

University of Rhode Island
Meeting of the Council for Research
Thursday, October 30, 2008
URI Library, Conference Room A

Attendance:

Members Present: S. Bradley Moran, Manbir Sodhi, Marcella Thompson, Jami Halpern, Thomas Mather, Mark Wood, Karen Markin, Raymond Wright, Joelle Rollo-Koster, Betty Young, Clinton Chichester, Ginette Ferszt, Jane Miner, Theodore Walls

Others Present: Cliff Katz, Laura Kenerson, Leslie Pajda, Andrew Harris, Jill Diehl

Members Absent: Vice President Peter Alfonso, Chairman John King, Nikhilesh Dholakia, Cynthia Blanthorne, Graham Forrester, Harold Bibb, William Krieger, Sookhyun Kim

As Chairman John King had been called away for an emergency, he asked Manbir Sodhi to chair the meeting. M. Sodhi opened the meeting at 3:04pm with a round of applause for Cliff Katz when he walked into the room.

Minutes of the meeting of October 6, 2008:

The minutes of the meeting of October 6, 2008 were approved unanimously.

Discussion with Cliff Katz and Laura Kenerson re: Post doc Policy:

Vice Provost Cliff Katz and Director of Personnel Services Laura Kenerson attended the meeting to discuss the University's salary and benefits policy for postdoctoral fellows. C. Katz described the history of the process that was undertaken four years ago to develop the current policy, noting it was initiated by requests from Deans Seemann, Letendre, and Farmer to establish post doc policies that would make URI more competitive with other universities. Important dynamics of the process included numerous meetings representing many colleges held throughout the campus. Deans and professors advocated extending health insurance benefits to postdoctoral fellows. Laura Kenerson spent six months reviewing health care options. Additionally, all grants were reviewed to determine the financial impact of providing benefits.

A decision was made to delay offering benefits to post docs for two years, until all new grants included resources to cover the additional costs. At the end of the two year period, another assessment was conducted, which resulted in a decision to wait another six months for a few remaining grants to turn over. After that time, all post docs were then put on USB2's and became state employees. A salary range coinciding with NSF and NIH salary scales for post docs was adopted; its current annual range is \$38,000 to \$45,000. C. Katz said he is open to considering salaries up to \$48,000 annually, but not salaries lower than \$38,000 unless housing is also provided. With housing, a salary of \$37,000 may be considered in hardship situations, he said.

L. Kenerson said she thought that the meeting held at Green Hall two years ago to disseminate this information would have resulted in uniform dissemination throughout the campus. She apologized that apparently it did not. She noted that benefits are an “all or nothing” option, and warned that encouraging post docs to waive health benefits is illegal. Kenerson stressed the importance of offering the same rules for everyone. She said that Leslie Pajda is available to meet with post docs and discuss benefits. A draft memo distributed at the meeting by Katz and Kenerson clarifies employment conditions and benefits for all postdoctoral fellows, who are now classified as non-union employees. Current health care costs for individuals are about \$6,400 / year; family plans are \$18,000 / year. Franca Cirelli advises PI’s to build in family coverage in every grant, as individual needs can change during the year. The standard percentage rate (currently 12.5%) of salary that the university established, to cover other benefits such as taxes, worker’s compensation, unemployment, vacation, and disability insurance, must also be used.

Members expressed appreciation to C. Katz and L. Kenerson for clarifying the policy. However, they expressed concerns that now the high cost of health insurance may make URI non-competitive on grants. They asked if it is possible to create different policies, or to classify post docs as independent contractors. C. Katz said that such a classification wouldn’t pass the IRS test and may also result in unionization of post docs, which would increase costs even more. As post doctoral fellows are now employees, health benefit policies apply.

The Council requested that this policy be published widely and distributed to PI’s through the Research ListServ, and posted on the HR website. L. Kenerson agreed to create a chart format and post the policy online so that PI’s and support staff have information to calculate costs. She also offered to participate in the Division of Research’s budget training workshop (scheduled on April 3, 2009 to be presented by Franca Cirelli). Kenerson will attend to explain HR benefit policies and to remind colleagues not to discourage post docs from accepting the employee benefits that they are entitled to.

The Council then discussed Chairman John King’s request concerning the possibility of adding health benefits for graduate students. L. Kenerson reported that she has spoken with many insurance groups and has learned that graduate students are not eligible for health benefits unless they are employees. Costs to hire graduate students as employees are prohibitive. There may be a way in the future for students to be hired through the URI Research Foundation and receive health benefits, but since the foundation will have a smaller pool, costs may still be prohibitive.

Members complained that without health benefits for graduate students, URI is less competitive. It was noted that grad assistants of tenured professors at U-Conn have health benefits. C. Katz said that Provost Dehayes, Peter Alfonso and Bradley Moran are formulating a plan to relieve the situation; however, Katz explained that institutions which began paying stipends in the 60’s have gotten incremental increases to cover rising health insurance costs. Because URI never offered graduate students benefits, adding health insurance now would amount to multi-millions of dollars. He said that solving this problem is very high on Provost Dehayes’ list. His goal is to implement something soon that can be covered incrementally by increasing future resources. Many proposals are being considered, such as offering in-state tuition for out-of-state graduate students. given the financial crisis, we have not been able to finalize anything yet.

Progress Update: Ad Hoc Committee Sponsored Projects Recommendations:

Assistant VP for Research Administration Bradley Moran updated the Council about the progress being made on the committee's recommendations, as follows:

- * The search for the Director of Sponsored Projects Review closed on October 17. Four candidates, out of a total of sixteen applicants, have been invited to interview. We expect to complete interviews of the short-list of candidates on November 25 and provide a recommendation to VP Alfonso in early December.
- * Staff training to utilize a web-based scheduling calendar is being offered for Franca, Julia, and Mary, to help cut down on the number of emails and phone calls they receive, and to empower the PI's to schedule appointments electronically.
- * The Research Office first floor has been repainted and the cubicles have been removed. Surplus furniture has been requested to create a comfortable waiting area.
- * A workstation table has been made available in the waiting space.
- * Wireless connectivity will soon be available at the Research Office for PI's to access their proposals while waiting for their appointments.
- * A temporary employee may be needed to cover for the employee who has been out for a month, to help staff keep up with the workload.
- * A draft of U-Conn's policy for proposal deadline enforcement was distributed, along with a synopsis of policy deadlines from comparable universities. While VP Alfonso and Bradley Moran are not satisfied with U-Conn's policy, it can be used as a starting point to create a revised draft policy for the Council for Research to review, recommend changes, approve, and submit to the Faculty Senate for their vote. Moran asked Council members to email their comments and recommendations concerning a new policy to Susan Gomes at sgomes@uri.edu

Other Business:

Karen Markin reported that she met with Barry Costa-Pierce, Director of Sea Grant. He said that Sea Grant might be able to add some funding to the Council for Research faculty grant program, to support proposals related to Sea Grant research priorities.

The meeting adjourned at 4:03pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Jill Diehl
Grants & Contracts Specialist

Note: The next meeting of the Council for Research will be held on Monday, December 1st at the URI Library, Conference Room A.