

The Research Policy Committee of the Faculty Senate reviewed processes in the Division of Research over the past year in order to develop recommendations for improving the research environment and UTRGV and facilitating the progression of the university to R1 status. The members of the Research Policy Committee are listed below.

Laura Seligman, Chair, Department of Psychological Science
Suad Ghaddar, Vice Chair, Department of Health and Biomedical Sciences
Bruno Arthur, Department of Economics
Brent Campney, Department of History
Sergey Grigorian, School of Mathematical and Statistical Sciences
Ulku Karabulut, Department of Health and Human Performance
Sanjeev Kumar, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Voelker Quetschke, Department of Physics and Astronomy
Pad Renga, Department of Medical Education
John VandeBerg, Department of Human Genetics

The Committee is committed to fostering a culture of research at the institution, so that UTRGV provides a supportive environment for investigators. Such a culture decreases the administrative burden on the faculty, so that faculty can devote increased effort to the development of grant applications, conduct of research or creation of scholarly works, and generation of manuscripts and other scholarly products.

The Committee recommends that the Division of Research involve faculty early in the process when developing new approaches or guidelines that are intended to support faculty research. The hands-on experience that investigators have with the preparation and submission of grant applications, the navigation of compliance processes at the university and federal levels, and the conduct of research may help guide process development to minimize administrative burden.

The Committee would like to work with the Division of Research to establish or refine processes intended to decrease the administrative burden on investigators by developing clear priorities for areas to address and working with Division of Research staff in an advisory capacity during the development or revision of policies and procedures.

As recent example illustrates the value of obtaining faculty input early in the development of a new policy or procedure. The Office of Clinical Research has been working for two years on a new process for tracking human subjects research. The initial requirement of this process is that faculty complete a START form for all human subjects research that involves prospective enrollment of participants. This requirement is in addition to the data collection associated with current mandatory IRB processes and existing OSP forms. The START form must be updated and modified by the investigator when certain changes are made to study procedures during the course of the study.

The Office of Clinical Research indicated that the goals for the new process were:

1. To gather metrics.
2. To check for billing compliance.
3. To be a “one stop shop” to get approvals for support needed for the research.

4. To enhance operational feasibility.
5. To streamline processes.
6. To assist investigators in navigating study start-up.

The START process does not appear to achieve the stated goals, and in some cases conflicts with the goals of supporting research. In discussions with the Committee, the OCR staff indicated that one goal was to allow review of projects to determine if a grant or industry sponsored project would be accepted after it was selected for funding by the agency or company. To enhance research at UTRGV, it is critical that processes be designed to enhance the success of investigators in generating funding rather than focused on multiple levels of review that could possibly result in the decision to not accept an awarded grant or contract.

For federal grants, there are multiple points at which the ability to conduct the proposed research if the grant is funded are verified during the grant submission process. Approvals of the research project and the budget are provided by the Department Chair, the College Associate Dean of Research, and the College Dean in addition to others. Of the reviewers, the Department Chair knows best the requirements for the research and the feasibility of conducting the research at UTRGV. A subsequent review by administrative staff not directly involved with the research does not improve the assessment of feasibility and costs the investigator time and effort.

In the case of industry sponsored trials, there is an assessment of the proposed site for feasibility by the sponsor prior to the award of a contract. The sponsor is aware of the requirements of the trial. The Department Chair, College the Associate Dean for Research, and the College Dean are approving the project, so subsequent review by administrative staff not directly involved in the trial does not improve the assessment of or ensure the feasibility of a given trial.

The IRB is solely focused on the protection of human subjects, following federal regulations regarding human subjects research. The proposed subsequent review by administrative staff not directly involved in research does not enhance the protection of human subjects.

The information required for the START form is already collected in different places within the Division of Research. The administrative staff could complete the form given the information already provided to OSP and the IRB, so it is unclear what the benefit of the faculty member completing the form is. The opportunity cost associated requiring the faculty member to provide information that already has been provided in other forms is unnecessary.

The Office of Clinical Research has a distinctly clinical focus but is attempting to impose process requirements on all research involving human subjects. UTRGV has a broad range of research programs that involve human participants, many of which are not clinical.

The Research Policy Committee recommends that the Senate recommend that the goals and priorities for supporting research at UTRGV be developed by the Division of Research in collaboration with faculty who have active research programs. It also recommends that processes in place at research intensive universities be examined so we that can align our processes with those already in use at R1 institutions in anticipation of our transition to R1 status.

The Committee is excited about the future R1 status of UTRGV and the future of research at UTRGV. Outstanding research support focused on minimizing administrative burden and maximizing the number of high-quality grant submissions will help UTRGV attract and retain strong researchers.

The Committee recommends the following.

1. Recognize the role of academic leadership (Chairs, Associate Deans for Research, and Deans) in approving research proposals, assessing feasibility, and committing appropriate resources.
2. Define the success of faculty research programs as a central mission for all Divisions across the university, since the ability to conduct research is dependent upon multiple units including HR and Facilities, among others.
3. Develop policies that require new proposed procedures to go through a benchmarking process that focuses on identifying the most efficient and effective processes used at research intensive institutions.
4. Use objective measures or outside experts to assess gaps or deficiencies in research support at UTRGV and develop plans to address those gaps.
5. Recognize that the most productive and successful researchers are largely driven by intrinsic motivation and that increased research support can further improve their success.