

University Research Council
Approved Minutes
November 8, 2013

Present: Jeffrey Arterburn, Matthias Burkardt, Rebecca Creamer, Muhammad Dawood, Richard Fortin, Stephen Hanson, Shanna Ivey, Cathy Kinzer, Cathy Ortega-Klett (for Sam Fernald), Jill McDonald, Mary O’Connell, Hari Sankaran, Robert Smits, Steve Stochaj, Dennis Zaklan (for Joanne Esparza)

Absent: Rani Alexander, Susan Beck, Vimal Chaitanya, O.D. Hadfield, James Robinson, Mingjun Wei

Guests: Greg Fant, Andrew Pena, Dorothy Anderson, Kathy Agnew, Pamela Roggow, Loui Reyes, and Gary Rayson

1. Human Resources Visit URC

Deputy Provost Greg Fant, HR Asst Vice President Andrew Pena, Director HR Admin Dorothy Anderson, Asst Director Kathy Agnew, and Director HR Ops Pamela Roggow met with URC to provide handouts and discuss talking points that were provided to them earlier in the week. Ms. Anderson suggested going over the handouts as a good starting point.

The first topic included concerns of the URC with the limited salary range for hiring research staff – particularly post docs and graduate students - to support grants especially when a higher salary was budgeted and approved by the funding agency. In response, Ms. Agnew said there is no specific range limit for post doc positions but HR tries to remain within an equity area unless justification is provided based on the discipline or unique research being performed. Graduate students have no maximum salary range; non-exempt staff have no real flexibility and are subject to union policy; however exceptions for exempt staff may be considered with justification.

As far as hiring staff for funded program support, she gave an example of the position “program coordinator” that is a level 6 on the pay scale. Some staff in these positions have master’s degrees and if a request to hire a new person for program coordinator comes in at a higher salary request, it can become an equal salary equity issue. This requires justification. A potential solution suggested was to create more categories. Several years ago an effort was made at NMSU to reduce the numerous positions and it was suggested that perhaps broadening the categories would help. Ms. Anderson said they would be happy to meet with a group of URC that could provide specific classifications that are causing these issues and expand them.

Another comment included confusion and/or frustration with equity measure. If a person goes across job titles, they are measuring equity of grant hired employees vs. permanent state funded employees. The state funded staff members have job security, a future, and staff members on soft money realize they might not have a job a year out. The commenter went on to say that NMSU researchers are leaders in their fields and not only write the grants that get

funded but also serve on panels that review other grants. These grants are written with competitive salaries and reviewed and approved by peers, then they go through federal agencies and after every hurdle is cleared, they come back to NMSU and the researcher is not able to offer a competitive salary to someone who has a short time-line. Quite often that means the researcher is awarded money that NMSU ends up returning to a federal agency.

It was suggested that a different way of determining equity of soft money employees separate from the state funded employees would be good and that perhaps that's where separate classifications would be helpful. Ms. Anderson said HR could start by providing URC with a list of the research specific titles, then a group of URC could study the titles and decide where the areas are that have the most issues. She said HR could then look to see how to expand that to meet the researchers' needs by addressing the most critical.

To circumvent some of the issues, some faculty researchers take the amount of funding available to hire someone, then go to HR to see what title/position fits the salary. For one researcher, it is not always a scientist position but a program coordinator that poses issues. Ms. Agnew said HR created a whole series in that area with program coordinator being the lowest level - level 6 - and others such as program specialist, program specialist senior, program manager, program manager senior, and program operations director, the whole series of which are geared towards research. Past Chair Shanna Ivey suggested there is still a disconnect in that when HR is asked about a position or whether a person can hire at a certain level, the answer is no. She gave an example of a situation that occurred in her department and said the research faculty need more options and more conversation on how it works.

HR has options for hiring including a "term" position that is benefit eligible for a finite period of two years and can go three years with approval. This allows time to establish a permanent position. Limitations to this include no sick leave and annual leave has to be used or it is lost when terminated. Ms. Agnew said she feels that if URC looks at the restricted funded positions or classifications they have created, that HR with URC's assistance can come up with a better system. Ms. Anderson said HR will send them to Chair Hanson and then after URC review, will go back to HR so they can address these positions.

Another topic for HR included Past Chair Ivey saying 3% increases are built into the proposals and then researchers aren't able to provide them to their staff supporting the grant. She would like to see some resolution with this.

Chair Hanson said that there is an appreciation of the rules and requirements HR has to meet; however the general feeling regarding state funded positions is there is a big campaign to maintain equity. The research side of the campus brings in about a third of the revenue to NMSU and accounts for all of the overhead generated. If researchers can maximize their ability to use that money to get the best staff and retain them with raises, it makes it easier to be productive. A URC member suggestion was to give them the raise by putting more money in the next grant and create job at a higher level so that the "raise" is already worked into the salary.

A question was asked about reclassification of research funded employees and how often they occur. HR performs reclassifications throughout the year for restricted funded positions. The proposal usually indicates it's hiring a person with the raise anticipated, without assigning extra duties to reclassify.

HR was asked about clarification on the affordable care act related to students and grad students. HR said the expectation is that any employee working above an average of 29 hours per week is entitled to insurance and NMSU compliance is expected by January 1st. HR has looked through all the policies and procedures and while not compliant with some positions they're still tracking and trying to comply with the FTE. The expectation is the penalty will go into effect in January 2015. They continue to hope the government will change the regulations so graduate students will not fall into this category but this is how they are currently approaching this.

Some graduate assistants work twenty hours a week during the school year and full time during the summer which is similar to the teaching assistants, and there is not a problem. HR said what could pose a problem is if the grad school dean provides a waiver during the fall or spring semester and the student is allowed to work twenty five hours after work, and then full time during the summer.

HR has found that there are a number of student intern programs that last six months and are full time so departments are actually hiring a student for that particular position. They are up front saying they're going to create this position at the thirty-one percent rate versus having to hire at seventy five percent. If you hire a student and hours worked average thirty hours a week or more, you are required to hire them into a benefit eligible position for an additional six months whether you need them or not, at .75 FTE, paying benefits at 32% fringe. If they decline the position then they can't have another student job for six months or longer than the previous employment period, whichever is less. HR is trying to establish a way to review what a person's average number of hours of work is so that if they are approaching the threshold, you can be notified so the number of hours a person is working can be decreased.

Response from the research side indicated this is critical because it can reduce productivity if the student cannot work. HR wanted to clarify that grad assistants are not tracking hours based on FTE. They are an FTE of .5 which is approximately 20 hours a week so if the hours are fluctuating, that is fine as long as it averages about twenty hours a week or less. HR also suggested that if it looks like the student is getting near twenty-nine hours, to hire another student(s) reducing overall hours to keep everyone within a safe range.

In closing, Ms. Anderson asked URC to see the handouts she provided which included a document with salary levels for students employment, exempt graduate assistants (RA, TA & CA) and for exempt and nonexempt staff; a document that listed the HRS team partners, an organizational chart for HRS, a document that provided email and telephone numbers for HRS staff starting with Assistant Vice President Andrew Pena and a summary of solutions to the issues that were provided to HR in preparation of this meeting (see attached for record). She said HRS is very happy to meet with any URC member individually and want to know

of any questions about soft money hires and classifications so they can address the issues researchers are facing.

2. Graduate School Interim Dean and Council Chair

Loui Reyes, Graduate School Interim Dean, and Graduate Council Chair Gary Rayson met with URC to discuss ways to increase graduate student enrollment and other topics specific to graduate students and researchers. Dean Reyes told URC that he is meeting with HRS Vice President Dr. Pena monthly and has already started to look at payroll issues. He said graduate students are his first priority and he is changing the graduate handbook to coincide with the HRS policies and procedures. He said that in some colleges graduate student are more of an apprenticeship and in other colleges/department, they are in the lab and as a result, can't be treated the same. We currently have the one size fits all and they can't always be treated the same. He is hopeful that the two of them can come to solutions but he feels meeting with the URC is very helpful and he hopes to bring back to URC the accomplishments they work through.

Dr. Rayson said one of the biggest difficulties is that there wasn't a one-stop-shop for graduate students and now Admissions, Registrars and the Grad School are across the hall from each other in Educational Services building which makes things much more accessible, especially when looking for a solution. He feels significant progress has been made. Dr. Rayson told URC if there are issues, they should be sent to the Graduate Council as he has a good relationship with them and we can work on the policy.

He brought up a topic of concern which included foreign students and the TA. These students are usually hired as teaching assistants and a good fraction of them fail the ITA screening. The first semester they are not allowed to contact students. Dr. Rayson is working with International Programs and to be able to incorporate the skills ITA has. He said it needs to be taught because it is one thing to be able to speak a language and entirely another to understand it. Our international grad students are growing tremendously with some of our departments at almost 100% international.

Another concern is the package offered graduate students at NMSU. Other universities offer better packages so it makes it difficult to retain students. A ploy some universities use is decrease the stipend so that the stipend offered is lower but the tuition is waived. Other schools pay a large part of the tuition. In Texas a waiver is offered up to a certain dollar amount. NMSU is looking at what other schools are doing and how we can become more competitive. Within some departments a tuition waiver is given to all grad students in which out of state tuition is waived and they pay in state tuition.

With the tuition fellowship the difficulty is the time order of events. As you're making a student an offer, you've often lost the tuition fellowship when another University makes them a more attractive offer. Another issue is the flat rate of tuition. There are certain communication courses that physics international students face because they cannot afford to take twelve credits so their whole course of study can be delayed. The deadlines are not soon enough in terms of application of tuition fellowship and it depends upon the department and the individual recruitment. The ideal situation is to find the candidate before an offer is made

and include that fellowship with the offer. The tuition fellowships are distributed in many different ways and there are about 30.

A question was posed that if a researcher gets a stellar A-plus student applying, do they have to reapply for that every year. Dean Reyes replied “no.” Every year they must show they have maintained their GPA and a few other factors. If the deadline needs to be pushed up, the Grad School can certainly do that but they are getting mixed messages. Right now we have two different deadlines, a March 1st deadline and an April 1st deadline and last year with those two deadlines, we received very few applicants and the fellowship committee refused those.

Another question was posed regarding the 30 fellowships. Are they total for the university or are they new fellowships. Dean Reyes said he didn’t know the answer to that but he would find out.

Regarding a fulltime graduate student’s credits, if they were raised from nine to twelve hours, would that be a big burden? That would allow a graduate student to get a part of a tuition waiver. Dr. Rayson replied that last year there was a memorial through Faculty Senate that supported changing the graduate catalogue so that nine hours was a cap on tuition of two fifteen hours so it would be the same tuition rate between nine and fifteen hours. The administration has decided that it’s more of a memorial issue so they didn’t have to do anything. This caused a road block and we need to explain to the administration that this is really the best change of policy in NMSU’s interest. A separate memorial to place the graduate students on a list so that their first paycheck would be received after the first pay period paralleled this memorial and had the same response by the university. He said the overwhelming consensus of the faculty was that this was wrong.

How does one get an undergraduate course to count towards a student’s PhD when the student has been asked to take it? This is a common problem with the microbiology classes that Past Chair Ivey assigns her grad students to take place. Oftentimes even though we have done our part the graduate services have rejected it. It was suggested she write a very specific letter requesting this and send it to the Dean.

Chair Hanson said that when President Caruthers visited URC one main topic was to dramatically expand the number of graduate students. Dean Reyes said his concern is that we need a financial model. As we grow we need to recognize and reward those individual departments with the larger grad student population, but we also need to make sure that it’s for the good of the whole.

Dean Reyes went on to say that he would prefer if that money would be used for PhD’s because there are labs in desperate need of equipment and furniture. He wants to put the energy in enrolling a master’s program and as the revenues increase, then that could be put towards PhD programs. In working with Dr. Chaitanya he has proposed that upon students completing their comprehensive they could fund a twenty hour GA and mentor them on how to write grants. That twenty hour GA would increase the chances of a grant being written. He said that grad students on campus fall into two different categories: research labs (funded

and supported), and a masters in teaching. Grad students in the sciences are a cost rather than a surge in revenue. He feels that if grad student numbers were increased, funds would be needed to hire them and a more streamlined process would aid us in that. Just increasing the number of grad students in general puts pressure on the staff and if grants written are increased, we have to make sure our staff can still devote time to their classes and the education they provide.

A URC member in Arts and Sciences said all of the grant courses that take so much of their time is hard as they receive no credit for them and when their assignments are added up in teaching the only thing considered is what is a normal course.

Dean Reyes said that at this moment they are addressing these comments and having conversations about what to do. Changing doesn't always mean fixing, so they are trying to change it in a way that will be probable. Clarification is needed to know how to increase graduate programs. Many courses are revenue generators and easier to put people in seats but they aren't research based. He said he felt that advocating for the graduates is his main purpose as Dean. He has expanded his definition of success and invites URC to think of the process as well of the outcome for all of the graduate students at NMSU.

In closing, Dean Reyes told URC he appreciated them sharing their Friday afternoon with the Grad school and council, and he hopes to be invited back again. He would like to provide an update on how things are restructuring as they progress.

3. URC Website

Chair Hanson told members that a comment field is being added to the URC website and a button will be available for faculty members to contact the URC via email. The VPR office is working on this and it should become available during the spring semester.

4. CADRe Representative on URC

Because CADRe has the URC Chair as a member of their council, it was decided URC would not have a rep of CADRe attend URC meetings. The NMSU policy states clearly how the URC membership is composed and changes to this would require a new charter to be developed and approved through channels.

5. Meeting dates for the spring

These will be covered at the next meeting.

6. Other

URC Chair Elect to be discussed at the next meeting.