

Leading and Managing Multidisciplinary, Multi-Institutional Research in a Bottom up Faculty Culture in a Land Grant University

The University of Illinois has a distinct bottom up culture which has developed outstanding faculty. The culture is distinctly individualistic and has resulted in major successes for Faculty all of ranks and in all Colleges. The University of Illinois faculty have been honored with 22 Nobel Prizes over the years and currently 140 of them are members of national Academies. In this environment of strong success it is non trivial to implement change and bring the faculty together to conduct multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research.

The sense of urgency to reconsider research strategies is motivated by the fact the leading federal grant agencies and in particular USDA NIFA has changed its funding paradigm to now include major multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional funding programs. The Faculty need to respond and they have been more amenable to work together and to reach out to other institution's faculty. Those that don't want to change might not be as successful as they used to be.

In order to gain support from opinion leaders we have put together a think tank from some our most successful faculty. We have asked for the faculty to consider what the optimal balance between disciplinary and multidisciplinary research should be to have a successful research program. This think tank is helping facilitate the development of a new culture in the College of ACES.

To clearly send a signal that this change in research culture is very much needed the Office of research has brought in an assistant dean who is facilitating the formation of these teams. We are finding that this needs to be a process where the Faculty express interest in this help. So the approach has been to put our capabilities in front of the faculty without actually trying to impose them on the Faculty.

In order to facilitate the process further the Office of research has designed several Communities of Scholars that have facilitated conversation between our faculty. These have resulted in mixed reviews until the current NIFA RFP emerged. At the beginning they were two hour meeting facilitated by a speaker and a moderator leading to discussion to identify Grand challenge sin Core research areas such as Climate Change, Bioenergy, Nutrition. In addition the effort aimed t understanding how spontaneously teams might form when funding became available. In addition we focused on developing new and dynamic leadership. In the absence of RFPs the leadership was not spontaneously emerging. Once relevant funding became available then the numbers of leaders started to increase and multiply. While I believe the Community of scholars is a fundamentally sound process to foster multidisciplinary research it need the motivational piece that comes from funding being available for research

To foster multi-institution research we have had several conversations with Experiment station directors in the North central region, have identified faculty that might be able to benefit from each other's expertise and again being sensitive to the top down culture simply brought these resources and various initiatives to the attention of the faculty and offered to help. Any level of further push is met with resistance an results in immediate failure. We are currently very sensitive to insuring that these team building activities are perceived as help and not as "telling the faculty what to do "

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