



**THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**  
**SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH**

DEPARTMENT OF EPIDEMIOLOGY

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**TO:** Vice President for Research, Stephen Forrest  
Provost Teresa Sullivan  
Charles B. Smith, Chair SACUA

**FROM:** Mary N. Haan, Chair, on behalf of the University of Michigan Senate Assembly  
Research Policy Committee

**RE:** Recommendations for Interdisciplinary Research enhancement

**DATE:** May 6, 2006

**Background**

The Research Policy committee of SACUA has focused attention on the need for enhancing interdisciplinary research at the University of Michigan. In part, this concern was stimulated by national attention to the topic as exemplified by a series of reports from the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine. These institutions have standing committees on facilitating interdisciplinary research both through development of effective research organizations and through incorporating interdisciplinary research in training of student at the undergraduate, graduate and post doctoral levels. In 2005, these bodies issued a 300-page report that addresses this issue in detail, along with a set of recommendations for implementation<sup>1</sup>. RPC reviewed this document and held several discussions about the implications for research at the University of Michigan<sup>1</sup> National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine. *Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research*. 2005.

Some input was obtained from the UM Task Force on the Research Enterprise in the School of Medicine (SOM) which issued a report in February 2006. The major intent of the TFORE was to make recommendations about expanding research and research related revenue at the SOM. One focus of the TFORE report was on enhancing interdisciplinary research as an approach to extending research at UM. The final TFORE report primarily focuses on biomedical research but the general discussion about IDR presented by the TFORE group is one indicator of the need to address the issue of Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Michigan as a whole.

This summary reports discussions within the RPC on this issue and points the way to a process that could elevate the issue of IDR in a way that could benefit all faculty involved in research and present models for IDR teaching as well.

The need for IDR and organizational and fiscal support for it should be brought up to the University level. Funds and models for IDR should be a University wide priority. The National Academy of Science addressed in detail the issues of interdisciplinary research and teaching. This report called on academic institutions to develop new policies and practices that would lower barriers to IDR, promote IDR training for students and faculty/staff at all levels, and institute flexible and equitable budgetary and cost sharing policies that support IDR. NAS recommended that academic institutions allocate resources to units or groups doing IDR, encourage recruitment of students and faculty across department and college lines, revise hiring and promotion policies to reward IDR, and institute and enhance social science research into how IDR can develop and be successful.

#### Summary of Research Policy Committee discussions

- Cost structure of schools/departments often constitutes a disincentive to IDR. Indirect costs can be divided between collaborating departments but may be difficult, depending on the policy/attitude exhibited by the administration.
- The TFORE recommendations focus on enhancing large, mainly existing, biomedical research centers. How can IDR be promoted at a University level to all faculty and provide incentives/support for faculty, especially junior faculty?
  - OVPR may offer funding of for existing research centers wanting to do IDR. Given limited funds, can/should this be modified to provide smaller amounts of money for faculty not leading centers?
  - If IDR funds are given to existing center, how can non-Center faculty/researchers access core facilities. Perhaps this should be a condition for centers of receiving IDR funds.
  - If funding is developed to provide mini sabbaticals for IDR development of faculty, this should be available for any faculty/researcher
- Incentives need to be offered for supporting IDR to Deans and Chairs. These could take the form of funding, space allocation, faculty release time.
  - Possible funds could be provide as incentives in the form of
    - Tax forgiveness
    - IDC cost recovery benefit
    - There may be a need for a change in the fund allocation model for distribution of IDCs and related funding for IDR research and teaching.
- Incentives are needed for faculty/researchers to engage in IDR given academic cultural issues in favor of a narrow focus and staying within disciplinary boundaries

- For those engaged in IDR, formal recognition should be developed that could both provide advantages and protect the faculty member from criticism.
  - A faculty member should file a formal memo or notice with the department regarding the scope and nature of the IDR. An outline or work plan for IDR should be a part of this notification. Department chairs should sign off on the work plan.
  - A senior mentor for IDR should be provided for junior faculty who represents the 'other' discipline.
  - Publications and grants that are a result of/related to the IDR should be noted as part of merits and promotions.
  - Guidelines for evaluating faculty engaged in IDR should be developed and provided to merit and promotion committees.
  - An Ombudsperson at the University level should be appointed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The SACUA Research Policies Committee recommends the establishment of a joint task force between OVPR and the Office of the Provost to evaluate and make recommendations about:

- i. Current status of interdisciplinary research at UM for all units
- ii. Existing barriers to IDR and how these may be mitigated. This would include both financial and organizational barriers.
- iii. How 'cultural change' in favor of IDR can be promoted and supported for all faculty including those not currently involved in large research centers.
- iv. Financial incentives that can be offered by UM to units to promote the development of IDR in research and teaching.
- v. Development of formal guidelines for evaluating IDR in the context of merits and promotions, along with a plan to educate and inform merit and promotion committees.