Minutes

UW School of Medicine and Public Health
Medical Education and Research Committee
3:00 PM April 14, 2008 – Room 4201 Health Sciences Learning Center

Members Present: Bill Busse, Cindy Czajkowski, Paul DeLuca, Norm Drinkwater, Tom Grist, Cindy Haq, Javier Nieto, Greg Nycz, Rick Moss, Mary Beth Plane, Patrick Remington, Gordon Ridley, Susan Skochelak

Members Absent: Sanjay Asthana, Molly Carnes, Susan Goelzer, Jeff Grossman, Jeff Stearns, George Wilding, Rod Welch

Guests: Jeff Walker

Staff: Tracy Cabot, Phil Davis, Cathy Frey, Ken Mount, Tonya Mathison, Karla Thompson, Eileen Smith, Shannon Sparks

The Committee was called to order by Chair Paul DeLuca at 3:07 p.m.

1. The draft minutes from the March 10, 2008 and the March 25, 2008 MERC meetings were presented. Both sets of minutes were approved unanimously without modification.

2. Announcements: Eileen Smith introduced two new staff members (Shannon Sparks, Program Officer for OAC, and Phil Davis, Public Relations).

   a. Smith announced a schedule change for the Board of Regents, which has resulted in some extra time to prepare the WPP 2007 Annual Report. The first draft of the report will be circulated to MERC members in May.

   b. Smith reported that OAC has passed a motion recommending an increase in the annual distribution from the endowment income for public health initiatives to 5%. She asked if MERC would also pass a motion to increase the annual distribution from the endowment income for medical education and research to 5%. Busse so moved and Skochelak seconded the motion. DeLuca noted that this increase was endorsed by the Executive Subcommittee. Ken Mount explained that the UW Foundation uses a long term rolling average rate of return to smooth the effects of the stock market. This average has been 4.25%, and approval of this motion would change the distribution rate to 5%. The motion was approved unanimously. Program staff will work with UW Foundation staff to effect the change.
3. **Executive Subcommittee:** DeLuca reported that the Executive Subcommittee had discussed a number of issues, two of which are outlined below. Other meeting topics included the changes to the New Investigator Program will be discussed later, as will the Human Proteomics progress report. The Executive Subcommittee tabled the report from the Cancer Disparities program, pending further information. Also, the Subcommittee endorsed the reviewers for the Collaborative Health Sciences Program applications.

a. Shared service for minority recruitment: DeLuca explained that although the SMPH presence in Milwaukee has increased over time, our activities are limited to specific research topics and are not well coordinated. This lack of coordination is becoming a hindrance to research. The Executive Subcommittee discussed the need to build a minority recruitment shared service in collaboration with CUPH and Aurora and possibly other entities. What we need to do is pull all these efforts together and empower ICTR and CUPH to do this comprehensively across all types of research. Such a center must develop collaborative relationships with the community. DeLuca noted that creation of a shared service will require significant effort, and may take some time to complete.

Bill Busse noted that most NIH grants require 30% of participants to be under-represented minorities, and it is hard to meet these recruitment goals in Madison. A shared service in Milwaukee would enhance our activities. He added that development of a shared service is a natural evolution of our existing pockets of activity, and will help us to break down recruitment silos. Pat Remington spoke in favor of development of the shared service. Mary Beth Plane suggested partnering with UW-Milwaukee and Marquette. She added that we must also encourage PIs to build the cost of this service into their grants applications. Gordon Ridley suggested that we have some UW-Madison faculty located in Milwaukee, because all the CUPH faculty are currently UW-Milwaukee based.

Cindy Haq expressed concern about the overlap in the development of a minority recruitment shared service with the activities in Sager’s Alzheimer’s proposal. DeLuca agreed, and asked for discussion of Sager’s proposal.

b. Alzheimer’s Disease Proposal: DeLuca said that we should uncouple these requests for the near term. Dean Golden has made a commitment to provide matching funds for a grant to Sager from the Bader Foundation. The Executive Subcommittee suggested transferring $250,000 from MERC to the Dean’s Strategic Fund, which will cover one year of the required match. During that time, MERC can work on the larger issue of developing a shared service. Greg Nycz moved that MERC transfer $250,000 to the Dean’s Strategic Fund for the purpose of providing matching funds to Sager’s Bader Foundation award; Remington seconded the motion. Nycz spoke in favor of buying time to work on the overall issue, and suggested that the Cancer Center, ICTR and CUPH take leadership. Haq asked what would happen at the end of the year, and DeLuca said that we hope to have the shared service in place. Plane suggested that Sager be involved in the development of the shared service, and that his project be used as a test case. There being no further discussion, the motion passed unanimously.
4. **Five Year Plan:** DeLuca began by noting that MERC has made considerable investments in infrastructure, but does not have a long-term mechanism for evaluation and continuation of that infrastructure. Mount presented an overview of MERC finances, including financial projections, how much money we have, and how can we use it. Mount explained three columns of funds: one-time startup funds, annual income from the endowment, and the endowed funds. Interest is earned on funds in each column. However, the bulk of the annual budget comes from interest that is earned on the endowment which is transferred to the spendable columns.

Mount focused attention on future projections, which are based on our current commitments and unexpended funds. For 2008, the expected income is $13.3M and predicted expenditures are $13.4M, so we are spending a bit more than we’re earning. Drinkwater asked if we expect to be able to convince UW Foundation to increase the distribution, as approved earlier, and Mount said yes. Susan Skochelak asked if we will have expended all the start-up funds by the end of 2008, and Mount said yes.

Mount next showed a listing of currently funded MERC and Strategic Allocation grants and their end dates. The top boxes showed the annual expenditures. The Dean has indicated that Strategic Allocation awards should be for start-up of strategic priorities and that grantees would be expected to obtain other funding for long term sustainability. The sum of these obligations and predicted expenses is $14.5M annually. Mount pointed out that MERC’s annual budget, based on the 5% distribution policy, is $14.2M annually. This information should be used as a starting point for the discussion of what grants may continue.

Drinkwater observed that the implication of this data is that if we continue the projects we’ve funded in the past, we won’t have enough funds to do anything new. Mount said that although we have cash reserves, in effect, that conclusion is correct. Drinkwater suggested that one way to gain a bit of annual income would be to move the MPH program to the SMPH budget, rather than continuing MERC support. Mount agreed, but the school must first receive funds from the state, Board of Regents, or campus to be able to take on the program.

DeLuca suggested that before we focus on individual programs, we should consider a draft reapplication process for infrastructure grants. For each of the infrastructure items we funded, it was understood that these could be ongoing expenses to MERC. However, where it is possible and appropriate, these programs should find external sources of funding to offset MERC support. DeLuca stated that MERC must have a process for reviewing the infrastructure grants. Each program must be evaluated to see if it is achieving its benchmarks, and to determine if there is value in continuing MERC support. Plane asked if this would be like a competitive grant renewal, and DeLuca said yes. Plane then suggested that community engagement be included as part of the reapplication process.

Busse suggested that the instructions for reapplication should explicitly state that projects may not be renewed, and ask the applicants to describe their plans in the event of loss of MERC funding. Busse asked what percentage of projects would be renewed, and DeLuca said that we will not use a set percentage; we will make decision based on the evaluation of existing programs.
Nycz observed that the Dean is not interested in renewing existing awards. He asked if those programs would then apply to MERC, and DeLuca said yes. Drinkwater added that those programs should be treated as if they are new proposals to MERC.

Drinkwater said that although we don’t want to set a pay line, we should discuss what fraction of the MERC budget we want to preserve for new initiatives. This decision will impact how many programs we can renew and what the funding levels could be for the renewal of existing programs. Skochelak said that this important topic will require more discussion, and she suggested forming a subcommittee to do this. We need to consider how support of existing programs relates to the initiatives developed by the three strategic planning subcommittees. DeLuca agreed that this draft document was meant to spark discussion, and further discussion will be forthcoming.

Remington suggested that we should review the original Five-Year Plan goals and consider how each grant did with respect to those goals. Plane reiterated that any renewal applications should have an expectation of becoming self-sustaining.

Skochelak asked how we will address conflicts of interest in the review process, and DeLuca suggested using non-MERC members as experts. Drinkwater said that conflict of interest should be raised in the context of development of the next Five-Year Plan, especially as we move away from the use of focus leaders as advocates for development of program areas. He added that in the next Five-Year Plan, the role of MERC may be different.

DeLuca closed the discussion by asking the group to send comments in writing to Smith. The creation of a subcommittee will be postponed until after further discussion.

6. Human Proteomics Program  Jeff Walker reported on the Human Proteomics program, describing the scientific progress to date, financial status, and barriers encountered. Walker described the efforts as a basic science research program that is working to establish partnerships with clinicians and others. The Human Proteomics program has a three-part mission which includes promoting research, education, and clinical applications of modern proteomics technologies. In order to achieve this mission, the group has established a core lab of high-tech tools necessary for systems biology research.

Walker addressed each part of the mission. He noted that the research aspect is going well, and he described a number of innovative experimental strategies, new collaborations, and grant applications. Walker stated that he is very pleased with the educational efforts of the Human Proteomics program, which provides hands-on training in proteomics methodology in addition to symposia, workshops, and journal clubs. The group is also preparing to submit a training grant application to NIH. Walker noted that the clinical applications portion of the mission has made less progress. They are in the planning stages for the creation of a joint clinical diagnostics lab, but are limited by funding and location.

Walker described the program staff, and reported that although MERC funds are providing the majority of their salary support, there is also some grant support for staff salaries.
Approximately $1.2M of the MERC award was used to purchase the two mass spectrometry machines, as outlined in the original proposal. Ongoing expenses include salaries, supplies, and service contracts on the machines. Walker explained that the program has some income from symposium fees, user fees, and grants. The Human Proteomics Program website lists the services provided and the fee structure for both internal and external users. These fees are competitive with those offered by the Biotech Center’s mass spectrometry facility.

Customers of the core facility include students and post-doctoral fellows from a number of basic science labs, as well as a few students working in the labs of physician-scientists. However, interactions with the clinical scientists have been limited to consultations and collaborations because clinical faculty don’t have the time or financial resources to use the facility themselves.

Walker described three barriers to progress for the program. The first barrier to overcome, is the concept of research “silos.” People are used to working with others in their own departments or disciplines, and each group has its own unique language and culture. Therefore it has been hard to get the groups talking to each other. Walker feels that the solution to this problem may be found through education, especially for students and trainees. He also described his efforts to get the four mass spectrometry facilities on campus working together.

Another major barrier is that of shrinking resources. He estimates that the core facility can earn about $100,000 per year, but that is not enough to be self-supporting. Walker feels that he can create sustainability through education and by leveraging multiple funding sources. Finally, Walker described the lengthy process through which the core facility was created, including remodeling space, purchasing and installing instruments, and hiring and training staff. Even though this process was facilitated by the SMPH leadership, it took about one and a half years from the time MERC made the award to get the program up and running.

Busse asked how the Human Proteomics facility differs from the facility at the Biotech Center, and how he could compete with them. Walker explained that the Biotech Center is strictly a fee for service operation, meaning that you give them a sample, they give you data, and they charge you for the service. On the other hand, the Human Proteomics facility trains the students and post-docs to use the instruments. Walker added that the Human Proteomics instruments compliment the other instruments on campus, and noted that users with specific needs have been referred to the other facilities. Busse observed that the users of the Human Proteomics core service will be limited to those faculty who have staff available to do the work. Walker said that one of the solutions is an upcoming four-day workshop to train the users.

Remington expressed concern that faculty director is not paying for the use of the facility. Walker responded that none of the facilities on campus are self-supporting in that regard, and most have direct support from the faculty director’s research grants. Plane asked how the program planned to serve customers (physicians) than can’t do the work themselves, and Walker explained that he had applied for ICTR grant funding to increase the capacity of the larger machine so that it could quickly process samples from clinicians. Even though his proposal had matching funds from industry partners, the grant was not funded by ICTR.
There being no further questions, Walker and Moss left the room. Because DeLuca had to leave, Drinkwater chaired the remainder of the meeting.

Drinkwater opened the discussion by noting that the Human Proteomics Program is not functioning as a core facility as originally proposed. For example, cost recovery of only 10% is not realistic. However, the program is doing very well in educating students and fellows. Drinkwater observed that there seems to be some mixture of this program with the individual research of the faculty director. He also stated that MERC support ends in about one year.

Remington expressed concern about the apparent conflict of interest between the needs of the program and Walker’s own research. As it stands, the Human Proteomics mass spectrometry facility does not seem like a shared service. He added that in any review of a shared service, the co-mingling of the director’s research with the operations of the facility would be problematic. Grist suggested that Walker would benefit from advice and guidance in how to operate a core facility.

There was general agreement about the strength of the educational component of the Human Proteomics program. Czajkowski suggested that it could even be an example of the type of educational opportunities for graduate students and postdocs that we would want to see in the next Five Year Plan. However, she was concerned about the response to the question regarding working with physician-researchers.

Skochelak reminded the group that in the original proposal to MERC, the Human Proteomics facility was described as a shared service that would become self-sustaining after three years. As it stands now, they do not appear to be on track to meet that goal. Smith clarified that the goal was to support the operating budget though user fees and grants by year four.

Nycz asked about the benchmarks for biomarker discovery, which were included in the original proposal. Those biomarkers were described as having significant impact in communities, but no mention of that type of activity was made in the progress report. Busse observed that the program has two major goals, which are user education and development of a core facility dedicated to research. Walker seems to be interpreting those goals differently than MERC. Busse added that it might be useful to suggest developing this facility as a core lab for ICTR.

Drinkwater said that MERC needs to provide constructive feedback to Walker, to clarify our expectations for the coming year. He suggested that our response include praise for the educational efforts, but include a statement that he has fallen short of expectations with regards to development of a shared service. The response should also state that MERC is concerned that the Human Proteomics Program will have negligible impact on translational research.

Moss returned to the room.

6. NIP changes: Drinkwater explained that the changes to the New Investigator Program RfP were discussed extensively by the Executive Subcommittee. A minor word change in the first paragraph (changed and to or) makes the research spectrum inclusive, but does not require one proposal to bridge all the parts of the spectrum.
More substantive changes were suggested to the proposal review criteria on page 3, in response to the change in the mix of investigators applying to the program. The criteria were revised last year, and perhaps went too far in emphasizing interdisciplinary or collaborative research with immediate impact. The Executive Subcommittee suggested that the review criteria should match our goals, with an emphasis on scientific excellence.

Nycz expressed concern about the changes, saying that we have gone too far in the opposite direction by eliminating the criteria for interdisciplinary or collaborative research and community impact. Drinkwater explained that the target group of applicants is new faculty, who are not yet collaborative because they will not be successful in establishing their labs and getting tenure. Nycz asked if this situation is at odds with NIH roadmap, and Drinkwater explained that the roadmap is applied broadly, and includes many established researchers. New researchers must develop their own expertise before collaborating.

Javier Nieto agreed with Drinkwater regarding the rationale for changing the criteria, but suggested that we continue to include wording about interdisciplinary or collaborative research with the words “if applicable.” Skochelak agreed, and said that by removing the words interdisciplinary or collaborative, we give permission to reviewers to ignore those concepts. Drinkwater suggested a new criterion, “As applicable, the proposal has a direct impact on communities.”

Members were asked to send specific suggestions to Smith, and a final decision will be made at the May MERC meeting.

7. CHSP reviewers: Smith circulated a confidential list of reviewers for the Collaborative Health Sciences Applications. She showed two versions of a score sheet, and members agreed to use the version that allocates points based on the section, rather than by individual question. The sections are Collaboration, Objective and Scientific Quality, Impact / Application, Transformation, and Applicant Qualifications.

On a separate issue, Smith circulated a revised version of the strategic plan subcommittee recommendations, which included the points from our last discussion. She asked members to read the new document and be prepared to discuss it at the May MERC meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by:
Tracy L. Cabot, Recorder