

Committee on External Relations and Research Policy Annual Report 2013-2014

The Committee on External Relations and Research Policy spent much of the 2013-2014 academic year on its research policy directive. This was considered critical given the continually shifting attitudes in Washington regarding government-sponsored research and the concerns that arose during the budget debates. The Committee also addressed conflict of interest policies, technology transfer, smoking policy and University communications with the public with a particular emphasis on newer social media efforts.

Research Policy and Trends in Federal Funding: Several members, particularly those at the Medical Center, felt that the Committee should open a discussion regarding the potential implications of decreased federal funding, particularly by NIH and NSF, on University-wide research activities. G. Michael Purdy, Executive Vice President for Research, addressed the Committee, saying that the university was preparing for the possibility of flat funding of research in the future. He noted that the magnitude of Columbia's research effort depends on federal support, which accounts for about one-quarter of the university's revenue, and that if that support decreases in the future, it will decrease Columbia's effort. Columbia is looking for alternate sources of support, he said, but there are no sources that can completely substitute for federal funding.

Rudina Odeh-Ramadan, Associate Vice President for Research Administration, presented data on overall University research funding to the Committee. According to Dr. Odeh-Ramadan, total University research awards (total costs) were \$901,200,000 in FY09 and \$887,200,000 in FY13. [Funding was higher in FY10 and FY11 as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.] The Committee was concerned about this roughly 1.5% decrease (in absolute dollars, approximately 10% when adjusted for inflation) in research funding and its implications for the University. Ross Frommer, Vice President, Office of Government and Community Affairs at CUMC; Loftin Flowers, Assistant Vice President, Government Affairs; and Nathan Robb, Project Coordinator, also discussed the University's lobbying and other efforts with regards to extramural research funding.

Some specific questions the Committee felt needs to be addressed are:

- 1) Does the University have an overall policy of how probable continued decreases in research funding will be addressed or will it be handled on a school-by-school or even department-by-department basis?
- 2) How is reduced availability of research funds affecting faculty productivity; for example, are faculty members now spending undue time writing grants to compete for funds rather than actually doing research or teaching?
- 3) How is reduced research funding affecting the morale of faculty, research staff and graduate students?
- 4) Does the University have plans to counter certain effects of this decrease, particularly at sites where "soft money" from research grants, rather than hard University funding lines, cover large portions of salary and fringe benefits?

5) If research operations are being curtailed due to decreased funding, are administrative operations being reduced accordingly?

Conflict of Interest Policy: Naomi Schrag, Associate Vice President, Research Compliance, updated the Committee on the University's Conflict of Interest Policy. The University-wide Policy was updated in 2009 and occasionally undergoes minor modifications to comply with federal regulations, for example by NIH. Ms. Schrag noted that there are two University committees to address and help manage potential conflicts of interest. She also discussed the Physician Payments Sunshine Act, which requires manufacturers of drugs, medical devices and biologicals that participate in U.S. federal health care programs to report certain payments and items of value given to physicians, which has required certain faculty members to disclose outside activities beyond the University-wide policy. The Committee realizes that the University's policies on conflict of interest need to be "fluid" in a constantly changing world, and Ms. Schrag said that she welcomed suggestions from the Committee.

Technology Transfer: Orin Herskowitz, Executive Director of Columbia Technology Ventures, provided the Committee with an excellent overview of the University's technology transfer, IP licensing and business start-up activities.

Smoking Policy: The Committee heard an update on campus smoking policy and noted that effectiveness would have to be evaluated over time.

University Communications: The Committee was introduced to Victoria Benitez, the University's Director of Communications for Community and Civic Initiatives. The Manhattanville initiative is her main focus. She discussed the University's efforts not to disturb the community, use clean construction practices and mitigate noise and noted that the Environmental Defense Fund has commended Columbia on its construction methods. Ms. Benitez also said her team was producing short stories about Columbia on the web and was trying to cover all the different schools at the University. At another meeting, David Stone, Executive Vice President for Communications, and members of his office updated the Committee on Columbia's communications effort and social media. They discussed the University's presence on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google+ and Instagram. He noted that his office has two fewer staff members than when he arrived at Columbia but that they were doing more with less. Mr. Stone also said that he sees a need to reinvent Columbia's home page on the Web.

Submitted by

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External Relations and Research Policy Committee 2013-2014

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