



Representing Wayne State Faculty and Academic Staff

NEWSBRIEFS

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Mismanagement Jeopardizes WSU Research Mission

Faculty Survey Highlights Underfunding and Shoddy Grant Accounting

By Bob Arking, Professor of Biology and Contract Implementation Officer

Wayne State University's status as one of the National Science Foundation's top 50 research universities in the nation is in jeopardy. There are several factors that account for the recent slide in WSU's national ranking by both the Carnegie Foundation and the NSF, but at least two of them are self-inflicted according to a recent faculty survey.

Stagnant Internal Funding for Research

Based on returns from over 400 researchers, the Academic Senate's Research Committee found that 67% believe the level of internal funding for research at WSU falls short of their needs. This finding is consistent with the results of a recent study by the Office of the Vice President for Research, which found that WSU's level of internal funding has stagnated compared to other research universities ranked by Carnegie and the NSF.

As the AAUP-AFT has pointed out in recent issues of *Newsbriefs*, a growing percentage of General Fund spending at Wayne has been shifted to the central administration while the proportion going to schools and colleges has declined in most years. In the Academic Senate's survey, 71% of respondents agreed that an increase in the percentage of budget allocated to academic units would produce

a major improvement in research activity and external funding.

Shoddy Administration of Accounts

The faculty survey confirmed a second and perhaps more troubling factor that jeopardizes the University's research mission: administrators who should be collaborating with researchers to maximize the effective use of grant accounts are perceived by the majority of faculty as unresponsive, bureaucratic, and frequently antagonistic.

Much of the faculty's frustration is focused on the office of Sponsored Programs Administration (SPA), which is responsible for monitoring expenditures funded by research grants. A staggering 94% of surveyed faculty agreed that "changes are needed to improve the accuracy of my research accounts and to insure appropriate use of my funds." Nearly as many (88%) agreed that "SPA personnel need to demonstrate increased willingness to work with researchers to resolve budgetary problems."

There are certainly individuals in SPA who are competent, capable, and courteous. But the faculty's opinion of the unit as a whole is negative. SPA has a reputation for providing inaccurate finan-

INSIDE:

Union Holds "Town Hall" on the State Budget

page 3

con't on page 2

cial reports and failing to understand program-specific reporting requirements. In the eyes of most faculty, it is not willing to work with researchers on correcting inaccurate reports, and once a mistaken charge is posted, it is very difficult to trace and to remove. When you are running an accounting firm and 80-94% of your clients are highly critical of your performance, then you must be doing something wrong.

The AAUP-AFT has investigated several cases in which senior faculty have received what they believed were erroneous financial reports, but for which SPA administrators refused to produce documentary justification for their charges. They simply behaved as if it were not their unit's mission to support the research activities of the University, but rather to demonstrate to their superiors that they were zealous in their defense of institutional monies—which is not the same as being accurate.

The union is aware of cases in which possibly inaccurate charges were not cleared or investigated but were maintained on the books despite the researcher's complaints bolstered by documentation. In other cases, SPA refused to transfer budgeted funds to other institutions for research done there in accordance with the original proposal. This refusal, based on no good reason at all, forces faculty to pay thousands of dollars out of their own pocket in order to preserve their personal reputation and honor, while waiting months or years for the SPA to ultimately acknowledge their mistake and pay them.

In other cases, SPA presented revised financial reports to researchers months or years after the grant had expired, but with new charges on it that were suspect. Researchers were given the 'choice' of repaying the funds from their indirect cost accounts. In two cases, the administration and/or SPA made the empty but frightening threat to the faculty that if they did not acquiesce in emptying out their indirect cost accounts to pay contested charges, then the University would put a lien on their salary or

attach their retirement funds. Those threats, we have pointed out, are empty because they are illegal. But think what it means if the SPA—which is charged with supporting the University's research effort—is actually threatening to pauperize the University's research faculty.

It Starts at the Top

There is an old adage that you get what you pay for. In the case of SPA, it would seem that senior administrators have made it clear to their staff that they do not value accuracy or timeliness or a client-centered approach to supporting the research faculty of the University. They apparently do value the appearance of being hard-nosed (and inaccurate) bean counters.

Many really good research faculty will not tolerate such behavior. And that is why 83% of the faculty

surveyed agreed with the statement that "Changes are needed to retain excellent faculty in my department." Funded faculty can often find another job if they really must. But ask yourself this: How harassing must SPA's behavior be in order to make a tenured and funded faculty member, probably with family ties to the area, decide to call it quits with Wayne and go elsewhere?

It turns out that the loss of talented faculty is a major factor in the recent difficulty Wayne State is experiencing in keeping its national ranking as a research university. Many of these departing faculty were first hired and nurtured by Wayne, but often decide to go elsewhere just when they are really hitting their professional stride. The SPA is contributing to this exodus, and if the Administration is not persuaded to change its ways, then it is likely that Wayne State will lose its coveted research ranking.

The strategic plan put in place by the Division of Research to enhance our research performance actually specifies (as goal 4.6, www.research.wayne.edu)

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Union Holds “Town Hall” on the State Budget

Legislators and members of the Board of Governors Discuss “Schools First, Not Prisons” with Union Members

On April 27, more than 70 faculty members, academic staff, and graduate assistants crowded into the second floor of the Reuther Library to meet with legislators and members of the WSU Board of Governors (BOG). The discussion focused on the state budget crisis and the urgent need to shift resources from Michigan’s bloated prison system to the support of higher education in general and Wayne State in particular.

State Senator Gilda Jacobs and Representatives Fred Durhal, Doug Geiss, and Coleman Young II spoke to the need for a reorientation in state priorities. The WSU BOG was represented by Gary Pollard, who is also chief of staff for state Senator Martha Scott, and Richard Bernstein, the current BOG Chairman.

The Town Hall was organized by the Political Action Committee (PAC) of the AAUP-AFT and was endorsed by both the Union of Part Time Faculty and the Graduate Employees Organizing Committee.

With the collapse of the auto industry and the corporate exodus to non-union and low-wage production sites in Mexico and China, the state of Michigan has suffered a devastating decline in tax revenue at the very moment when the state’s students, unemployed and

uninsured desperately need state support. In the meantime, Michigan has become one of only four states in the nation which spends more on prisons than on higher education. The state’s prison population has grown from 8,000 inmates in 1973 to nearly 50,000 in recent years at the same time that state support for higher education has been cut dramatically.

All of the Town Hall participants welcomed the recent emphasis placed by the Granholm Administration on paroling prisoners who have served their minimum sentence and have demonstrated a commitment to rehabilitation. Such efforts need to be expanded with an accompanying emphasis on minimizing the risk to Michigan citizens, while addressing the greater risk that our underfunded universities will not be able to prepare working and middle-class class students for the challenges of a world in crisis.

Two weeks after the Town Hall, more than a dozen members of the AAUP-AFT Executive Board and PAC carried the same message to Lansing as participants in the American Federation of Teachers’ “Lobby Day.”



edu/about/pdfs/strategic-plan- 2007.pdf) that there should be an “increase in campus satisfaction with grants management.” This goal can only be achieved by an active intervention into the management and culture of SPA.

If the University loses its national ranking as a research institution, its reputation will be diminished in the eyes of legislators in Lansing and we will have even more difficulty in avoiding further state cuts in the university’s budget.



Members of the Board of Governors Gary Pollard (left) and Richard Bernstein at the union’s Town Hall meeting on “Schools First, Not Prisons.”

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