March 27, 2012

MEMORANDUM

TO: University Committee on Faculty Affairs


SUBJECT: Review Comments and Recommendation for a University Research Organization at Michigan State University

The University Committee on Faculty Affairs (UCFA) carefully reviewed the Confidential Report to the Steering Committee to establish a University Research Organization (URO) at Michigan State University (MSU). We recommend, based on our review, that UCFA support the concept of a URO at MSU with certain assurances. Details of these assurances are described below as well as a summary of our review process, concerns identified, and a final recommendation.

Review Process
Professors Leo Kempel and Paul Hunt met with the full University Committee on Faculty Affairs (UCFA) at the regularly scheduled December 6, 2011 and February 28, 2012 meetings. They provided the UCFA members with the Confidential Report to the Steering Committee: University Research Organization Exploration Committee, November 1, 2011 and other supporting documentation. Also provided were the locations of additional information on the URO website. An ad hoc UCFA subcommittee was appointed to review the materials provided in December and later in February. Members of the ad hoc subcommittee were: Gerald Aben (Osteopathic Medicine), William Anderson (Human Medicine), Karl Olson (Natural Science), William Schall (Vet Medicine), and Gwen Wyatt (Nursing). The URO ad hoc subcommittee met three different times to review and analyze the materials provided.

Our Concerns
Based on our review, we have identified the following concerns with the URO report.

1. While there is a great deal of information available about URO’s elsewhere and possible organizational structures at MSU, we could not identify a specific, final description of the MSU URO plan. Without specifics about the overall mission, organizational structure, personnel and staff requirements, expectations and benefits for faculty, it was difficult to critically appraise the possible value-added of a URO at MSU.

2. While the report stated no MSU general funds should be used to establish the URO, it was difficult to imagine how a URO could be initiated without MSU general fund
support. The start-up costs for such an organization are significant (faculty, staff and administrator recruitment; space, office and lab equipment, etc.), and the time lag from submission to funding (if successful) may be a minimum of 9 months.

3. The proposed MSU URO report raises questions about possible duplication of existing lab space, equipment and personnel required to administer the URO contract/grant, and those resources already supported by other general or grant funds in the unit. Further, it was unclear whether MSU faculty would have access to the URO funded lab space and equipment.

4. The proposed MSU URO report was unclear about the specifics of the checks and balances, reporting lines, and oversight by university administration and academic governance.

5. The proposed MSU URO report did not specifically address the relationship of reporting lines, supervision, and review of faculty and staff involved in URO funded projects and how that supervision and review meshed with the faculty members’ home department.

6. The proposed MSU URO report did not specifically address the protection afforded to MSU faculty involved in URO-related projects. It was unclear whether established MSU faculty policies (annual review, tenure, grievance, etc.) apply to faculty funded on URO projects.

7. It was difficult to determine what decision making criteria would be used to assign a proposal to an academic unit or the URO. Further, it was unclear how release dollars and indirect costs would be allocated from URO funded projects to departments.

8. Most importantly, the proposal did not address how the research and scholarship supported by URO funding would be evaluated by department, college and university for annual review, promotion and tenure. Also, could URO supported research be used to meet graduate degree requirements?

Proposed Recommendation

Despite the concerns presented above, the UCFA ad hoc subcommittee believes Michigan State University would benefit from the establishment of a University Research Organization as long as the following assurances identified by the URO Working Committee are met:

1. MSU general funds will not be used to establish the URO.
2. Classified research will not be conducted at an MSU affiliated URO.
3. No breach in the integrity of the campus and its buildings that would unnecessarily jeopardize the University’s commitment to inclusiveness will be permitted.
4. Research conducted in the URO will be allowed only if this research cannot be
undertaken in an academic unit.
5. The current MSU research publication policy will be preserved or strengthened for projects that can be conducted in the units, and the administration will ensure that research is conducted in appropriate venues, whether in units or the URO.
6. Undergraduate students, graduate students and junior faculty involved in URO projects will receive written documentation and a verbal explanation of any limitations or implications to their current or future academic standing prior to URO participation.

In summary, the UCFA ad hoc subcommittee recommends the full UCFA endorse the University Research Organization Exploration Committee report of November 1, 2011, as long as the concerns and assurances are addressed in future versions of the planning proposals.