

January 16, 2008

TO: Senior Vice Chancellor Paul Drake
Academic Senate Chair James Posakony
Academic Senate Committee on Research Chair William Hodgkiss

On January 9, 2008, the directors or other representatives of 15 of the campus' ORUs and MRUs met to discuss the recently released recommendations of the Joint Senate-Administration Task Force on ORUs.¹ The following is a summary of main points made by meeting participants:

Closure of ORUs

1. The Task Force report defines the principal problem that needs to be fixed as an ORU portfolio at UCSD that is too "static." The indicators cited are: (a) too many resources are tied up in existing ORUs; (b) it is too difficult to eliminate failing ORUs, under current review practices; and (c) the Office of Research Affairs has insufficient disposable funds to establish new ORUs.
2. Any solution to this problem should take account of the dual functions performed by ORUs: being incubators for new research initiatives, as well as the mechanism by which UCSD can sustain, on a moderately long term-basis, interdisciplinary research activities. At their core is an interdisciplinary area with shared ownership among many disciplines that cannot be developed optimally through the departmental structure. ORUs that have successfully performed this function for many years should not be targeted for elimination out of a need to make the ORU portfolio "more dynamic."
3. Empirical support for the idea that the "natural lifetime" of an ORU at UCSD is 10 years is weak. Some ORUs have needed more than half that much time just to become fully operational, acquire adequate space, and recruit staff. The report's one-size-fits-all approach disregards major disciplinary differences. Moreover, appointments of independent researchers and successful fund raising of any sort requires that individuals and granting agencies have confidence in the stability of the effort. The concept of a "natural lifetime" for ORUs would lead to serious uncertainties that would erode this confidence and make recruitment, retention, and extramural fundraising more difficult.
4. Clearly "dysfunctional or lagging" ORUs should be eliminated through the regular five-year review process, bolstered by greater use of external reviewers. The benchmarks for continuation should be specified more clearly, particularly the criteria for determining which ORUs are "innovative."

¹ Those represented at the meeting included the Center for Human Development, the Cancer Center, the Whitaker Institute of Biomedical Engineering, the Center for Research in Biological Structure, the Stein Institute for Research on Aging, the Institute for Nonlinear Sciences, the Center for Network Systems, the White Mountain Research Center, the Glycobiology Research and Training Center, the Center for Research in Language, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies, the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, and the Institute for International, Comparative, and Area Studies. The Chair of the UCSD Academic Senate Committee on Research, William Hodgkiss (SIO), also attended. Individual ORU/MRU representatives who concur in this summary of points are listed at the end.

Funding of ORUs

5. Future constraints on campus resources for research support will require tough choices, but there should be a clear separation between (a) continued funding of successful interdisciplinary research activities, and (b) creating new ORUs. Different funding models/mechanisms should be established for each. A campuswide opportunity fund to seed new interdisciplinary, cross-divisional research ventures should be considered.
6. The existing ORU portfolio is underfunded, as a whole. The total amount currently being invested in ORUs represents about $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of 1% of the UCSD cash flow of \$2 billion per year. The goal should be to increase overall funding for the portfolio, e.g. through extramural gifts and reallocation of indirect cost dollars, rather than an attrition model of funding new ORUs by cutting or eliminating support for extant ORUs.
7. The Task Force report recommends that funds provided to ORUs by the Office of Research Affairs be used only to support “new research directions”; core administrative expenses should be covered entirely by extramural grants. But it is unreasonable to expect relatively small ORUs to cover all of their core functions from extramural sources. Granting agencies expect such expenses to be funded from indirect costs; typically they cannot be written into grants. This is certainly true of funders available to the social sciences and humanities, but even in the natural and physical sciences it is increasingly difficult to have core functions funded extramurally.
8. It is unrealistic to expect ORUs to raise funds for research activities from the thousands of small charitable organizations that operate in the United States. The reality is that these foundations are extremely small-budget operations (most grants are less than \$5,000), controlled tightly by the family members who sit on their boards. They fund “action” projects, not research and training. Recent efforts by campus ORUs to tap such philanthropies to support academic research have been fruitless and had a high opportunity cost in terms of other fund-raising efforts. Moreover, ORUs as presently staffed are not equipped to do this type of fundraising. We strongly support the Task Force recommendation that ORUs receive dedicated assistance from the central Development Office.
9. Just as some departments cost more to educate students than others, it is inappropriate to apply a rigid formula in determining ORUs’ needs for support. The Task Force report implies that UC Berkeley uses a formula of 7.5% of extramural dollars earned to allocate campus support to ORUs. However, inquiries made to three ORU directors at Berkeley revealed that none of them had ever heard of this formula, and in no case has it been used by campus administrators to limit support for a specific ORU. If this specific formula were applied to smaller ORUs at UCSD it would cripple them or prevent them from continuing in operation, since it is highly unlikely that they would be able to meet the threshold of \$800,000 per year in extramural grants needed to cover essential core program administration expenses.
10. The Task Force report appears to suggest that 100% of ORA support to ORUs should be temporary and subject to annual adjustment by the Vice Chancellor for Research. But if ORUs have no “permanent” support this will negatively impact extramural fund-raising, staff recruitment, and programmatic planning. Extramural donors expect, and demand, a reasonably predictable level of campus support for the units that they support.

Annual Evaluation of ORUs

11. UCSD should not try to turn its ORUs into profit centers. It is inappropriate to tie campus support for ORUs to a revenue stream, because only one of the functions that they perform is to assist faculty in raising extramural funds; their primary mission is programmatic support of interdisciplinary research. Because of the vagaries of federal funding and the nature of the fund-raising environment in which some ORUs must operate, especially in the social sciences and humanities, extramural grant earnings should be one criterion but not the principal metric for performance.

Administrative Support for ORUs

12. The Task Force report recommends that resources be liberated from existing ORUs by “pooling” staff to “reduce duplication of administrative effort.” But creating a centralized bureaucracy to support programmatic activities by ORUs is likely to generate serious inefficiencies and reduce the capacity of ORUs to carry out programs effectively. Most ORU staff members are not performing routine clerical or fiscal management tasks; they are involved in creating, managing, and reporting on programs and projects. It is impossible to centralize such functions.

We ask that these comments and suggestions be taken into account in considering the ORU Task Force’s recommendations. While these recommendations might be viewed as a starting point for further discussion, we feel that they are very distant from a final set of practical procedures that would help rather than hinder the continued development of ORUs as a critical venue for interdisciplinary research and training at UCSD.

Sincerely,



Wayne Cornelius
Director, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies

Cc: Mark Applebaum, Co-Director, Center for Human Development
Eli Berman, Research Director for International Security Studies, IGCC
Sheldon Brown, Director, Center for Research in Computing & the Arts
Shu Chien, Director, Whitaker Institute of Biomedical Engineering
Michael Cole, Director, Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition
Jeffrey Esko, Co-Director, Glycobiology Research and Training Center
David Fitzgerald, Field Research Director, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies
Christine Hunefeldt, Co-Director, Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies
Marta Kutas, Director, Center for Research in Language
Katja Lindenberg, Interim Director, Institute for Nonlinear Science
Frank Powell, Director, White Mountain Research Station
Gershon Shafir, Director, Institute for International, Comparative, and Area Studies
Joan Stiles, Co-Director, Center for Human Development
Ajit Varki, Co-Director, Glycobiology Research and Training Center
René Zenteno, Executive Director, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies