

ACADEMIC SENATE ADVISORY SUBCOMMITTEE ON
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FUNDING

Preliminary Report – January 16, 2020

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Background to the Preliminary Report:
UROP, the Subcommittee Charge, and Deliberations to Date

Over the past six Academic Years, the Provost’s Office has administered the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP), a continuation of a program previously housed in the Honors College. The centerpiece of this program has been a twice-yearly competition for research funding (in November for funding for the following Winter and Spring/Summer semesters and in March for funding for the following Fall). These competitions awarded roughly 60 grants per year (30 per competition) – each allocating up to \$2300 to students for expenses and/or as a stipend, and \$750 for research expenses of a faculty mentor (with no additional award to any faculty member mentoring more than one student) – totaling almost \$180,000 in grants in 2017-18.

On January 19, 2019, the Provost’s Office announced that it was terminating the bi-annual competitions and was planning to reallocate the funds to “partnerships” with other units of the University that sponsored undergraduate research. “A deeper examination of the situation led us to conclude that many talented undergraduate students would be better supported in undergraduate research opportunities with a broader array of supports than UROP is able to provide through an award mechanism.” This announcement drew an immediate negative reaction from various stakeholders, including both the Student Senate and the Academic Senate Policy Committee, which had not been consulted in advance.

In response to that reaction, the Provost’s Office withdrew its statement and promised to reinstate the UROP competition in September 2019 (having, however, skipped the second of the two previously projected 2018-19 competitions). That competition was held in September for Fall and Winter 2019-20 funding, drawing a record 114 applications. The UROP office decided to award a full 60 grants at that time. There remain funds unspent from the previous semester’s cancelled competition, and to date, there has been no word on whether that money will be carried forward to allow for a further competition for Spring/Summer 2020 funding.

Meanwhile, for Fall 2019, the Academic Senate Policy Committee established this Subcommittee to “collaborate with Senior Associate Provost Monica Brockmeyer on plans for the ongoing operation and expansion of the current Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP), with the aim of generating additional research opportunities for students. The

Subcommittee ... shall make recommendations including, but not limited to, recommendations for funding increases and new funding sources; criteria for selection of funded projects; and eligibility requirements for students.” Pursuant to this charge, the Subcommittee has held meetings with Dr. Brockmeyer and with members of her staff who have responsibilities in this area: Darryl Gardner, Director of Operational Excellence, Student Success; and Matthew Orr, Student Success Program Coordinator. The Subcommittee has solicited and has been provided with statistical and qualitative information about the past practices involving the bi-annual UROP funding competitions.

The Subcommittee held a total of four meetings in Fall 2019 (09/18; 10/02; 11/13; 12/04). Its work was suspended in October as a result of some confusion over the allocation of roles between itself and an “Action Team” assembled by Dr. Brockmeyer’s office to “re-imagine UROP.” In response to concerns expressed by the Policy Committee about overlapping competences, Dr. Brockmeyer suspended the operations of the Action Team on November 4, 2019, so as to allow the Subcommittee to proceed with its charge in advance of further efforts of the Provost’s Office.

At its December 4 meeting, the Subcommittee resolved to issue a Preliminary Report to express its concerns and recommendations on the basis of information thus far available. Since the Provost’s Office has not made any affirmative proposal of a way forward – having withdrawn its previously announced plans, which had included a reallocation of UROP funding to the McNair Scholars Program – the Subcommittee is not presently in a position to evaluate any specific blueprint for changes to the existing program. It has, however, decided to express its general views herein, so as to give the Provost’s Office an opportunity to respond. The Subcommittee intends to continue in existence in order to monitor the Provost’s Office’s next steps and to give input as that Office sets about devising a specific plan.

The Importance of Retaining the Bi-Annual UROP Competition

The Subcommittee is strongly of the view that, at minimum, the principal features of the existing competition – its funding levels and the awarding of research grants in bi-annual competitions – should be maintained. Wayne State’s comparative advantage in undergraduate education as a major research university lies largely in its capacity to make available to undergraduates the opportunity to work with nationally- and internationally-prominent scholars in the widest range of academic fields. Although delivering a mere 60 undergraduate research grants per year at a university of this size is far too modest a contribution to this aspect of the university’s mission, the UROP competition helps to retain promising students who might otherwise be drawn to transfer elsewhere and helps to promote the university’s regional and national profile. (Research is presented not only at an annual on-campus conference, but also at the annual National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR), for participation in which the UROP program has dedicated other funds.)

Students from many different disciplines have attested to the importance of their UROP-funded research projects to their present academic programs and to their undertaking of subsequent graduate and professional programs. The Provost's Office does not dispute these successes, lamenting only that "while UROP students had very strong academic outcomes, we had not yet attracted into UROP a broad segment of the undergraduate population" (Dr. Brockmeyer's Message of 1/17/2019). It would be highly unwise to abandon an important and successful program because the very fact of it being under-resourced has impaired its ability to extend its benefits more widely. Rather, these are successes on which we need to build.

Moreover, the Subcommittee is convinced that holding a competition only once a year, as Provost Office representatives have suggested, would undermine the value of the program. The bi-annual structure well serves students who develop research interests while they are taking courses in a given semester and are moved to pursue an independent project in the following semester. A once-a-year competition seems likely to arrive too soon or too late for many promising students. Moreover, Spring/Summer funding is of special importance to students who would seek to perform research either abroad or in another part of the country – opportunities that do not ordinarily present themselves during the standard academic year. The past practice of holding one competition in November for funding for the following Winter and Spring/Summer semesters and in March for funding for the following Fall, although apparently an administrative challenge for the Provost's Office, seems well worth the allocation of administrative resources – which might usefully be augmented by the creation of a standing faculty committee to run the competitions.

The Need to Increase Inclusivity

The Subcommittee shares the Provost's Office's concern to broaden access to undergraduate research funding, with special attention to traditionally under-represented and disadvantaged groups of students. More effort can be put into recruiting students of different backgrounds. A place to start may be direct cooperation with the academic units that have a special mission directed at under-served parts of the community (e.g., the Department of African American Studies, the Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies), though of course, these are not by any means the exclusive avenues for reaching students of color, first-generation college students, and other groups who may thus far be inadequately represented.

The Subcommittee notes that the present practice of keeping statistics may substantially understate the diversity of UROP grant applicants and recipients. Although the statistics definitely point to a need to increase African-American and Latino/a/x participation (a combined total of 18 out of 114 applicants and 10 out of 59 grantees in the latest round), the number of "white" students (67 out of 114 applicants and 32 out of 59 grantees in that round) is likely to be misleading as an indicator of homogeneity, since no distinctions (e.g., first-generation immigrant from Southeastern Europe, first-generation college student) are drawn within that category, and since students of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) origin are classified for statistical purposes as white. Insofar as there may be a concern that the existing program is dominated by

traditionally privileged sectors, the evidence is at best equivocal on that point. (In general, the diversity of this University's student body is systematically understated by the use of standard, government-mandated markers.)

The Need for Additional Funding Sources: OVPR and Development

The Subcommittee and the Provost's Office are in full agreement about the need to make more resources available for undergraduate research. The Subcommittee notes with disappointment that the Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR), which is possessed of substantial resources, seems to have been resistant to the Provost Office's entreaties for contributions to undergraduate research funding. Undergraduate research may not fit the OVPR's understanding of the University's research mission, but to neglect this piece would be shortsighted even in the absence of any direct impact on professional research outputs. Demonstrating the educational worth of a national research institution is important to Wayne State's ability to draw both tuition and tax dollars, both of which play a role in the research enterprise. A small investment of OVPR funds on this project would be money prudently spent.

Another neglected source of undergraduate research funding is Development. As it stands, there is not even a box for donors to the University to check to allocate donations to undergraduate student research. Undergraduate research presents substantial fundraising opportunities, as alumni and others can be persuaded by the impressiveness of student achievements that their dollars should support the unique educational opportunities that a major research university affords to students who would otherwise tend to miss out. Student researchers and their faculty mentors might be featured in outreach events in the community, demonstrating the impressiveness of both. (The Subcommittee's chair engaged a few years ago in such an off-campus event with a colleague and two of their students-in-common, the latter providing striking testimony of their activities and of the value of their interactions with faculty researchers.) UROP should have a prominent place on the University's fundraising agenda.¹

The Problem of UROP Grants Counting Against the Financial Aid Cap

A continuing issue looming over the UROP competitions has been the grant's implications for students' financial aid packages. The grants are delivered as lump-sum payments – even when they reimburse research/travel expenses – and count toward the cap on financial aid under formulas that are based on federal limitations of student aid to an individually calculated “cost of attendance.” This is a highly complex and seemingly opaque phenomenon,

¹ Wayne State's distinctive status as a research university with a mission of inclusivity underlies our being listed as among “The 10 Best ‘Hidden Gem’ Public Universities In the US,” <https://collegegazette.com/the-10-best-hidden-gem-public-universities-in-the-us/?utm_source=LinkedIn&utm_medium=Direct&utm_campaign=Social+Media&utm_content=>>.

where the Financial Aid office has some leeway to recalculate the “cost of attendance” to prevent financial aid money from being recaptured from the grantee. Although the UROP office has worked with Financial Aid to resolve the larger share of these problems, difficulties remain. In this past cycle, 15 of the 60 grantees needed this kind of intervention: 4 succeeded in having their financial aid cap raised, but others had to accept loan reduction in lieu of payment (which is advantageous to students, but not always optimally so); at least 2 were unable to accept the full award amount; and 1 was obliged to decline the award altogether. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that the associated uncertainties have deterred financially-disadvantaged students from pursuing these grants at all.

There is a pressing need to investigate alternatives for addressing this problem. At minimum, more needs to be done to make prospective applicants aware of the process by which research grants can be reconciled with their financial aid packages to avoid an outright “grab-back” of their awards. (One idea mentioned was a consent box on the application, where students can elect to have Financial Aid review their packages to make adjustments that would accommodate an UROP award if granted.) But there may also be ways of avoiding the problem by having a unit of the University pay a student’s actual research and travel expenses directly, rather than issuing a lump-sum payment to the student that is reportable as aid. Such solutions would undoubtedly involve administrative complexities and burdens, but the importance of finding such solutions justifies such efforts. Since other universities undoubtedly face identical problems, attention should be given to consulting with counterpart programs at other institutions to identify solutions that these programs may have developed.

The Need for More Systematic, Faculty-Led Coordination of the Competitions

One weakness that the Subcommittee has identified in the existing UROP competition scheme is attributable to the burden that this scheme currently places on Provost Office staff members. The staff recruits faculty volunteers on an *ad hoc* basis to score research proposals that are sorted into five categories: Arts & Humanities (9 awarded out of 13 applications in 2019); Behavioral & Social Sciences (13 of 25); Engineering (12 of 19); Life Sciences (16 of 44); and Physical Sciences (9 of 13). Three faculty members in each area score proposals without meeting to deliberate; the staff aggregates scores and takes the matter from there, with an eye to assuring some rough balance of awards among the disciplinary areas. There is no standing faculty committee, either to assess the applications, to deliberate collectively about award decisions, to review student work product (or even individual faculty-mentor reports), or to oversee the process as a whole.

Among the challenges facing the program is the need to establish clearer standards for the evaluation of proposals. Subcommittee members who have served as *ad hoc* volunteers have noticed that, alongside applications clearly arising from the student’s own initiative and (albeit often less-than- polished) ingenuity, there are applications that appear to have been written by faculty desirous of undergraduate research assistants on their own fully-worked-out projects. Although working on pieces of existing faculty research projects may be a legitimate and fully

worthy student research experience, more thought needs to go into what limits on faculty participation are appropriate. There is some concern that the currently specified limitations on faculty input into the applications may be “honored in the breach,” and that the current system’s design does not lend itself to enforcing these limitations.

The above-mentioned problems strike the Subcommittee as amenable to a solution that would reduce rather than increase the administrative burden on the Provost’s Office staff: the creation of a Standing Faculty Committee, staffed by faculty members selected (in whole or in part) by the Academic Senate. This Committee would assess the applications, deliberate collectively to arrive at award decisions, evaluate the resulting student work, and establish accountability for any failures to fulfill the terms of the grant. In addition, this Committee would be in a position to monitor the program’s processes and outcomes and to propose solutions to the numerous challenges arising from time to time.

The Need for Greater Coordination of University-Wide Undergraduate Research Opportunities

Although UROP’s signature project has been the funding of a relatively limited number of ambitious undergraduate student research projects, UROP has a wider mission of furthering undergraduate student research across the campus. The Subcommittee agrees with the Provost’s Office about the desirability of coordinating the efforts of the many units, perhaps ultimately through a consolidated application process on one website that would make students aware of all of the available options.

There is also a need to coordinate preparatory sessions in the lead-up to the application periods, so that prospective applicants have a greater awareness of what counts as academically rigorous research in various disciplines and of how to prepare oneself to undertake such research. And at minimum, there is a need to assure sufficient lead time between the announcement of a given competition and the due date of applications, so that students (and their faculty mentors) are in a better position to take advantage of opportunities presented. (Too-short notice has been acknowledged to have been a problem in regard to the September 2019 competition.)

In addition to funded opportunities, there are innumerable (and inexpensive) opportunities to further undergraduate research by way of Directed Study credit or even for zero-credit certification on student transcripts. Where appropriate course numbers or transcript notations are currently unavailable, the appropriate University units should be tasked with filling these gaps.

The Need for a Spring/Summer 2020 UROP Competition to be Announced as Soon as Possible

As mentioned above, as of this date, there has still been no word about the carrying forward of monies from the suspended portion of the 2018-19 competition to finance a competition for Spring/Summer 2020 funding. As noted, Spring/Summer research projects are

especially important, given the greater flexibility of schedules and the far greater scope for research travel during that period. The Subcommittee urges that all efforts be undertaken to make the Spring/Summer research funding a reality.

Moreover, as also mentioned above, lead time is of the essence. This is especially true for Spring/Summer funding, as students and faculty need to know well in advance their options for allocating their time in that period – all the more so, if the projects will involve travel abroad. In the past, it was Thanksgiving-period competition that yielded funding for both Winter and Spring/Summer of the following year, whereas the Spring Break-period competition was for Fall funding. For many potential applicants, the Spring Break period may be too long to wait for a competition for a Spring/Summer award. The Subcommittee therefore urges that an announcement of a competition for Spring/Summer 2020 awards be made imminently, so that the earliest possible decision process can occur, subject to the need for a reasonable interval between the announcement and the application due date.

Summary of Preliminary Recommendations

In sum, the Subcommittee makes the following preliminary recommendations:

1. The principal features of the existing competition – its funding levels and the awarding of research grants in bi-annual competitions – should, at minimum, be maintained.
2. Special efforts should be made to recruit students of a wide range of backgrounds, starting (though not ending) with plans for direct cooperation with the academic units that have a special mission directed at under-served parts of the community.
3. The Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR) and the Development Office should be vigorously pressed to help expand the financial resource base for undergraduate research.
4. Efforts should be redoubled to find ways (in consultation with counterpart programs at other universities) to mitigate both actual and perceived adverse impacts of UROP funding on students' financial aid packages.
5. A Standing Faculty Committee, staffed by faculty members selected (in whole or in part) by the Academic Senate, should be established to oversee the UROP competitions, with duties including, but not limited to, assessing the applications, deliberating collectively about award decisions, reviewing student work product and faculty-mentor evaluation reports.
6. Efforts should continue in the direction of coordinating the undergraduate student research programs of the various units, especially in regard to establishing a schedule of sessions preparing students to undertake research, and with an eye to an eventual consolidated application process that would effectively make students aware of all of their available options.

7. A competition for Spring/Summer 2020 awards should be announced immediately, so that the earliest possible decision process can occur, subject to the need for a reasonable interval between the announcement and the application due date.

Having issued these preliminary recommendations, the Subcommittee will remain in operation. We look forward to engagement with the Senior Associate Provost for Student Success and her staff in furtherance of the implementation of these recommendations.

APPENDIX A: Minutes of the UROP Subcommittee Meetings (09/18; 10/02; 11/13; 12/04)

APPENDIX B: Superseded January 17, 2019 Memorandum from Senior Associate Provost Monica Brockmeyer on “Changes to the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP)”

APPENDIX C: Data on the UROP Awards Competition Provided by the Provost’s Office