

Annual Report of the Faculty Committee on Research

Research Committee 2005-06

Kenneth Bollen (Sociology – on leave Spring '06)

Sandra Funk (Nursing)

James Hosking (Biostatistics)

Laura Janda (Slavic Languages and Literatures)

Suzanne Kirby (Medicine)

Harvey Seim (Marine Sciences and chair)

John B. Stephens (School of Government)

Stephen Walsh (Geography)

Tony Waldrop (Vice Chancellor for Research and Economic Development), Ex-Officio

The Committee met once in the Fall 2005 semester and twice in the Spring 2006 semester prior to reporting to the Faculty Council. This year, the committee has focused on implementing actions recommended last year to foster collaborative interdisciplinary research on campus, and has discussed ways to provide campus-wide guidelines for gap funding/bridge support to research teams on campus.

Collaborative Interdisciplinary Research at UNC-CH

The committee has drafted a formal recommendation that CIR be recognized as an integral part of research in many fields of study by enabling a reporting mechanism in faculty annual reports. This information on the extent of CIR at UNC-CH can then be harvested from the reports. We encourage the Provost, Deans, Center Directors and Department Chairs and Heads to highlight CIR on campus through this reporting mechanism, to let the public know of the important work being done on campus, and to encourage more CIR among the faculty of the University. The reporting mechanism is considered a simple first step in supporting and expanding CIR at UNC-CH.

We note that through the efforts of the VC for Research and Economic development, the university is close to having a policy on interdepartmental sharing of F&A (indirect costs), which was one of the issues identified by the Research Committee last year as an impediment to greater CIR on campus. The committee will continue to explore actions that implement findings on CIR from previous work.

Gap funding/bridge support for research teams at UNC-CH

A new effort for the committee this year has been to begin exploring gap funding/bridge support for research teams on campus that face a temporary funding shortfall. The need for this type of program has been precipitated by increasing uncertainty in funding for academic research. Rather than leaving the implementation of such a program to ad-hoc development, it has been suggested that development of guidelines for the University as a whole to address internal short-term funding of research teams is timely.

The central idea behind gap funding is for UNC-CH to maintain vital research teams for limited time periods with internal funding to enable the teams to seek other sources of support.

The biggest challenge in conceiving of the guidelines is that the scale of need varies greatly across campus. The preliminary view of the committee is that a standing review committee is the most flexible way to address requests.

Discussion has focused on the scope of activities that should be eligible for gap funding. It is felt that funding should be restricted to support of staff, rather than teaching faculty of the university. However, recognizing that large research teams require a range of skills for support, it is felt that staff should be defined in the broadest sense to include research faculty who staff grants, grant-supported EPA and SPA staff, as well as students and post-docs.

The source of funding for bridge support is anticipated to be a critical issue. A number of possible sources were suggested. One novel idea was a small increase to benefits; however the VC for Research related that increasing benefits is probably not a possibility. The most likely avenue of funding is use of indirect costs (a.k.a. F&A), but ever increasing pressure to use these funds for routine operating expenses within the University complicates matters. Other possibilities raised were patents/trademark, royalties, or endowments.

An informal survey of other universities (through communications with Research officers at peer institutions) indicates a wide range of implementations and funding mechanisms are used throughout the country. Very few universities have campus-wide policies; those campuses with gap funding often leave the matter to the discretion of the department chair or college dean. In some cases endowments exist to provide financial support but these arrangements are rare.

The committee will continue to develop ideas on the topic of gap funding in the coming months. Issues of discussion include the appropriate structuring on campus, centralized or distributed? About whether the purpose of the funding is to maintain projects or retain personnel? The committee feels there is a need for a clear statement of what 'gap' means, specific to timeframe and personnel, as part of the guidelines.