

MEETING NOTES
I²SL University Alliance Group (UAG) Conference Call/Webinar
August 27, 2014, 2PM EDT

Participants (*denotes I²SL members):

*Wendell Brase, UC Irvine
*Allen Doyle, UC Davis
Chuck Frost, UC Berkeley
*Amorette Getty, UC Santa Barbara
Gail Lee, UC San Francisco
Sarah Lowder, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
Klara Olofsdotter Otis, UCLA
*Brenda Petrella, Dartmouth College
*Kathy Ramirez Aguilar, UC Boulder (chair)
*Sudhakar Reddy, University of Michigan
Lisa Sanzenbacher, University of Illinois at Chicago
Sheryl Soucy-Lubell, UC Davis
Randy Smith, Duke University
*Phil Wirdzek, I²SL (co-chair)

Notes:

Kathy started the meeting by reviewing the UAG purpose and the group's current focus on the topic of connecting sustainability to research funding at universities.

Kathy then briefly reviewed the material covered at the last UAG webinar meeting held June 26, including a schematic of the flow of grant funds from the federal grantee to the university and the location in that flow that are missing sustainability connections. Overall the group members agree that federal grant policy and therefore the grant monies are not to encouraging or relating to any sustainability objectives.

The meeting also included some follow-up discussion from the last meeting on ICR (indirect cost recovery) funds or F&A. Kathy presented data from CU-Boulder estimating that ICR funds allocated for utilities were covering 50% of CU-Boulder's research lab energy costs even though most of those utilities were the result of federal research funding at one time or another. It was also noted that ICR funds are only allowed to be used for allowed costs associated with support of research on university campuses such as safety, building usage, maintenance, IT, administrative personnel, etc.

Discussion pointed out that universities could be defensive about any outside force pushing ICR funds to serve sustainability objectives, thereby reducing their control and appropriations of these funds. It was noted too that the federal grant process was a "zero-sum" game, meaning there would not be an increase in grant dollars from the feds to off-set that directed to sustainability investments.

Wendell Brase offered that a senior level university organization, the Council on Governmental Relations (COGR), has for decades interfaced with the federal grant-making agencies to address issues and policy development that were important to universities and their role in conducting federally funded research. It was Wendell's recommendation that the UAG be sensitive to their existence as COGR as a rather significant player that could hinder UAG's effort.

However, it was pointed out by Phil that this topic may not be a significant issue for COGR as nothing has percolated throughout the sustainability managers indicating movement on this or related topics. Generally, schools want to be “green” but without too much pain, if any (my words!).

Phil and Allen also noted that sustainability managers are putting in place many programs within their universities, specific to the research facilities and occupants, to increase awareness to energy and environmental objectives. In fact, many of those involved with the UAG are active in an I²SL effort to develop a Laboratory Continuous Performance Improvement Program (L-CPIP) that could serve as a guide for any sustainability manager regardless of the condition of their laboratory. This tool would be versatile and accommodating. Should the L-CPIP be introduced to COGR?

A comment that garnered the group’s interest was the idea or notion that the carbon footprint associated with the federal funded research on the university campus is not really the university’s, but the federal government’s because the government is paying for most of the research at research universities and thus it could be considered an extension of the federal government.

It was discussed that I²SL should find a way to approach COGR to find an ally, a partner to wrestle with this concept and the development of an appropriate federal policy. Since the meeting, Kathy has also learned about the Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP) which is an extension of the National Academies of Science and is about redefining the government university research partnership, where COGR is an affiliate member along with ~120 universities and ~10 federal agencies.

Allen suggested some new developments within the UC system that indicated a push to be recognized for its greening efforts as part of its grant competition with others. He suggested, and Wendell concurred, that a UC white paper on this topic might help develop the roadmap to affect the greening of the grant process. Allen will keep the group informed on this.

The idea of creating an initiative suggested on the call, to find the win-win scenario for university researchers, university administrators, and the federal grant maker.

Phil suggested that the group consider a “proposal” or development of a concept that utilized partnerships between funding agencies, utilities, and universities to identify the win-win opportunities. The idea is to recognize that utilities have money to support university lab energy efficiency improvements, the federal government could partner to leverage the utility’s funding, and that the university partners would show a reduction in ICR funds attributed to energy bills, EH&S improvements, lab infra-structure and process equipment.

One way to propose this idea is to raise the issue of “whose carbon footprint is it anyway?” and the need to “use tax dollars efficiently”. A series of very useful developments could also occur: 1) work with the state utility commissions to revise their incentive programs to address the laboratory condition (not fit labs into the commercial or residential programs), 2) to usher into practice a much greater level of metering and sub-metering within the lab, down to process equipment, and 3) actually demonstrate the off-set in ICR spending on lab infra-structure, equipment and utility payments and the opportunity to reduce the ICR percentage which could be assigned to actual grant work. Lab recipients could participate in sustainability through their research by purchasing more energy efficient equipment, more recycled content stuff, more sample size reducing equipment, disposing of old equipment, updating lab equipment (hoods, solvent recovery, green chemistry, etc.), and committing to utilizing the I²SL Laboratory Continuous Improvement Program.

On a different note, Kathy suggested pursuing a “top-down” approach whereby the federal granting agencies encourage including resource use considerations in grant proposals and spending of grant dollars on energy efficient equipment and green supplies. “Encouragement” rather than “requirement” avoids the need for development of rules and regulations, additional forms, govt employees to enforce, etc. that is time intensive and expensive to the federal govt and scientists do not want, but it also helps move towards more efficient use federal funds for research. Scientists are the ones who are writing grants and judging grants. If everyone was aware that this is what granting agencies wanted, because there is so much competition for grants and scientist will do what they can to give their proposal the best chance for funding. Kathy’s thoughts are that it would get conservation infiltrated into the culture and expectations of the science community. It also would help labs be compliant with HHS CFR on the books requiring green spending of grant dollars.

In general, the group agreed that the September 12 meeting should remain on track so we can learn more about this topic from the federal perspective. Ideas from this meeting could be presented. Phil and Kathy will come up with a plan and share it with the group which would be presented to the feds on September 12. That Sept 12 meeting will also contain significant time for suggestion and discussion of ideas.