

7 February 2008

ORU Taskforce

RE: Joint Senate/Administration ORU Taskforce Response to Wayne Cornelius's Letter of January 16, 2008

The ORU Taskforce has reviewed the written response from Dr. Wayne Cornelius and signatories, dated January 16, 2008, to the Joint Administration/Senate ORU Taskforce Report, which was transmitted to the Senior Vice Chancellor and the Senate on December 20, 2007. The Taskforce would like to comment on the observations and concerns expressed by the correspondents in their letter.

Closure of ORUs. The Taskforce would not characterize the principal problem of the ORU portfolio as being too "static," but, as stated in the Executive Summary, is concerned with "...how to create opportunities for starting new ORUs and how to make the ORU portfolio even stronger and more dynamic so as to enhance the contributions ORUs make to the UCSD research enterprise."

Our reading of this section is that the correspondents were concerned that in promoting a more dynamic ORU portfolio, there not be forced closures of existing, successful ORUs in order to establish new ORUs. The Taskforce members completely agree that successful ORUs should not be sacrificed to establish new ORUs. However, the Taskforce believes that dysfunctional or lagging ORUs must be phased out after appropriate consultation and review. The central question is how to judge the success of a particular ORU. It is not possible to define a single set of measures of success that fits all ORUs because of their diversity. The Taskforce thus noted in the Report that it is appropriate for each ORU to provide input into the specific criteria by which it is judged. If an existing ORU fails to satisfy the metrics of success, constructive discussions about the ORU's future will begin with the relevant parties. The Taskforce acknowledges that there is a tension created by the desire to launch new ORUs in an era when funds are limited. Having a clear process in place to assess success will help alleviate this tension, and revision of the policy document seeks to clarify this issue.

The correspondents seem to suggest that the Taskforce is recommending that ORUs close after 10 years based on the empirical observation that this period is a natural lifetime for some ORUs. The Taskforce fully recognizes that one size does not fit all, and the Report states that the closure of an ORU must be treated on a case-by-case basis. Given that interdisciplinary scholarship evolves over time, the intellectual theme of an ORU should certainly be reconsidered as the tenth year approaches and each five years thereafter. "Natural lifetime" was linked in some cases to a desire of founding directors to pursue other interests without having developed an adequate succession plan for the leadership of their ORU. The Taskforce also notes that a 10-year lifetime is often used by major funding agencies like the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation for large centers and multidisciplinary awards; nothing prevents investigators from seeking a new center grant supported by peer review after the 10-year cycle of a grant. The Taskforce would agree that establishment of a thriving ORU can take some years, but believes the recruitment and retention of outstanding staff and the ability to obtain extramural support are not compromised so long as an ORU sustains its vitality. Implementation of the Taskforce's recommendation to create affiliations with departments for ORU career researchers when they are initially hired will provide a mechanism for long-term staffing stability.

Funding of ORUs. The correspondents propose separate funding sources for existing and new ORUs, including possible introduction of a campus-wide opportunity fund for new interdisciplinary, cross-divisional ventures. This is a budgetary issue for the SVC-AA to resolve, but the Taskforce agrees that the proposed opportunity fund could be a valuable mechanism for launching new ORUs. The Taskforce agrees that the ORU portfolio is under-funded and would

benefit greatly from a focus on expanding the resources available. However, we believe that the vitality of the research enterprise requires a periodic assessment process to ensure that the available funds are being distributed in a manner that arguably optimizes their impact.

The correspondents described the Taskforce as recommending that campus funds only be used to initiate new efforts in an ORU, leaving the support for ORU administration to be borne by extramural grants. This appears to be a misreading of the Report, which explicitly states that ORUs "...should have adequate campus resources – space, staff, and funds – from the ORA to administer the ORUs effectively and to pursue extramural support". The Report also states that ORU costs that can be covered by other sources of intramural and extramural support should be funded in this way.

Although the correspondents are less sanguine than the Taskforce regarding raising philanthropic funds, there is agreement on the importance of having dedicated assistance from Development for this goal, and we are pleased to report that a search will be underway shortly for a fundraiser whose efforts will serve ORUs. It is important to note, though, that the ORU's leadership team is most in touch with the potential impact of the ORU's work and needs to form a strong partnership with the Development office.

The correspondents state that it is inappropriate to apply a rigid formula in determining ORUs' budgetary needs. The Taskforce agrees wholeheartedly and used the Berkeley study as a means to analyze our own campus's data. Application at Berkeley of the 7.5% formula has been exclusively in engineering, which may account for the limited knowledge of it on that campus. Data presented in Figure 1 of the Report convincingly demonstrates that UCSD does not adhere to a formula, particularly for supporting smaller ORUs, an approach endorsed by the Taskforce.

Concerns were raised by the correspondents regarding the adverse impact annual budgetary adjustments might have on extramural fund-raising, staffing, and programmatic planning. The Taskforce agrees that ORUs need to have some expectation of the level of year-to-year support, but proposes in the Report that annual reports and reviews can be used to gauge the health of the ORU and provide a basis for some flexibility in annual allocations. The Taskforce would also support a practice of having all significant changes in allocations be carried out in consultation with the SVC.

Annual Evaluation of ORUs. The concern expressed by the correspondents that UCSD not turn ORUs into profit centers is well taken and not the intent of the Report's recommendations. The Taskforce agrees that extramural grant earnings should be only one of many measures of performance, recognizing, as noted in the report, that ORUs vary considerably in the opportunities for fundraising available to them.

Administrative Support for ORUs. In our reading of this section, the correspondents indicate that the Report proposes the creation of a centralized bureaucracy to support ORU programs and administration. This is not the case. Rather, the Report suggests that it may be possible to have some ORU administrative functions provided by an individual whose time is shared by multiple ORUs, as has been demonstrated already with a trio of ORUs. Less demanding administrative functions could then be served by less experienced administrative staff that are dedicated to and supported by a single ORU using campus funds. The Report does recommend that some ORU support tasks, such as large proposal preparation and development of knowledge mapping tools, should be centrally supported by the ORA.