



Council of Principal
Investigators

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February 8, 2008

MEMORANDUM

TO: Michael McKinney
Chancellor
The Texas A&M University System
MS 1122
College Station, TX 77843-1122

FROM: CPI Executive Committee:
H. Alan Love, Chair
Nancy Amato
Deborah Bell-Pedersen
Lisa Campbell
Paul F. Fitzpatrick, Chair-Elect
David Russell, Past Chair
J. Martin Scholtz

SUBJECT: Research Administration

Dear Chancellor McKinney,

On behalf of the Council of Principal Investigators (CPI) at Texas A&M, we thank you for meeting with us on November 14th to discuss your plans for changes in research administration at Texas A&M. We appreciate your efforts to improve research administration at Texas A&M and want to work closely with you to do this.

Following our November meeting with you, we set up a forum to facilitate discussion about the Texas A&M University System Integrated Research Administration Project Report, and the potential inception of a System-wide Research Administration. The TAMU research community has some constructive suggestions, which are summarized below. The entire discussion is available at: <http://cpi.tamu.edu/activities/discussions/click-here-to-leave-comments-for-cpi>.

In the feedback we received, there is unanimous concern among the members of the research community regarding the proposed formation of a centralized “research administration and commercialization function that provides integrated System-wide services to include pre-award administration, post-award administration, compliance monitoring, implementing a new research database, and commercialization activities,” the original charge to the working committee. Comments from the research community overwhelmingly reflect support for the present dispersed system, with the strongest support for TEES and the Research Foundation.

Chair — Alan Love, COALS • Chair Elect — Paul Fitzpatrick, COALS • Past Chair — David Russell, Science • Architecture — Donald House • Business — Joobin Choobineh • COALS — Rosana Moreira, Suresh Pillai, Herman Scholthof, Dorothy Shippen, David Stelly • Education — Susan Bloomfield • Engineering — Nancy Amato, David Boyle, Sheng-Jen Hsieh, Don Russell • Geosciences — Sarah Bednarz, Lisa Campbell, Norman Guinasso • Health Science Center — Geoffrey Kapler, Marty Scholtz • Liberal Arts — Sarah Gatson, James Grau • Science — Deb Bell-Pedersen, Keith Maggert, Michael Weimer • TTI — William Eisele, Katherine Turnbull • Veterinary Medicine — Bhanu Chowdhary, James Derr

The most common concerns expressed by CPI members regarding proposed changes in research administration are:

- From the perspective of PI's, the need for change is unclear since the current system is working very well. What problem is centralization intended to correct?
- Centralization will result in a larger, more cumbersome system, making it more difficult and time consuming for PI's to submit proposals and administer grants. The ease and proximity of the present system makes TAMU attractive to productive researchers. Indeed, the current system has proven to be an excellent recruiting tool, especially for senior faculty who suffered under cumbersome centralized systems at their former universities.
- Placing research administration under an office of commercialization might significantly distort the type of research being administratively supported, discouraging PI's from pursuing ideas if there is not a commercializable aspect. There is real concern about research direction being determined, directly or indirectly, by a centralized administration rather than by PI's.
- There is concern that a System-wide restructuring will end up shifting indirect/ overhead funds from the PI's who earn it, and their departments and colleges that rely on these funds to operate, to other areas of the System.
- There is a willingness to adopt a common data management system, but concern about how such a system will be funded.

Based upon the comments from members of the CPI, comments from the research community facilitated through our discussion forum, and the recommendations of the working group, we recommend a phased approach to any changes in research administration with reassessment after each phase.

Phase 1) The working committee for the Texas A&M University System Integrated Research Administration Project recommended the development and implementation of an integrated research information system (IRIS/EPIK used by TEES) and implementation of uniform coding and accounting for research activities.

The research community generally supports the development of an Integrated Research Information System (IRIS) as a prototype System-wide information system. IRIS should be made available for use by each of the Texas A&M System members and the Texas A&M Research Foundation. However, it will be key to the ultimate success of IRIS for PI's who will use the system to have a prominent role in its design and development. For example, we realized during a five-minute demonstration of EPIK at the December 12th CPI meeting that a list of PI publications and CV's should be included in the database. This simple addition to IRIS would greatly aid in the development of multiple-PI grants, including equipment and student-training grants. We believe that, with PI leadership, IRIS can be developed into a system that other universities would want to emulate.

Phase 2) The working committee for the Texas A&M University System Integrated Research Administration Project recommended the creation of an Executive Council to identify the resources for conducting the analysis to assess the efficiencies and effectiveness of proposed changes to research administration, and an Operating Council for reviewing and making recommendations concerning the various issues in research administration.

The PI's are against a centralized System-wide Research Administration. Therefore, we do not support the creation of System-level Executive or Operating Councils. As an alternative, we suggest the formation of an Operations Committee which functions within Texas A&M to develop and recommend "best practices" that each of the research administration agencies may choose to adopt. We recommend that this committee be composed of CEO's and Texas A&M PI's who have grants administered through each of the agencies (TAMU, TEES, Texas AgriLife Research, TTI, HSC, and the Research Foundation). PI representation should be proportional to the research dollars administered by each agency. Since the majority of research grants in the TAMU System are from PI's at the main campus (estimated at 90%), College Station PI's need to be the driving force and majority on this committee.

We recommend that the Operations Committee first draft a "needs" statement to identify what the problems are in research administration and why they require attention. Emphasis should be on service to PIs and maximizing return of indirect cost monies to PIs and their originating units. Only when needs are clearly articulated and justified should the Operations Committee make recommendations for changes to the current structure to meet these needs. It may turn out that the implementation of IRIS in each of the current agencies solves the perceived problems. This is a main strength of the phased approach with reassessment that we support.

It must be emphasized that research administration (including grant management, risk assessment, contract negotiation, proposal development and submission, post-award accounting and reporting systems, and overhead return) are key to the success, and critical to the careers, of PI's at Texas A&M. If not done with extreme care and caution, the potential consolidation and move of research administration to the System level could have profoundly negative consequences for the future of our faculty and the international research preeminence of the A&M System. Any proposed changes to the current administrative structure need to be carefully assessed by PI's prior to finalization and implementation. Simply put, PI's need to be part of the origination and creation of change, not just responders to change proposed by Administrators and CEO's.

You indicated in your discussion with the CPI on November 14th that any changes made to research administration will not affect the direction of research. We strongly appreciate this comment and want to stress that investigator-led research is the best way to create new knowledge, technologies, diagnostics, and therapeutics to benefit Texans.

We look forward to continued open discussion and to working with you toward the development of a research administration system that will enhance research at Texas A&M and serve us all well now and in the future.

Sincerely and on behalf of the CPI,

H. Alan Love
Chair, Council of Principal Investigators

xc: (distributed electronically)

- Elsa A. Murano, President, Texas A&M University
- Jerry R. Strawser, Interim Executive Vice President and Provost, Texas A&M University
- H. Russell Cross, Executive Vice President for Operations, Texas A&M University
- James A. Calvin, Interim Vice President for Research, Texas A&M University
- Leo J. Pattera, Interim President & CEO, Texas A&M Research Foundation
- H. Joseph Newton, Chair, Research Environment Council, Texas A&M University
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