

**REPORT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCE
FACULTY GRANT REVIEW COMMITTEE
April, 2001**

BACKGROUND: The Social Science Faculty Grant Review Committee was charged with reviewing the current grant application/selection process and making recommendations for improvement. Though it would have been consistent with our charge to investigate the Curriculum Development/Instruction grant program, we chose to focus on Research/Scholarship grants. We did this for three reasons: (1) we received almost no expressions of concern or dissatisfaction about the Curriculum Development program from division faculty; (2) we received many expressions of concern and dissatisfaction about the Research/Scholarship program; (3) there is quantitative evidence that problems lie predominantly with the Research/Scholarship program. Data for the years 1999, 2000, and 2001 show that while no one division received as much as one-third of the 42 Curriculum/Instruction grants awarded, a single division received nearly two-thirds of the 103 Research/Scholarship grants. Furthermore, while knowing the division in which a Curriculum/Instruction proposal originated provides no help at all in predicting whether it was actually funded ($\lambda = 0$), knowing the division in which a Research/Scholarship proposal originated is quite helpful in predicting its fate ($\lambda = .40$). This improvement in predictability evidently is due to the very high funding rate for Science Division proposals (85 percent) compared with that for non-Science proposals (35 percent) -- a highly nonrandom disparity ($\chi^2 = 46.1$ [$p < .001$]). Indeed, simply knowing that a proposal originated from outside the Science Division is as helpful, for prediction, as knowing its specific divisional origin (again, $\lambda = .40$). To make matters worse both the number and variety of funded proposals have plummeted in recent years. In 1997, 48 faculty members from 18 disciplines were awarded summer research grants. This year, only 36 faculty members from 12 disciplines will receive grants.

THE MAJOR PROBLEMS: Having received an abundance of comments and suggestions from division colleagues, we reviewed the Research/Scholarship grant program and identified three major problem areas.

- ❖ *Purpose:* The program lacks a clear purpose that is clearly related to Truman's distinctive mission.
 - According to its published statement of purpose, the program is supposed to encourage faculty scholarship through funding of the most meritorious projects. It is not self-evident what standard of merit is intended here; nor is it clear how the application of this standard will contribute to Truman's distinctive mission.
 - It would be in the spirit of a liberal institution to use research funds to promote diversity: the diversity of ideas, approaches, and forms of expression, without regard to their apparent utility or their prestige in the broader culture. From this

perspective, a proposal could be meritorious because it adds variety to the overall mix of funded work. Neither the current statement of purpose nor the published review criteria encourage this sort of assessment.

- ❖ *Process*: The process for allocating grants is deeply flawed and is widely recognized to be deeply flawed.
 - An outsider who compared the recent pattern of grant allocation with the published review criteria might well be mystified. How could the impartial application of these criteria produce such a drastically skewed result? The key is that the published review criteria are frequently *not* applied, while unpublished review criteria frequently *are* applied. This creative approach to the review criteria has favored applicants from high prestige disciplines whose projects easily accommodate student collaboration and whose proposals are couched in language so technical that they are intelligible only to specialists.
 - While the university-wide allocation data have suggested to some observers that the review process must be infected with some sort of positivist bias, someone who reviewed only the data for this division might draw the opposite conclusion. For example, this year no Social Science applicant from a discipline typified by quantitative methods was awarded a grant. Such a result would be no surprise to someone who has questioned all along whether any one person can adequately represent the full range of research methods practiced in this division.
- ❖ *Effect*: The program, as currently administered, yields outcomes so destructive that the net effect of the program may actually be negative.
 - There is nothing inherently wrong with any particular division receiving an annual, 6-figure budget supplement from the VPAA's office. But if only one division is to be so blessed, the money should not be distributed in a way that commits the university to any official judgment about the unusual merit of that division's work. To do otherwise is not only antithetical to our mission, but is demoralizing and alienating for scholars whose forms of inquiry or creativity are found to lack merit.

SOME OPTIONS: The committee proposes three general strategies for dealing with the problems discussed above.

- ❖ *Minimal Adjustments*: Retain the current system of review by an inter-divisional committee without any scheme for divisional allocation of grant monies. The current system could be improved in a variety of ways. We list a few.
 - The research grant program's statement of purpose should make it clear that grant monies are intended to promote a wide range of scholarly activities across

the whole campus. This commitment should be reflected in the published review criteria.

- The review committee should include a non-voting member, representing no particular division, whose primary responsibility is to ensure that funding decisions are based on the published review criteria. The Director of Grants & Foundation Relations might play this role.
 - Each voting member of the review committee should complete a score sheet for each proposal. The score sheet should be based on the published review criteria.
 - Score sheet items should probably be weighted. If they are, the weighting scheme should be published along with the review criteria.
 - Each applicant should be supplied with either a scoring summary or a copy of each scoring sheet. Unfunded applicants should be given some indication of the improvements in their proposals that would most increase their chance of funding.
 - Applicants should be allowed to consult with their divisional representative.
 - We should acknowledge that we are not all equally qualified to serve on an inter-divisional research grant review committee. There should be an explicit statement of desired qualifications (e.g., significant training or experience in an academic discipline outside of one's home division). The desired qualifications should be a serious consideration whenever members are selected.
 - Review committee members could receive guidance about how to assess proposals from various disciplines. Disciplines might submit statements about typical research techniques.
 - Diverse research traditions might be better represented if each division had two representatives on the review committee.
 - More proposals could be approved if the research grant program were better funded. An alternative would be to reduce the maximum grant amount.
 - It might be reasonable to place a cap on the number of grants an individual can receive in a certain time period. It might also be reasonable to consider applications for additional grants only after previous funded work has produced tangible results.
- ❖ *The Middle Road*: Retain the current system of review by an inter-divisional committee, reformed in some of the ways indicated above, but impose some sort of divisional allocation scheme. We list two ways this might be done.

- Make it a rule or guideline that the review committee award grants to each division in approximate proportion to the number of proposals originating from that division. If, for example, funding was available for sixty percent of all proposals, then as near as possible to sixty percent of all applications from each division should be approved.
- Make it a rule or guideline that the review committee award grants to each division in approximate proportion to the number of full-time faculty in that division. If a division houses twelve percent of Truman's faculty, they should receive about twelve percent of the grants.
- ❖ *Fundamental Change*: Eliminate the inter-divisional committee. Divide research funds among the divisions in proportion to faculty headcount. In each division, set up a review committee that advises either the division head or the VPAA on the allocation of grants.

Our committee was asked to present a range of options for addressing faculty concerns. We were not asked to endorse any one option. We can report, though, that each of the reform strategies discussed above enjoys some support on the committee.

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