

## *Vik Kapoor's vision founders in UT transition period*

# Researchers struggle with university turmoil

**BY JENNI LAIDMAN**

BLADE SCIENCE WRITER

When Larry Curtis, one of the University of Toledo's best-known researchers in one of its best-known departments, applied for a federal grant this fall, he did something unusual.

He wrote the University of Toledo out of his proposal.

"I was forced to do that, unfortunately," the physicist said.

Dr. Curtis is one of UT's stars, honored by the university where he serves and the research community at large. In science, where publication of experimental results is among the central measures of accomplishment, Dr. Curtis is no

slouch, with 199 publications to his credit.

He was named a distinguished professor in 1992, was designated a master teacher in 1993, and last year received the prestigious recognition of an honorary doctorate of philosophy from the University of Lund in Sweden.

But when the physicist couldn't get answers to basic questions about research support from university officials, he decided to conduct his experiments at one of the facilities where he has visiting scientist status.

"I have no plans to do research here in summer or fall. When [grant] renewal came up in October, with no guarantees that I would have a lab, I had to realign

and restructure my grant. I wish I could have done it in another way," Dr. Curtis said.

Dr. Curtis is among a number of researchers at UT who say their ability to work has been impaired by the climate of constant change on the campus.

But there are two realities here. At the same time researchers struggle with basic and apparently significant bureaucratic upset, the university is embracing ambitious plans for the future of research.

This contradiction is an odd turn of events.

UT President Vik Kapoor emphasized research during his tenure as dean of the College of Engineering. Research awards more

than doubled to \$6 million. He entered the president's office with a promise to improve university research in the same manner.

"When I came into office, I thought research was the only agenda [item]," Dr. Kapoor said recently. "But we discovered that we have an enrollment problem, a budget problem, and so on and so forth. It diverted my attention," he said.

But not entirely. In meetings with department chairmen, Dr. Kapoor advised them to "be bold" in their research plans. He's told everyone to seek new professors with a record of winning large federal grants and producing top-



BLADE PHOTO

**Curtis: The physicist has taken his research elsewhere.**

See **TURMOIL**, Page 6 ►

# Turmoil

► Continued from Page 1

flight research.

"I have said, 'You can bring the professors that you are convinced are great researchers and teachers. I'll hire them,'" Dr. Kapoor said. "Hire a professor you think can walk on water."

But researchers question whether such orders can be carried out in what they say is a welter of bureaucratic confusion and administrative indecision.

"It's going to be extremely difficult and expensive to get people like that," said Dr. A. Alan Pinkerton, chairman of UT's chemistry department. The best candidates, he said, would require a certain level of support.

"A top researcher would expect to be able to call people to fix computers, get building equipment, have a grant proposal team. He wouldn't expect to tie his own shoe. He'd have secretaries and accountants to do that. We don't have these people," Dr. Pinkerton said.

"In terms of getting research done, there are a lot of stumbling blocks," Dr. Pinkerton said.

"I sympathize with the trouble," Dr. Kapoor said. "We are in, I would say, a transition period, and we are going through some change. The changes we are trying

to do have been needed in this place for the last 15-20 years," he said.

Many of the most troublesome issues for researchers cover simple matters once taken for granted, such as university support of scientific computing and maintenance of experimental equipment. Issues that most frustrate researchers often involve the inability to find answers to nuts-and-bolts questions about applying for grants and bringing on assistants to help with laboratory work.

While there are signs that the worst may be ending, only the most optimistic have been able to dismiss what appears to be chaotic change.

Take a common complaint among researchers: the inability to get university approval for the hiring of post-doctorate-storral researchers.

## Status

While post-doctorates have advanced degrees, in the world of higher education, their status is that of a research apprentice. University researchers depend upon post-docs, along with graduate research assistants, for a lot of the heavy lifting.

For months, post-doctorates have been almost impossible to hire, UT professors say, and the status of university support for graduate research assistants has also been confusing.

Dr. Alvin Compaan, interim

# Kapoor promises problems will be fixed by the end of the year

chairman of the physics department, said one physicist began the effort to hire a post-doctorate in November under the university's newly established centralized approval process.

It was a disaster.

"We went through all the steps of hiring a post-doc," Dr. Compaan said, only to have the choice rejected by a high-level administrator.

"We don't know why. [The post-doc] was a top candidate. He took another job," Dr. Compaan said. "It's frankly outrageous."

It's the same story nearly everywhere at UT.

"It's gotten very bureaucratic," said Dr. Pinkerton. "It takes about 10 steps, like hiring an administrative assistant. That's not how post-docs are hired."

"There are people in this department who have been trying to hire post-docs for several months. It's driving them crazy," Dr. Pinkerton said.

Dr. Patricia Komuniecki, chairman of the biology department, acknowledged that hiring post-docs has been a problem.

"There is so much change that goes so deep, with so many new people. It's taking a little time to point out the idea that post-docs are a little different than hiring a new secretary."

After more than a year, the issue was finally resolved last week in favor of the simplified system professors used before.

## Issues

Many other issues remain unresolved, such as who pays the tuition of graduate research assistants, which was traditionally waived by the university. There's also concern about support for the computing operating system that physics demands, which the university maintained until recent months. Others ask if the university will pay a share of maintaining scientific equipment.

But other programs go forward.

Most notable is new emphasis on certain research areas, beginning with an increase in staffing.

Cell and molecular biology is among the disciplines slated for growth. Four new positions will be hired this year, for a total of about 10 new slots in the next few years.

Dr. Komuniecki said she's been interviewing researchers from leading institutions, including Harvard Medical School, for openings in her department. They're dazzled by what UT has to offer.

When she showed the Harvard candidate the lab she shares with her husband, Dr. Richard Komuniecki, he said: "This much space would have 60 post-docs sharing it," at Harvard.

Plus, area housing prices are a tremendous incentive to people accustomed to East Coast real estate.

That, combined with the reputations of researchers in the biology department, is proving a powerful attractant to new hires, Dr. Komuniecki said.

Another important change in biology occurred as a result of one of Dr. Kapoor's "be bold" directives to university staff.

Dr. Mike Phillips, chairman of the geology department, took the university president at his word and proposed a new department that separates environmental sciences from the cell- and molecular-level pursuits.

The proposed department is called Earth, Ecological and Environmental Sciences and will combine geology and environmental biology.

## Trends

In the College of Engineering, where the rough spots found in the College of Arts & Sciences aren't evident, there's fresh emphasis on tracking funding trends among the major research support agencies and preparing research proposals with those trends in mind.

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"We're trying to obtain critical mass in certain areas," said Dr. Atam Dhawan, engineering's assistant dean of graduate studies. "We're trying to identify collaborative teams for multi-disciplinary problems. We want to compete at a national level."

Dr. Dhawan, who was recruited through Dr. Kapoor's efforts, sounds the same themes as UT's president: cross-disciplinary research, national competition, and staying on top of what funding agencies want.

To accomplish this, Dr. Kapoor said he's reorganizing the duties of

the university's research office, which previously played a large role in helping researchers apply for grants. This reorganization plan, along with staffing problems in the research office, has many researchers fearing that the university is leaving them adrift.

"The research department is going in a different direction. Sometimes you have to do some basic changes for the long term," Dr. Kapoor said.

He compared the confusion with the orange barrels of highway reconstruction.

"After this is all done, we forget [the barrels] and we have beautiful roads," he said. That means, in this case, a research office that lobbies for grant proposals with the proper funding agency, while individual colleges take over the duties of preparing the grant details — once the duty of the research office.

"Only 20 per cent of the proposals we submit get funded. I want to increase that rate from 20 per cent to 42 per cent," Dr. Kapoor said.

## Grants

In the fiscal year that ended June 30, the University of Toledo received \$17.2 million in research grants. Federal grants made up \$7 million of that total. That's roughly equivalent to what it received in the previous year.

Dr. Kapoor said by next year, not only will funding be up, but today's problems will be history.

"My time has been devoted toward building leadership. I have taken care of that. I have hired pretty close to 50 people in senior leadership jobs.

"I'll be very disappointed if by September people still have problems. Between July and September, 99 per cent of the problems I expect to disappear. New hires would not come here unless we have a system in place. I will solve the problems of my existing people too. I will challenge if a professor will have a problem in research after Sept. 1. I would consider that a failure on my part if they have difficulty."

Most hope Dr. Kapoor can live up to his promise.

"Let me come down four-square to say the University of Toledo is an excellent place to go to school," Dr. Curtis said. "If there's a chance we can get this place back together, we would love to do it."

"I'm still hopeful this is a transient situation," said Dr. Compaan. "I know this is a transient, because it can't get worse."



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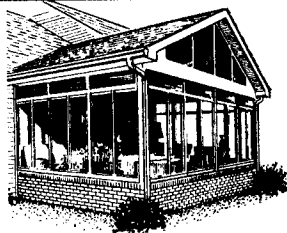
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