RESEARCH OFFICE SERVICE & SUPPORT REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Over the fall and early winter of 2017/18 the Research Office set out to complete a review of its current services to researchers in order to identify and evaluate operational approaches to implementing the Office of Research & Innovation's responsibilities related to the Integrated Academic and Research Plan that was adopted in the spring of 2016. To date, this effort has consisted of three key components:

1. **Internal Engagement**

   During the fall term, the Office circulated a survey via department chairs as well as the Faculty and Staff Communications Bulletin to generate feedback on researchers' expectations and level of satisfaction with the full gamut of existing services, as well as on their views on strengths, opportunities, and ideal scope of research service offerings. In total, 48 surveys were completed. 45% of respondents came from the Faculty of Arts, 32% from the Faculty of Science, 4% from Education, 4% from Kinesiology & Applied Health, 0% from Business & Economics, and 15% preferred not to specify. In February 2018, 2 Focus Groups were held to further clarify researcher needs and perspectives. A total of 20 participants attended both sessions. All Faculties were represented in at least one session: Faculty of Arts (9), Faculty of Science (4), Faculty of Kinesiology & Applied Health (3), Faculty of Education (2), Faculty of Business & Economics (2).

2. **Internal Environmental Scan**

   The Research Office reviewed the Integrated Academic and Research Plan to identify progress made to date as well as commitments found in the plan the require operationalizing. In some cases, commitments required more involved investigation. For instance, interviews were conducted with Directors of Centres and Institutes at the University to develop a better understanding of key issues and opportunities with them. Along similar lines, the Asset and Campus Enhancement (ACE) engagement process conducted in 2017 yielded insights relevant to this process.

3. **External High-Level Environmental Scan**

   The Research office conducted a high-level scan of Offices at comparably sized Canadian universities to develop a snap shot of core services offered elsewhere, as well as a high-level review of key pressure points and relevant issues on the horizon federally and provincially.

CONTEXT

Our Strategic Directions include strong commitments related to Research Excellence, Knowledge Mobilization, and Impact and this thread was carried through to the work of developing our new Integrated Academic and Research Plan (IARP). Through the IARP, the Research Office committed to a number of initiatives that invite a broader look at the provision of research services on campus. These commitments include:

- Enhance orientation process
- Support career development & mentorship
- Create opportunities for faculty to integrate into research networks
- Support research opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students

- Improve supports for:
  - ✓ grant writing
  - ✓ grant report preparation
  - ✓ communication of research results
  - ✓ knowledge mobilization
  - ✓ internal and external partnership development
  - ✓ collaborations with Indigenous scholars, students and community   members
  - ✓ assistance with budget preparation for active research programs

Over the last year, the Research Office has undertaken a number of projects to begin to deliver on these commitments. These include work on updating some key research policies, streamlining processes related to Post-Doctoral and Visiting Scholars, and convening a Knowledge Mobilization team to identify and consolidate information on existing supports for researchers related to advancing knowledge mobilization efforts and identifying potential future institutional supports in this area. A working group of the Knowledge Mobilization team has also been examining possible approaches to increasing the capacity of researchers to articulate their research impact and approaches to improving institutional knowledge of research activity.

As we explore approaches to further delivering on these IARP commitments, we are aware that research at UWinnipeg has undergone a decade of substantial growth. There has been a 59% increase in external research funding since 2007, a 117% increase in human ethics applications compared to 2007, and a resulting substantial increase in MOUs, contracts & non-disclosure agreements. Figure 1 provides details on research revenues at UWinnipeg over the last decade. Alongside this increase in research revenues, the changing landscape of research activity across the country has meant a substantial increase in research collaborations both among UWinnipeg researchers and with other academic and non-academic partners. This increase means that administering research agreements has become much more complex over the last several years.
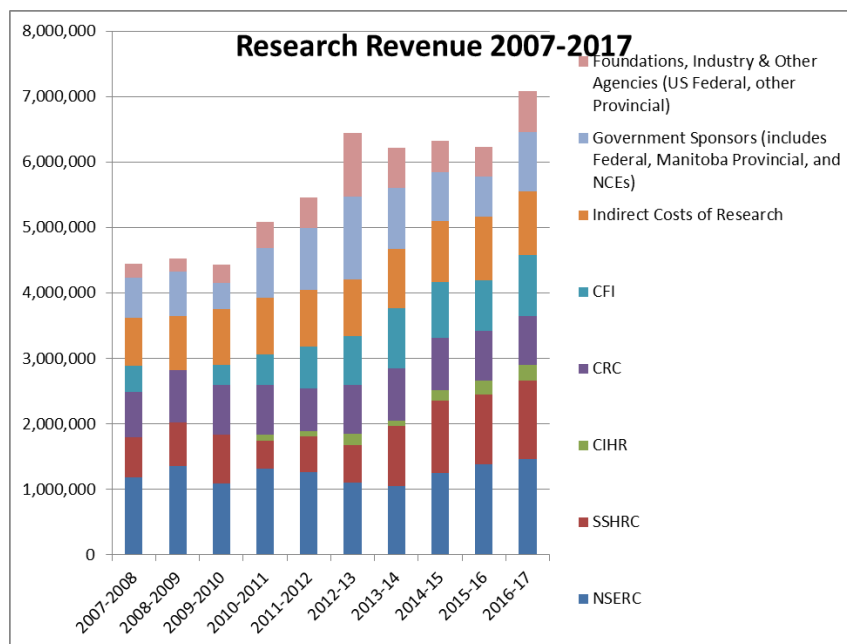

FIGURE 1: ANNUAL RESEARCH REVENUES BY SOURCE

We also take note of recent announcements from the Federal Government. Canada's Fundamental Science Review made a number of recommendations related to funding levels and funding mechanisms for researchers in Canada. Many of these recommendations were reflected in the 2018 Federal budget. The Tri-Council currently spends about $3 billion per year. The budget proposes investing $925 million more over five years and $235 million per year after that. The Canada Research Chairs program will see an investment of $210 million over 5 years and $50 million per year after that. Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) will receive $763 million over 5 years and a new Tri-Agency fund to "support research that is international, interdisciplinary, fast-breaking and higher-risk" will also be established ($275 million over 5 years then $65 million per year).

Given the Federal Government's role in supporting fundamental research across the country with a strong emphasis on promoting equity, diversity and inclusion throughout their programs, the Research Office will be increasingly asked to monitor, report on, and, where necessary, improve in this area. This emphasis on equity, diversity and inclusion aligns with our own institutional priorities.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM RESEARCHERS

Survey respondents were asked, via open-ended question, to identify the top three services they expect from the Research Office. Figure 2 provides details on the frequency at which different services were mentioned as priorities. This question was followed by a series of ranking questions related to current services and then by opportunity for open ended comment. The open ended comments received in the survey and focus group discussions roughly aligned with the top two priorities identified in Figure 2.
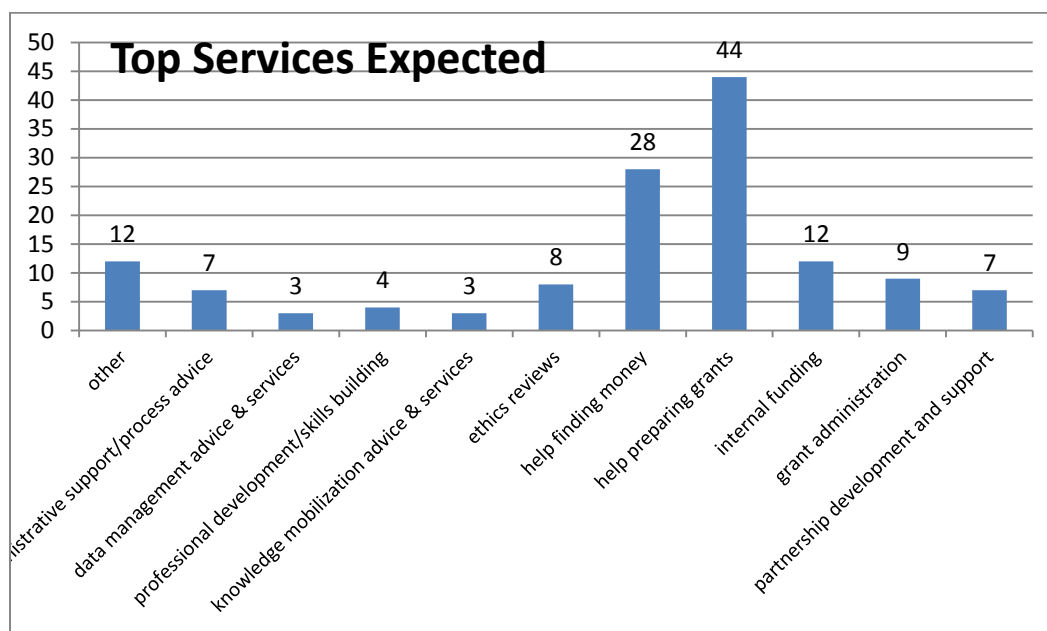

FIGURE 2: TOP SERVICE EXPECTATIONS OF RESEARCHERS

The figure provides two core expectations of researchers when they look to the Research Office for support: support with grant preparation and supporting finding research money remain core expectations. Using the questions in the survey, open ended comments in the survey, and feedback received during focus groups 6 key themes were identified as areas of particular opportunity or need. These themes provide the context for understanding the core expectations of researchers when they look to the Research Office for support.

1. **Specialized Grant Preparation Support**

   Support related to preparing research grants is the most common service expected from the Research Office. This includes support reviewing grant proposals as well as a range of other support activities. A number of researchers noted the trend in larger Canadian universities towards having more dedicated and discipline-specific grant-writing support from individuals with specialized subject knowledge. A variety of approaches to offering a measure of this type of support within the context of our smaller size were raised. These included identifying potential reviewers of draft grants with first-hand experience and knowledge in the research area and establishing an internal repository of successful grants for new researchers to consult. Further, consideration of approaches to grant-writing support may also include innovations in approaches to internal communication – some supports proposed by researchers have already been attempted by the Research Office, but were not accessed by researchers.

2. **External partnership development, targeted communication, and proactive cultivation of future opportunities**

   Next to supports related to preparing grant proposals, supports related to finding research funding were the most commonly expected service from the Research Office. Several researchers highlighted the importance of looking beyond the Tri-Agency for research funding opportunities. Some researchers expressed the desire for support in developing "complete funding strategies" for research while several researchers emphasized the importance of ensuring that someone on campus be responsible searching for and cultivating non Tri-Agency research funding opportunities. For some, this meant personnel tasked with establishing and maintaining liaisons with industry. For others it meant specific support on grant proposals to foundations. For others still, it meant cultivating key strategic relationships with a wide range of funders to ensure good understanding of what different funding agencies are looking for and to anticipate opportunities from government, industry, and foundations well in advance of formal calls for proposals. Researchers also expressed interest in accessing more digital tools to search out funding opportunities.

3. **Research implementation supports**

   Several researchers noted an increase in the number of MOUs, contracts, and other types of agreements that involve entering the University into some kind of formal agreement with another entity. They noted feeling unqualified to develop these agreements on their own and suggested that further support in this area would be helpful. This aligns with experiences in the Research Office, where a substantial increase in contracts and agreements of various kinds continues to be a challenge. Researchers also spoke of challenges related to monitoring and reporting on increasingly complex research budgets. These challenges include:

   - mis-matches between expense categories used in our internal finance system and expense categories funders require reports to be provided in;
   - lack of knowledge about how to access, and use, WebClient/NAV to monitor budgets;
   - an overall increase in the size and complexity of research budgets because of more partnerships and collaborations.

   Based on these challenges, they expressed a desire to receive more training and resources related to using WebClient/NAV and managing budgets.

4. **Welcoming, showcasing and connecting researchers, research clusters, and research coordinators**

   Researchers expressed substantial interest in seeing more events such as internal lecture series and themed workshops/mini conferences for clusters of researchers from different departments to showcase research, to

enable opportunities for new research partnerships to emerge, and to highlight UWinnipeg's capacity to lead large research projects. Different ideas related to online tools aimed at enabling a better understanding of the existing thematic clusters of research on campus were raised both in focus groups and in surveys. The importance of research coordinators as bringing important capacity to research efforts was highlighted, and a range of ideas related to both supporting their work and leveraging their capacity were raised. These suggestions all pointed to a broader desire to see the Research Office play a more active role in developing UWinnipeg's research reputation as well as in supporting faculty development and networking opportunities. Activities related to faculty development and networking have traditionally been taken on as add-ons to existing responsibilities, rather than as core aspects of day to day responsibilities.

5. **Research involving Indigenous partners**

Several researchers spoke about research involving Indigenous partners. Some talked about finding the ethics review process for this kind of research unexpectedly difficult and expressed desire to develop a better understanding of best practices. This aligns with trends in human ethics reviews in the Research Office. The University Human Research Ethics Board has established its own Indigenous Advisory Circle to advise on ethics proposals involving Indigenous partners and communities as one approach to addressing the marked increase in ethics proposals involving Indigenous partners, and these are indeed requiring substantial comment from the ethics review board. Further attention to this area of research may be required.

6. **Internal Communication**

Internal communications was an overarching theme in both the survey and during focus groups, and it is fair to say that this was identified as an area that would benefit from considerable attention. Some researchers highlighted that the current method of communicating with them via Chairs does not always result in information being received in a timely manner. Many expressed interest in receiving communications from the Research Office about opportunities that were more targeted to their specific research areas and interests. In the Research Office, the absence of an institutional bibliography and related knowledge management tools/process is a key barrier to providing this kind of targeting communication. At present, there is no simple way to identify key research clusters or to develop the kind of holistic understanding of research activity that would enable a more targeted approach to communicating about funding and other opportunities. Efforts related to knowledge management over the next year may help address this. In general, researchers spoke highly of the orientation they received from the Research Office. Suggestions for improvement included developing a written orientation package with information about where to find forms, who to talk to about different questions/issues, key dates, and other similar information. Others suggested conducting a follow up orientation for researchers after they have begun working on their research programme as many found that they had new questions emerge once they got started in their research that they didn't know to ask when they first arrived at the University.

NEXT STEPS

The feedback generated through the survey and focus groups have provided valuable information which will be used by the Research Office to better assess and develop pragmatic approaches to implementing the commitments made in the IARP. Given budgetary constraints, the development and implementation of these approaches will be undertaken by the Research Office gradually over time.