
OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES REVIEW 2007: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

BACKGROUND

Since the Office of Research Services (ORS) opened in 1999 it has experienced significant growth. Several things have combined to increase the complexity of the work of the ORS, including the introduction of the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI), Canada Research Chairs, Board of Governors Chairs, and various research networks. Significant growth in research programs and major changes to funding programs, the addition of over a hundred new academic staff, and the need to validate the ORS business plan, have driven the need for a review of the ORS.

In 2007 the University of Lethbridge initiated a review of the ORS to evaluate: how it contributes to the U of L mission and vision; how effectively it uses staff resources; its ability to meet the needs of stakeholders and clients; and its operational links with other units on campus. The ORS review was managed by the Vice President (Academic).

The review was in two parts: (1) Internal Review; and (2) External Review.

The Vice President (Academic) of the University of Lethbridge approached Jane Allan and Christine Picken in June 2007 to request them to conduct the **Internal Review** of the ORS. The mandate of the internal review was to address five main questions:

1. Does the mandate of the ORS fit within the vision and mission of the University of Lethbridge?
2. What is the role of the Vice President Research?
3. What services does the ORS provide and are they clearly articulated?
4. Is the ORS providing the services faculty feel they need and are faculty satisfied with those services?
5. Are the relationships ORS has with other units within the University effective or is there room for improvement, and what changes are required for more efficient and streamlined interactions?

The **External Review** had two main objectives:

1. Identify areas of excellence and areas of improvement.
2. Demonstrate accountability within the communities that the ORS serves.

PROCESS

The Vice President (Academic) managed the ORS review process. ORS conducted the internal review June-September 2007. To answer the five review questions, the internal reviewers used seven methods:

1. Perused the University of Lethbridge 2003-2008 Strategic Plan and other selected material for background and relevant information.
2. Discussed at length with Dr. Dennis Fitzpatrick the role of the VP Research.
3. Polled the current staff on their duties, and asked their opinions on the services we do offer and should or should not be offering.
4. Interviewed select faculty to solicit their input on our services and to allow them to express their concerns openly, using their feedback to develop a survey for the entire faculty that would hopefully solicit the same candor.
5. Developed, distributed, and analyzed the faculty survey to determine faculty's satisfaction with ORS services.
6. Interviewed staff from units¹ with whom ORS has a close working relationship.
7. Met with the Human Subjects and Animal Welfare Committee Chairs.
8. Discussed our services with senior administration, including the President, Vice President (Finance and Administration), Vice President (Academic), and Deans' Council.

The external reviewers of the ORS were Dr. Alaa Abd-El-Aziz (Provost, UBC Okanagan), and Mr. Neil Taylor (Director of Research Services Office, University of Alberta). The external reviewers considered several documents provided by the U of L (including the results of the internal review) and held interviews with: staff from ORS and Financial Services; the Dean of Arts and Science; the Vice President (Academic); the Vice President (Finance and Administration); and the Vice President (Research).

RESULTS

The Internal Review made several recommendations to improve the ORS' performance and meet the growing demands of the U of L's research community:

- Staffing**
- Create an Associate Vice President (Research) position to assist the Vice President (Research) with projects, serve on external committees, provide internal representation, and help faculty members with writing grant applications. The Vice President (Research) travels extensively, limiting his ability to manage ORS day-to-day operations.
 - Create a Director of Research Services position to manage the daily operations of the ORS, develop standard operating procedures, supervise staff and staffing, and facilitate communications between the ORS and other units.²

¹ Financial Services; Human Resources; the Library; Materials Management; the School of Graduate Studies; and University Advancement.

² Recognizing the tremendous pressures from the expansion of ORS duties, the U of L had committed to creating a Director of Research Services prior to the Internal Review. This position was budgeted for in the 2007-08 fiscal year. The Vice President (Research), the Internal Review, and the External Review all agreed on the necessity for a Director of Research Services position.



Policies and Procedures

- Hire a junior Technology Transfer Officer to assist the existing Technology Transfer Officer.
- Hire a Financial Accounts Manager with Banner and accounting expertise to monitor research funds and the operating budget, help develop budgets for research projects and grant applications, manage online expense claims, and open research accounts.
- Hire a Communications Officer to write award nominations, plan events and awards ceremonies, develop a communications strategy, develop and revise communications tools, and produce a research publication.
- Develop a five-year strategic research plan for the University and the ORS and involve faculty members in the development of the plan.
- Develop vision and mission statements, goals, and strategic priorities for the ORS.
- Develop and enforce departmental and institutional policies for research.
- Establish standard operating procedures for all departmental functions.
- Create complete job descriptions for all staff and procedure manuals for all staff functions and duties.
- Establish CFI grant strategies and procedures with a formal budget for their implementation.
- Get the support of senior administration for the Technology Transfer Office operating guidelines.

Financial Development

- Establish an annual ORS operating budget to cover supplies, travel, and professional development for staff. Provide funding from research overhead to ensure adequate funding of internal funding grants.
- Create a defined budget for the Technology Transfer Office.
- Train ORS staff in Banner and financial processes.
- Invest in animal care facilities, including renovating facilities in Biological Sciences that meet CCAC requirements. Fund these activities from the Federal Indirect Costs grant.
- Establish an annual budget for the Animal Welfare Committee that covers the ongoing costs of animal care.

Resource Development

- Mentor selected faculty or administrative staff to serve on external boards and committees.
- Create the position of Animal Care Director to run the Animal Welfare Committee program and facilities and to be the final authority on campus for animal care issues.
- Consider appointing a Chair to run the Human Subjects and Animal Welfare committees.

Service Enhancement

- Use ORS staff with project management training to help faculty members to plan, develop, and implement major research projects.



- Other**
- Continue to develop and enhance new initiatives to help faculty members, such as the Leadership, Peer, and Workshop program for faculty in the social sciences and humanities.
 - Consider adopting a ‘grant facilitator’ method of service.
 - Incorporate into the School of Graduate Studies the coordination and administration of graduate scholarships and the provision of training and mentorship services, and the resources to carry out these activities.
 - Ensure the Human Subjects Committee has at least one member who is knowledgeable in the law relevant to biomedical research, as per Tri-Council guidelines.

From the External Review, three major themes with related recommendations emerged:

- Organize for change**
- Establish policies, procedures, processes, and practices for the ORS. This is necessary so the ORS can focus on its key duties.
 - Ensure the ORS Director shows leadership in guiding ORS staff and in building effective relationships with key administrative units.
 - Reorganize the ORS and reassign staff responsibilities.
 - Create one additional full-time position to assess opportunities for technology transfer.
 - Create new full-time positions for health research/ethics and post-award officers.
 - Create new resources in the School of Graduate Studies to administer graduate student scholarships and other non-research related activities.
- Develop a plan for growth**
- Develop a strategic plan to align the ORS with the U of L Strategic Plan and Business Plan.
 - Develop an annual plan to direct ORS activities during the fiscal year.
 - Create clear and accurate position descriptions for ORS staff.
 - Develop and implement a system to facilitate the professional development and assessment of ORS staff.
 - Create and maintain standard operating procedures for all ORS functions.
 - Develop a mechanism for continuous improvement of ORS and its staff.
- Increase communications**
- Hold regular meetings between ORS and Financial Services to develop procedures and practices that ensure efficient delivery of research administration services from pre-proposal to post-award.
 - Ensure ORS staff can view the financial status of approved projects online.
 - Involve Financial Services early in the budgetary review of grant proposals, or provide ORS staff with training that enables them to provide advice to researchers on the budgetary aspects of their proposals.



One standalone recommendation related to the need for an Associate Vice President (Research) position, which the Internal Review felt was necessary to ensure academic representation for the ORS on campus. The External Reviewers did not feel such a position is required. They recommended that the Vice President (Research) decrease the amount of time spent travelling and provide this academic representation.

RESPONSE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT (RESEARCH)

To succeed, the ORS must engage with other support units on campus and improve communications with our clients – the researchers. To address the recommendations from the review, the ORS identifies nine main actions:

1. Recruit a Director of Research Services and invest the position with appropriate authority and responsibility.
2. Reorganize the ORS to create three grant facilitators who will focus on research applications in social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, engineering, and health.
3. Provide ORS support for human subject ethics activities and animal care committees, but restructure the committees that handle these activities so that the chairs are vested with responsibility.
4. House research-related activities—including biological, chemical, and radiation safety; animal care; approval of animal use; and the University veterinarian—in one unit with clear lines of reporting.
5. Ensure that responsibility for research scholarships, graduate scholarships, and the related award ceremonies resides with the School of Graduate Studies, and that the School has the resources to handle these responsibilities.
6. Continue to mobilize all available financial resources to fund promotional activities and creatively solve problems, such as replacement of common equipment and unanticipated support for new faculty.
7. Hold regular meetings between ORS and Financial Services, ensure ORS staff can view online financial records related to research projects, and train ORS staff on research project budgeting.
8. Add a second administrative assistant to handle the growth in activity in the ORS.
9. Redesign and renovate the ORS office space so that it accommodates staff growth, better addresses the needs for security of information, and professionally represents the University.

The recommendation to focus the ORS on technology transfer rather than managing start-up processes for new commercial enterprises is problematic as it makes the timely development of commercial outlets unlikely.

The External Review recommendation regarding decreasing travel time for the Vice President (Research) is problematic. The return on investment for Vice President (Research) travel is significant as it involves advocacy for programs and the institution, building of contacts in funding agencies and government, and chairing and participating in boards and review panels.