



An Untapped Resource



Fostering a Culture of Collaboration Between Institutes/Centers & Faculty

By Erica Gambrell and Rosemary Madnick

Over the past 70 years, research has transformed from a solitary operation into an endeavor characterized by ever-increasing team size. There are fewer opportunities for researchers to conduct independent research, marking the end of the solo-discoverer era. The changing nature of science has also been complemented by the increasing domi-

nance of public funding in multidisciplinary programs and collaborative research projects, both small and large. Public funding comes with ambitious goals, stressful term limits and requirements for broad inclusion and dissemination. The new face of research mandates the need for collaborative research efforts with the establishment of Institutes and Centers. Institutes and

Centers (ICs) serve as cores for collaboration in diverse areas and provide substantial support for interdisciplinary research at Universities. As the demand for cutting-edge interdisciplinary opportunities for innovative ideas increases, ICs create the environment where faculty can work across traditional departmental and college lines to develop innovative contributions to science. ICs

also play an instrumental role in bringing together varied professionals to a common realm. Faculty, administrators, research and technical staff, and students at all levels play a critical role in creating and fostering relationships and sharing knowledge.

The establishment of Research ICs is a sign of entrepreneurial activities of faculty and academic units. ICs are established for different reasons and bring different benefits. These organizations serve as a focus of scholarly activity and intellectual creativity, focal points for interaction with research sponsors, and serve to amplify an institution's competitiveness in obtaining research funding in designated areas. Most importantly they create highly valued venues for faculty to come together to reach common goals and focus university-level attention on the specific interdisciplinary priorities. Through this interaction, additional opportunities for joint projects and funding are created.

Though often spoken of in similar terms, Institutes and Centers serve different purposes. The differences between the two are defined as: A *Center* is a unit that normally has a focused mission and a clearly defined objective. It may involve a group of faculty from one or more departments from a single school/college or from different schools/colleges. An *Institute* is a unit that normally is larger, has a broader mission and a more complex interdisciplinary focus than a center. It is expected that most institutes would involve faculty from multiple departments and schools/colleges.

Based on their mission, ICs may be classified as:

- **Academic ICs:** These are established to promote scholarly activity in research, teaching or outreach. Scholarship is defined as "creative, intellectual work that is validated by peers and communicated" (Weiser, 1997). Some of these ICs may be established as a component of extramural funding (e.g. Latino Health Disparities Center) or as a result of a federal initiative (e.g. Food Marketing Policy Center).
- **Academic Support ICs:** The primary function of these units is to support the teaching, research, or outreach mission of the institution. Generally a programmatic effort associated with departments/units or colleges to facilitate the study and dissemination of information in

a scholarly area. Frequently, the center is viewed as multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary in nature, bringing together various faculty members with an interest in an area of study. Examples include the Human Development Center, which involves faculty from three colleges on campus or the Institute for Teaching and Learning.

- **Cultural Center:** The primary mission of these is to support diversity in the university community and promote an understanding and appreciation of diversity through co-curricular programming and other cultural and social activities. An example is the African American Cultural Center.
- **Research Center:** A smaller, collaborative effort, centered on a specific research or educational activity, often with participants from more than one Department or School. A Center is administered by a Director that may report to a Department Chair or School Dean or a higher ranking individual in the central administration.
- **Research Institute:** A larger, integrative unit, usually with participants from more than one College or School. An Institute may contain one or more Centers within its administrative structure. An Institute is administered by a Director that reports to a Dean or higher ranking individual in the central administration.

Both Institutes and Centers are focused on externally supported research or educational activities. By definition, ICs are collaborative efforts and not the product of single individuals. Directors of ICs are normally tenured faculty within a Department or School. ICs normally do not contain faculty lines outside of academic Departments or Schools. It is not necessary for every IC to be identical; the governance structure of each should reflect the unique needs and characteristics of that IC.

Institutes and Centers are the major organizational entities for research and educational activities across campuses and, serving as a central location of specialized expertise, have a number of benefits to offer:

- Engage faculty and staff to create a critical mass of intellectual capital for continued growth and productivity including knowledge transfer
- Provide research that impacts environment

and societies because of the specialization

- Source for information, teaching and research for faculty and staff
- Build linkages between the community and the university (Partnerships among academics, government, industry and community)
- Opportunities for extramural funding
- Access to the other academic ecosystems on campus
- Interdisciplinary opportunities to collaborate in transferring science into practice
- Create a mentoring environment for faculty that supplements and extends beyond that provided by individual departments

Propelling research into the future will continue to depend on the strengths of Institutes and Centers as the hub for research and the exchange of information and ideas. As the funding landscape continues to change, faculty and those that support faculty will need to leverage and to explore untraditional resources for research funding. ■

Reference

Weiser, C. J. (1997), The Professional Career — Faculty Scholarship and Productivity Expectations—An Administrator's Perspective. *HortScience* 32: 37-39



Erica Gambrell is the Coordinator of Research Services in The University of Alabama Office for Sponsored Programs where her responsibilities include development of networking and education programs for faculty as well as campus-wide Effort Reporting. She is a graduate of the 2013 NCURA Executive Leadership Program. She is actively involved with NCURA, currently serving on the NCURA Financial Management Committee and will represent Region III as the Regionally-Elected NCURA Board Member beginning January 2015. She previously served as Treasurer for Region III. Erica can be reached at egambrell@fa.ua.edu



Rosemary Madnick is the Executive Director of Grants and Contracts Administration for the University of Alaska Fairbanks. As the Executive Director, she oversees the pre and post award functions for the University. Rosemary is actively involved in NCURA both at the regional and national level. She has served in a number of capacities including NCURA Peer Reviewer, 2012 Region VI Chair, and presenter to name a few. She is a graduate of NCURA's Leadership Development Institute and the Executive Leadership Program. She can be reached at rmadnick@alaska.edu