

Understanding Alternate Research Funding and Its Implications

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The Problem

In Kansas and other midwestern states, commodity commissions provide substantial research funding to university faculty. While this support is generous and directly aligned with local agricultural priorities, it typically excludes indirect costs (IDC), which are essential for maintaining research infrastructure. This leads to a growing burden of deferred maintenance, deteriorating lab conditions, and increased pressure on departmental budgets. The issue was identified through direct experience as department head, where frequent infrastructure failures—broken equipment, outdated facilities, and lack of repair funds—highlighted the unsustainable nature of relying solely on direct funding.

The Plan

This project was designed to:

- Quantify the magnitude of alternate (non-IDC) funding and the associated unrecovered IDC.
- Investigate best practices in neighboring states with strong commodity funding.
- Explore models and solutions to encourage commodity groups to support institutional costs, either through modest IDC rates or direct infrastructure support.

Data from Kansas State University's Agronomy department and other units, organized in Power BI, provided a foundation for analysis. Collaboration with the university's Research Operations Manager and the VPR office enabled access to detailed funding records from 2017 onward.

Progress and Future Outlook

Progress to Date:

Analyzed five years of funding data, revealing over \$8.2 million in alternate funding and \$3 million in unrecovered IDC.

Identified that multiple departments benefit from commodity funding, amplifying the institutional impact.

Initiated conversations with commodity groups, with some agencies showing receptiveness to change and open for discussion.

Conducted a survey among NCAC1 committee members, revealing that most states allow IDC recovery from commodity groups - except Illinois - with prevailing rates around 10%.

Future Plans:

Propose a pilot IDC model starting at 1%, increasing annually to 5%.

Advocate for inclusion of lab and instrument usage fees within direct costs.

Continue dialogue with commodity boards and state agencies to explore policy changes.

Use data-driven storytelling to engage university administration and external stakeholders.

Project Impact

This project has already begun to shift the conversation around sustainable research funding. By quantifying the hidden costs of alternate funding, it has:

- Raised awareness among faculty and administrators about the long-term consequences of unrecovered IDC.
- Empowered leadership to advocate for policy changes that align funding models with institutional needs.
- Encouraged collaboration across departments and with external partners to develop shared solutions.
- Initiated cultural change by framing infrastructure support as a shared responsibility between researchers, institutions, and funders.

The project also serves as a replicable model for other land-grant institutions facing similar challenges. Its data-driven approach and stakeholder engagement strategy can be adapted to different contexts, potentially influencing broader policy reforms in agricultural research funding.

Impact of the FSLI Program

The FSLI program has been instrumental in shaping this project:

- Site visits (Ohio, San Luis Obispo) and the North Carolina session provided critical insights into leadership and institutional strategy.
- Executive coaching and peer conversations helped refine the project's scope and approach.
- Exposure to diverse leadership styles and institutional models inspired the pursuit of sustainable funding solutions.
- The program fostered a mindset of strategic thinking and systems-level change, which has been essential in navigating complex funding dynamics.