Committee on Research (CoR)
Minutes of Meeting
April 1, 2020

Pursuant to call, the Committee on Research met at 1:00 pm on April 1, 2020 via Zoom. Chair Michael Scheibner presiding.

I.   Consultation with Debbie Motton, AVC for Research Compliance & Integrity
    A. SPO redesign updates

    AVC Motton reported good progress in the SPO redesign efforts but activity has somewhat slowed due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused all staff and consultants to work remotely. Two new staff have been hired in SPO and one new staff member in Contract and Grants Accounting. SPO staff are also assisting faculty in the School of Engineering due to the School's staffing shortage of research administrators. AVC Motton also reported that progress has been made in revamping the SPO website to make it mobile friendly, more intuitive, and easier for faculty to access information. She stated that SPO is experiencing only a very slight down turn of faculty grant proposal submissions. SPO anticipates an influx of new proposal submissions over the next six weeks as faculty become more accustomed to remote instruction and research activities. AVC Motton added that she will speak with campus leadership about potential communication to the faculty from ORED in the event that SPO staff's work becomes significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

    VCORED Traina informed CoR members that federal funding agencies will allow for an extension to grant submittal deadlines if there is a direct inability to submit a proposal on time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The agencies will consider extensions on a case by case basis.   AVC Motton mentioned that the SPO website was updated this week to include information on several grant opportunities for COVID-19 related research. SPO will prioritize these proposals and may waive the internal submittal deadlines. VCORED Traina encouraged faculty to visit the UC Research Policy Analysis and Coordination website for relevant information about COVID-19. The SPO website also has useful information.

    A CoR member inquired about conducting research during this time of sheltering in place. VCORED Traina reiterated that COVID-19 research projects are deemed essential but cautioned that faculty have to practice social distancing and conduct proper sanitization of laboratories. Procuring equipment and chemicals is still being done in the normal manner as staff who carry out those functions are working remotely. AVC Motton advised faculty who submit grant proposals for COVID-19 related research to be forthright in their proposals about having a reduced group of research staff and students, and a reasonable timeline to achieve the goals of the research project. If faculty proposals are funded, faculty are advised to communicate with their deans and VCORED Traina about their plans to carry out the work. VCORED Traina advised faculty to pay careful attention to the language in the RFPs in case funding agencies request specific information about faculty's plans to sanitize their laboratories and reduce density.

II.   Consultation with VCORED Traina and members of the campus Committee on Research Computing (Professors Hrant Hratchian and Suzanne Sindi and CIO Ann Kovalchick)

A. Impact of COVID-19 on research mission

VCORED Traina announced that UC Merced has approximately 44-45 faculty initiatives that are deemed essential research activities and are proceeding. All but 6 or 7 of these involve faculty activities such as resetting servers, managing tissue cultures, and feeding animals that are not in the vivarium (flat worms, fruit flies). These research projects are being allowed to proceed for a variety of reasons: the projects were nearing completion at the time of the sheltering/shut down order, to preserve animal health, or the research was deemed too important to shut down. The campus is allowing faculty members to continue these research projects as long as they adopt the "buddy system" whereby each faculty member must have another person accompany them on the premises in the case of an accident or emergency. Proper sanitization and social distancing must occur.

VCORED Traina stated that it is unknown how many resources will be required to ramp the campus research mission back up after the sheltering order is lifted, even at a limited level. It is likely that in mid-April, the UCOP Office of Research will transfer funds to each campus to create a seed funds program for COVID-19 related research. Each campus will be allowed to manage their own funds. The funds from the federal stimulus bill will help the NSF and NIH support COVID-19 related research as well. VCORED Traina asked CoR to consider collaborating with him in deciding how to manage the UCOP funds.

B. Impact of COVID-19 on experimental research (research computing support for lab space-based research and scholarly activity)

Shortly before this meeting, three members of the campus Committee on Research Computing (CoRC), Professors Hrant Hratchian and Suzanne Sindi, and CIO Kovalchick, submitted a draft proposal for CoR's review to establish a COVID-19 Emergency Research Software and Cyberinfrastructure Support Fund. The proposal states that a Research Software and Cyberinfrastructure Support (RSCS) Board will be established to develop a faculty proposal/request process, review such requests, and make final funding recommendations to the Director of Cyberinfrastructure and Research Technologies. The suggested composition of the RSCS Board will include representatives from the Office of Information Technology, Office of Research, Office of Academic Affairs, and CoR. Where appropriate, the RSCS Board will encourage and may solicit co-funding from faculty, department and graduate group chairs, and deans.

Professor Hratchian stated that the RSCS Board may request between $75 and $150,000 for the Emergency Research Software and Cyberinfrastructure Support Fund. The funds will be requested from the Interim Chancellor. He asked CoR's input on whether the amount of requested funds is sufficient.

Professor Sindi stated that these funds should help computational faculty groups work more efficiently during the sheltering/shut down order. Professor Hratchian added that high performance computing assets are on campus are still running and research computing remains a core research item. CoR Chair Scheibner asked about the needs of faculty in the social sciences and humanities. Professor Sindi replied that CoRC has received several individual requests from faculty members, and that establishing this campus wide fund will benefit all faculty. The RSCS Board needs to gather more information about faculty needs across the disciplines.

Professor Hratchian shared that the next steps for the RSCS Board is to meet with school deans, department chairs, and graduate group chairs to discuss budgeting. Some departments and divisions may have left over funds that were allocated to an activity or event that was cancelled. VCORED Traina recommended that the RSCS Board also speak with the directors of SNRI, HSRI, CITRIS, and Center for the Humanities. CIO Kovalchick recommended creating a threshold for individual requests and suggested the RSCS Board would consider a cap. Professor Hratchian agreed; the final proposal will state that the Board expects that proposals over a certain dollar amount will not be funded. With regard to proposal submission deadline, CIO Kovalchick recommended reviewing proposals every 3-4 weeks. Professor Hratchian added that in the final proposal, the RSCS Board will include a sample proposal to guide faculty members who apply.

C. NSF DCL Letter Provisioning Advanced Cyberinfrastructure to Further Research on the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Chair Scheibner encouraged CoR members to review the letter and share with their colleagues.

III.   Chair's Report
A. Division Council meetings March 18 and March 30

CoR Chair Scheibner shared that the main topics of discussion at recent Division Council meetings is educational continuity measures in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated sheltering/shut down orders. EVC/Provost Camfield stated that the UC system and particularly UC Merced will benefit from funds in the federal economic stimulus bill. The EVC/Provost also shared that faculty searches that are currently in progress will be allowed to continue and that any failed searches may be carried over to the next academic year. There are no plans for staff curtailment at this time, but the situation is still developing.

IV.   Consent Calendar
A. Today's agenda
B. Draft March 11 meeting minutes

Action: The consent calendar was approved as presented.

V.   CoR-SPO-Department Research Administrator Working Group Proposal

In a previous meeting, CoR members consulted with AVC Motton on potentially establishing a CoR-SPO staff working group that would serve to facilitate feedback between faculty and SPO on the grant

submission process. CoR members later agreed that the working group should also include departmental research administrators.

CoR members and AVC Motton agreed to the establishment of the COR-SPO-Departmental Research Administrator working group. CoR members suggested that the working group should begin its activities at the beginning of the fall 2020 semester.

Action: CoR's memo containing its proposal to establish the working group will be transmitted to VCORED Traina and AVC Motton by Friday, April 3.

AVC Motton announced to CoR members that the US government is suspending all foreign visa requests that are not deemed essential. This includes faculty, students, and post docs and will have an impact on faculty hires. She asked for CoR's input on the most effective way to communicate this to the campus. CoR members suggested that AVC Motton work with VPF Matlock and VPDGE Zatz.

VI.   Indirect Cost Policy Exception Form
         In the last CoR meeting, the committee discussed requirement that PIs complete an indirect cost policy exception form for proposals with indirect cost recovery rates that do not adhere to the University's federal or state negotiated rates. CoR members had concerns over this requirement.

         AVC Motton clarified that the form is required by UCOP, not UC Merced. She added that SPO is gathering information for departmental research administrators to use as a resource guide to assist faculty in completing the form. VCORED Traina also recommended the creation of an FAQ to assist faculty and SPO.

         Action: AVC Motton will attend a future CoR meeting to update committee members on SPO's efforts to draft guidance for faculty to complete the indirect cost policy exception form.

VII.   Research Enhancement Proposal
         The proposal has been sent to the Graduate Council, School Deans, and the VPDGE for their review/endorsement/co-sponsorship. Their input is due by April 6. By April 7, the proposal be submitted to Division Council for review. Two responses have been received and were shared with CoR members.

         Action: The committee analyst will follow up with the individuals who have not yet responded.

VIII.   Systemwide Review Item
         A. Proposed Revisions to Presidential Policy on Protection of Human Subjects in Research
             This policy revises the current Protection of Human Subjects in Research policy, last updated in 1981, and describes the responsibilities of the University, its campuses and researchers, in protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects.

             CoR identified two lead reviewers.

Action: The lead reviewers' comments will be discussed at the April 15 CoR meeting. CoR's comments are due to the Senate Chair by 5:00 pm on Friday, April 24.

IX.   CoR Five-Year Plan

CoR Chair Scheibner asked committee members to consider whether CoR should establish a five-year plan for reviewing proposals to review and establish ORUs and Centers. He asked if it would be beneficial for the committee to create a calendar to share with the campus with a clear timeline for submission of these proposals. Additional items to consider are established and consistent consultations with the Chancellor and EVC/Provost, and regular communications to the faculty about updates that affect the campus research enterprise. As the campus grows, and CoR's workload increases, it may be necessary to construct such a five-year review/communication plan.

Action: CoR members will discuss this item at the April 29 CoR meeting.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 2:30 pm.

Attest: Michael Scheibner, CoR chair