight and inform students about the diverse career tracks open to PhD graduates, and many graduates do enter a variety of career opportunities outside academia – e.g., in government, industry, law, biotech, etc. However, in order to help our graduates find employment more effectively and efficiently, we propose first to meet with UTMB HR representatives to identify the best job search tools that are available and useful for job searching.

**Strategy: Develop HR tools for searching for academic and non-academic jobs for graduates**

Once job search tools are identified, they will be classified as universal, academic, and non-academic, and, if possible, non-academic tools will be sub-classified into more specific job titles. The next step will then be to develop a written plan for implementing the job search process in terms of: a) the specific goals, b) steps in the process, c) expected outcomes, and d) responsible parties and persons who can assist the students, help them conduct searches, and provide career counseling. With the process defined, we will establish a date for initiating the program. Finally a process and timeline for tracking the effectiveness of the program will be established.

3. **Deliver high quality educational programs to advance learning & leadership development to a diverse student population**

**Strategy: Develop additional certificate courses and tracks for postdocs**

Over the past few years, with the leadership of the Director of the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs and the GSBS Senior Associate Dean, numerous one semester credit hour (sch) certificate courses have been developed to serve the professional development of postdocs. Courses currently fit into 5 different “tracks” (Critical Research Skills, Advanced Business Management, Teaching & Mentoring, Translational Research,
Bioinformatics & Systems Biology). Postdocs can take up to 4 sch/term and after 12 sch can qualify for a formal certificate in a track. All postdocs are enrolled in the GSBS so that their coursework generates a transcript, which documents the professional development they receive. Tuition is paid by the GSBS, and the courses are targeted to occur at times that minimally disrupt the daily lab work of the trainees. For FY’13, the GSBS goal is to establish 2 additional certificate courses and 1 new certificate track.

**Strategy: Improve mentoring and advising of PhD Students**

This strategy represents our response to one important mandate contained in the “Framework for Advancing Excellence Throughout the UT System” presented by Chancellor Cigarroa at the May 2011 meeting of the UT Board of Regents and adopted by the Board. It was one of several mandates that the Framework contained designed to improve student mentoring and incentivize a shortening of the time to the PhD degree. One of our goals for FY’13 is to adopt 1-2 strategies for improving mentoring and assisting a student to finish in a more timely fashion. To help students and postdocs and to foster improved mentoring we now mandate that students and mentors discuss and sign the AAMC-developed “Compact Between Biomedical Graduate Students and Their Research Advisors”. The compact outlines responsibilities and behaviors expected of each signee, and it must be co-signed before a student is allowed to enter candidacy for the PhD. A similar “Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and their Mentors” must be signed as part of the hiring process for the postdoc. These compacts command a closer attention of both student and mentor to the expectations and responsibilities of both parties and are currently “best practices” in the US and Canada. We also are encouraging a supplemental document be generated- an Independent Development Plan (IDP), which details planned milestones and expectations for the trainee, including expected time to completion, incentives, deadlines, and consequences. Additionally, the GSBS plans to sponsor periodic workshops on mentoring and plan these events together with the GSBS Associates alumni officers who have volunteered to participate and also with members of UTMB’s newly formed “Academy of Research Mentors”, which enrolled founding members in summer 2012 and currently is planning activities for the future.

**Strategy: Incentivize a shortened time to the PhD**

Mentioned in the above strategy, this related one focuses on students who enter our 6 basic science PhD programs and all take a generic first-year curriculum (the Basic Biomedical Science Curriculum or BBSC) anchored by 3 major “foundation” courses (Biochemistry, Cell Biology, and Molecular Biology & Genetics). These students constitute ~60% of our entering class each year. A plan was developed in FY’12 which involved several proposed strategies: 1) Reduce credit hours in foundation coursework, 2) encourage taking competency exams that allow students to place out of foundation coursework, 3) eliminate or make elective some current 1 credit hour courses, 4) encourage students to take lab rotations as early as possible to identify a faculty mentor for the PhD, 5) make previously required modular courses serve as required program courses, and 6) have students take Ethics of Scientific Research in term 1 of the first year.
instead of term 2. All of these strategies would compress first year coursework and allow earlier entry into program specific courses and laboratory research. This would allow completion of 95% of the mandatory BBSC coursework in the first 2 terms of year 1 and free the summer term 3 for program courses and laboratory research. Such a change would allow qualifying exams to be taken earlier in year 2 and facilitate earlier entry into candidacy for the PhD. Additionally, we would reduce the time limit for graduation after entry into candidacy from 5 years to 3 and significantly increase supervisory committee oversight of students to foster adherence to this timeline.

In FY’12, development of the above strategies was spearheaded by the GSBS Senior Associate Dean for Student Affairs who also is Director of the BBSC, working with the BBSC Steering Committee. Our goal for FY’13 now is to implement one or two of the 6 strategies in order to embark on the course of shortening the time-to degree for a major portion of our entering students.

4. Advance our financial strength

Strategy: The goal here is to be fiscally conservative, maximize revenue, and cut expenses where possible. For more than a decade budgets have been tight, and state funding for education has not kept up with inflation. Therefore, we are used to this environment and are conscious of the need to meet the adjusted operating margins assigned to us annually. As in previous years, our goal for FY’13 is to stay within our budget and finish the year by returning unspent money to the institutional bottom line. We cannot totally control income (tuition & fees + state appropriated general revenue based on formula funding), but we can control costs. Also we will continue to work with our Development Office to secure additional philanthropic support in order to provide more scholarships for our students and professorships for our faculty.

Strategy: The GSBS developed a Fellowship Incentive Program several years ago to encourage students to apply for independent external funding to support their annual stipend. Winning external funding benefits both the student (who demonstrates an ability to secure funding) and the faculty mentor (whose grant is relieved of stipend support). In this Program, the GSBS pays $50 for a qualified student application and $500 for a student whose application is funded by stipend support > $15,000/year. We will continue this program and advertise it more frequently throughout the year, because past experience has shown that requests for the reward dollars typically come to the GSBS immediately following a global e-mail reminder of the program.

III. Goals Accomplished During the Previous Academic Year Beginning September 2011 (FY’12)

1. Invest in our #1 asset, our people

Strategy: Increase number of Presidential Scholarships by 4
In FY’10, with support from the Provost, Presidential Scholarships were established that are designed to recruit annually some of the most promising first year GSBS students in the basic sciences who are US citizens or permanent residents (eligible for NIH training grant support). The scholarships provide an additional $5,000/year (plus fringe benefits) of stipend for up to 5 years and up to $3,000 for a one-time relocation expense. By FY’12 a total of 8 Presidential Scholars were enrolled. For FY’12, the goal was to increase the number by 4, to give a total of 12 Presidential Scholars in residence, but we were able to recruit only 2 to bring the total to 10.

Strategy: Address areas of concern expressed by office staff in a survey of employee satisfaction

We implemented an Action Plan to address staff concerns that emanated from a 2011 UTMB-wide Morehead Survey that dealt extensively with issues contributing to faculty/staff satisfaction. Following that survey, GSBS leadership developed 3 action plans designed to address concerns of the office staff regarding their perceived impediments to employee advancement and workplace satisfaction. One of the 3 plans was addressed and evaluated in FY’12, and the elements of the plan led to an increased staff satisfaction as determined by an informal survey.

Strategy: Increase in the GSBS base student stipend by $2,000/year in order to remain competitive with our sister Texas schools for recruitment of outstanding students.

For fall 2010, UTMB graduate student base stipends were increased from $25,000/yr to $27,000/year. The stipend amount is supplemented by additional payments of fringe benefits, tuition & fees, and health insurance. These costs bring the total expense/student to ~$40,000/year. The increase is borne by the GSBS for first year Graduate Assistants and by faculty research grants after the first year. The challenge for the GSBS is to identify new institutional funds; for the faculty the challenge is to find the increase from existing and future grant support. This is especially problematic when faculty are in the middle of a grant budget that did not plan for such an increase, and it is compounded currently by the challenging economy, declining NIH support, and increasing competition for the scarce research dollars awarded. Loss of faculty grant support when that faculty member has a PhD student working in their laboratory means that the GSBS, department, or some other source must scramble to muster emergency support for the student involved. To help with this problem, the GSBS decided to enroll a 25% smaller class than usual for fall 2011 and fall 2012 in order to reserve the saved stipend money for interim support of students whose faculty member encounters a lapse in grant support.

Because of the uncertain economic situation and need for emergency support, it seemed inadvisable to raise the base student stipend again until FY’15. We currently are “in the ballpark” of what our sister schools are paying, particularly, UTHSC-Houston, UTHSC-San Antonio, Baylor College of Medicine, and Texas A&M.

2. Advance our quality and value in education, research and health care

Strategy: Assure high performance PhD programs
This and the following two strategies under this heading were developed in response to the mandates contained in the UT System Chancellor’s “Action Plan for Advancing Excellence Throughout the UT System”, which was described above. This past year, working with the UTMB Office of Institutional Effectiveness, we revised and strengthened our review criteria and reported them to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). Also, in response to a request from the THECB, we published a schedule for review of each GSBS graduate program between now and 2020.

**Strategy: Improve mentoring & advising of PhD students**

For FY’12, our specific goal was to develop a plan to ensure that the AAMC - developed “Compact Between Biomedical Graduate Students and Their Research Advisors” included a plan outlining the timeline to complete the PhD degree. This goal was accomplished. In addition, the GSBS enthusiastically supported the establishment of a UTMB Academy of Research Mentors in summer 2012. The Academy began with the appointment of founding faculty who are established researchers and recognized as quality mentors. They will develop programs, speakers, and workshops that will help UTMB faculty become better, more effective mentors of students, postdocs, and junior faculty members.

**Strategy: Incentivize a shortened time to the PhD**

This specific goal for FY’12 was to develop a plan and list 1-2 strategies that could be tested in FY’13. As discussed above in FY’13 goals for this year, at least 6 strategies were developed as part of this plan, and at least 1-2 will be tested in FY’13. Hopefully all 6 eventually will prove to be useful in shortening time to the PhD. Also related to this goal, in early 2012, the UT System’s Executive Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs wrote each UT System President requesting a letter be provided him by June 30, 2012 that addressed 11 questions regarding review and improvement of doctoral programs at their institution. The GSBS worked with the UTMB Office of Institutional Effectiveness to meet this mandate, and a 12 page report with 8 appendices entitled “Strengthening Doctoral Programs at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston -2012” was submitted by President Callender well in advance of the deadline. While the document dealt heavily with GSBS programs, it also addressed doctoral programs in the other 3 schools (SOM, SON, and SHP) as well.

3. **Deliver high quality educational programs to advance learning & leadership development to a diverse student population**

**Strategy: Minimize effects of possible state budget reductions & non-renewal of some faculty NIH grants on graduate student funding**

State budget reductions for the current biennium FY’12 & ’13 were severe. Also difficulty renewing highly competitive grant funding in a time of scarce resources and limited NIH funding can cause loss of faculty support for graduate students funded from
faculty grants. When this happens, affected faculty members turn to the GSBS for interim student support while they work on a revised renewal application that hopefully succeeds. To preserve some GSBS stipend dollars to help support students in this emergency situation, the GSBS decided to enroll a smaller class than usual in fall 2011 (reduced by 25% vs. fall 2010) in order to reserve stipend money for interim support of students whose faculty encountered a lapse in grant support. In this past year several such requests were received and accommodated by this special fund. The reduction in enrollment was targeted to international applicants, who were not accepted unless they could pay their own stipend. Although such students enhance diversity, they are not US citizens or permanent residents and therefore do not qualify for support on NIH training grants. Since we already have a relatively small pool of US students that do qualify, a more limited pool could prevent us from being competitive and obtaining more training grants.

4. *Advance our financial strength*

**Strategy:** The goal here is to be fiscally conservative, maximize revenue and cut expenses where possible. For more than a decade budgets have been tight and state funding for higher education has not kept up with inflation. Therefore, we have become used to this environment and the need to meet the adjusted operating margins given to us annually. As in previous years, our goal for FY’12 was to stay within our budget and finish the year returning some money to the institutional bottom line, and we achieved that. We cannot totally control income (tuition & fees + state appropriation based on formula funding), but we can control costs. Also we continued to work with our Development Office to secure additional philanthropic support in order to provide more scholarship support for our students.

**Strategy:** The GSBS developed a Fellowship Incentive Program several years ago to encourage students to apply for independent outside funding to support their stipend. The GSBS pays $50 for a qualified student application and $500 for a student whose application is funded with stipend support > $15,000/year. We continued this program and advertised it in both the fall and spring terms, because past experience has shown that requests for the reward dollars for applications and for successful awards typically come to the GSBS immediately following a global reminder of the program.