

TO: Faculty Senate, Idaho State University

RE: Research barriers and the Office of Finance and Administration

RC Meeting Date: December 17, 2009

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In this document the term ‘research’ applies to research, scholarship and creative activities in accordance with the bylaws and representative membership of the Research Council of Faculty Senate.

INTRODUCTION: The Research Council is currently considering and addressing perceived barriers to research at ISU. Operations of the Office of Finance and Administration are among the most common complaints from constituents and focus groups surveyed in the 2008 report by the Research Coordinating Council, “How can I help you?” Research at ISU: Support and Barriers. The Office of Finance and Administration oversees Grants and Contracts Accounting, Purchasing Services, Travel Services, and Payroll Services, each of which are viewed by ISU faculty to be either occasionally or frequently a barrier to research productivity.

Regulation and oversight of awarded funds, purchases, and travel is demanded of ISU from multiple external sources that include the State of Idaho, the Federal government, and external auditors. In an effort to clarify the needs of ISU faculty and the needs of ISU's administration in financial oversight of research-related funds, the Research Council held a special meeting with the Vice President for Finance and Administration James Fletcher, the Controller Roger Egan, and the Vice President for Research Pamela Crowell.

AIMS OF REPORT: Present to the administration several faculty concerns about ISU's oversight of research related activities such as purchasing, travel, and budget management of external funds. Inform ISU faculty about the origin and purpose of research-related policies used by the Office of Finance and Administration. Assess where changes might be made and suggest potential solutions that could benefit both faculty and administration.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES:

- ISU is facing a real and perhaps lasting decline in revenue from the state during a period of increased research activity at the university. The administration wishes to improve the process of applying for and managing external funding because of the positive benefits that external awards bring to the school's

prestige and for the additional funding that would come from indirects associated with those awards. Hence, there is a strong incentive for both faculty and administration to remove any non-essential barriers to research funding on campus.

- The university was previously in non-compliance with many demands from the State, Federal government, and external auditors. The recent change in upper administration led to rapid enactment and enforcement of policies to rectify this situation. The effort resulted in stability of ISU's compliance with external regulations but also has produced a sense of increased burden for research management among ISU faculty. Although compliance was essential (consequences are severe from both state and federal agencies), it is possible that the necessarily rapid approach to compliance produced unwanted consequences to faculty researchers.
- According to the Vice President for Finance and Administration, policies that are considered "unchangeable" tend to involve direct compliance with State and Federal regulations, such as those found in OMB circulars (e.g. OMB A-21, 110, and 133). However, at times these regulations involve a level of interpretation, and it is the task of Finance and Administration staff to make such interpretations in a consistent way that will pass external audits (hereafter referred to as ISU's consistency approach). It may be that some policies considered by staff to be unchangeable simply reflect long standing procedures that are not, in fact, beyond revision. Researchers would find it helpful if policies that faculty perceive to be hindering success with research projects be first investigated on a case by case basis to determine whether any particular policy has room for flexibility or alteration. If such policies are directly related to ISU's consistency approach and not to specific and clear regulations from State and Federal agencies, then the consistency approach should be assessed for its effectiveness toward ISU's research needs.
- Faculty report feeling overburdened with tasks that they believe should be managed by the university, as paid for by the Finance and Administration (F&A) costs associated with grant awards. Faculty resent being told to contact multiple offices or process multiple forms in order to achieve a research-related outcome that they believe should be facilitated by staff.
- Faculty in the humanities and performing arts report that new policies often do not apply well to their research and creative needs. In developing a consistent approach to ISU's oversight of research and scholarship, the Office of Finance and Administration may have inadvertently constructed additional barriers to the research needs of the arts and humanities. Such faculty should not be unduly burdened with inappropriate regulations and procedures.
- Faculty often regard the university as inserting itself between a principal investigator and a funding agency. Following agency guidelines, most awards from external sources, as stipulated in the award letter, are made to the university and not to the applicant for that award. As such, when agencies require it, proposals and applications must go through Sponsored Programs. In the cases when this is not true, exceptions can be made by the Office of Research. An award is not possible without faculty initiative and effort, but in many cases the funds cannot be awarded if ISU does not maintain good standing with State and Federal agencies. Good standing depends on the assessment of widespread university compliance by

external auditors. Hence, both faculty and administration are responsible for the capacity of ISU to apply for external funds and be awarded those funds.

- Researchers are frustrated with apparent inconsistencies between proposal budgets that are awarded by external agencies and budget categories that are defined by Grants and Contracts. These apparent inconsistencies might stem from a combination of requirements by the funding agencies in question and the generalized consistency approach of ISU administration. It would be worth investigating how many of such apparent inconsistencies are in fact warranted, and how many could be eradicated with a reformed consistency approach.
- Differences in salary trajectories between grant funded versus university funded faculty and staff is complicated by ISU's desire to provide consistency standards and pass external auditing. However, it is the Research Council's request that Finance and Administration better explore the real versus supposed consequences of salary trajectories for grant-funded faculty and staff; such faculty are often written into grant proposals in a variety of non-standard ways when compared to university faculty appointments.
- ISU's deadlines and protocols for reporting functions and proposal submissions for external funds are either the requirements of granting agencies or set by ISU to allow its staff sufficient time to handle the documents involved. Some of these deadlines can be problematic for researchers who need to submit grant proposals very close to agency submission dates. The time asked for by ISU to handle a proposal reflects its staffing limitations and policies related to administrative approvals. The process needs to be assessed for its effectiveness in assisting researchers with last minute proposal submissions.
- Information for faculty about research-related policies and procedures has become more readily available via website distribution. For example, the Office of Research website has a Research Policies and Procedures page (<http://www.isu.edu/research/researchpolicies.shtml>) that contains updated links to Federal OMB Circulars A-110 and A-21, purchasing policies (with a link to the State Purchasing Office), and policies related to personnel. It also has links to policies of the State Board of Education. Additional information can be found on the Office of Finance and Administration website (<http://www.isu.edu/departments/finserve/>).

SUGGESTIONS:

- **Timeliness:** The suggestions offered below are considered essential to improving research efficiency at ISU. Action should be taken as soon as possible on those suggestions which ISU has the resources to address.
- **Handbook of Research Management:** Because policies are numerous, new, and scattered among different offices and websites, it would be helpful for the Office of Research and the Office of Finance and Administration to prepare a Handbook for use by ISU's researchers. The Handbook would allow the university to clarify its necessary management structure and policies, identify the responsibilities of

faculty members in the management of their funded awards, and provide clear pathways for action and communication when problems arise. This manual should be made available to all faculty electronically, and should be provided to any researcher upon the event of a first award.

- **ISU's Consistency Approach:** Many faculty at ISU who are actively involved in attaining external research awards have had significant research experience at other universities in the United States. Those faculty tend to describe their prior experience with administrative management of research awards more favorably than their current experience at ISU. The observation suggests that there may be flexibility in a university's approach to consistency, and that efforts can be made to better tailor ISU's consistency approach to the needs of its faculty. At the very least, a comparison should be made with consistency approaches at Boise State University and University of Idaho in regards to policies that involve research and scholarship.
- **Improvement for the Humanities and Arts:** ISU's consistency approach seems inappropriate for faculty of the Humanities and Arts, requiring new procedures that are poorly matched to the scholarship needs of these fields. The Research Council recommends that scrutiny be given to those areas of ISU's consistency approach that are out of sync with the research endeavors of such faculty, particularly those procedures that were developed for other areas of research such as the Natural and Social Sciences.
- **Solutions-oriented Approach:** Faculty are frustrated with an initial response of, "It can't be done," from the Office of Finance and Administration when first raising questions about grants, travel and purchasing. A far more productive response would be, "Let's see if there is a way to do it." Staff could then investigate whether governing policies are flexible in their interpretation and whether a solution can be reached that maintains compliance with state and agency regulations yet allows faculty to best use their funds to suit their research needs.
- **Improve Efficiency of Extramural Budget Revisions:** The Research Council wants to see a decrease in the time and effort required for research budget revisions when principal investigators require such changes to accomplish their research aims. Revisions require prior knowledge of agency requirements by the researcher as well as Grants and Contracts personnel, so speed and efficiency will necessarily come from both improved ISU procedures as well as improved faculty engagement with the details of their individual awards.
- **Grant-funded Salary Trajectories:** The Research Council requests that Finance and Administration explore the real versus supposed consequences of salary trajectories for grant-funded faculty and staff. These so-called "soft money" positions are inherently different from regular university appointments and are often written into grant proposals in a manner that is acceptable to funding agencies but is not directly comparable to standard faculty and staff appointments. Such positions are essential to the functioning of many research centers and institutes at ISU.
- **Purchasing Procedures:** Discussion at the Council meeting revealed that several new purchasing requirements are simply recent enforcement of State-level policies for which ISU was historically non-

compliant. However, it was also evident that the structure put in place to achieve compliance could be made more streamlined and timely. The Council recommends that lengthy purchasing procedures be revisited to improve the efficiency and speed with which purchases can be made.

- **Faculty Involvement:** In light of the findings of this report, faculty should aid in the establishment of a stable and efficient consistency approach to ISU oversight of research matters. It is requested that faculty familiarize themselves with those policies that relate to the management of their specific external awards, and to consult the relevant ISU policies prior to acting in matters of budget management, travel, and purchasing. Faculty participation in this request would be increased by the availability of a Handbook of Research Management (described above). As faculty become more familiar with policies related to their work, those policies that are inconvenient and perhaps unnecessary will become more obvious to the Council, and steps can be taken to review and revise such policies once they are identified. However, administration should remain cognizant that faculty are extremely busy with many other aspects of their jobs and should not be expected to learn all policies and procedures that govern ISU and its oversight of research funds.
- **Communication of Issues:** Although the Vice President for Finance and Administration clearly stated that cases of 'run arounds' and inefficiency in procedure can be brought to his personal attention, the Council recognizes that the VP has many demands on his time. The Council therefore recommends that a consistent and readily available communication pathway be established for faculty so that issues may be reported effectively and dealt with in a timely manner. A knowledgeable, service-oriented staff member could be allocated the role of serving as contact person and handler for faculty questions about policy and potential inefficiencies in the system.

Report prepared by Scot Kelchner, edited and approved by the Council.