



Establishing, Evaluating, and Changing Centers, Institutes, and Center-like Units

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(Policy history: Original guidelines adopted April 1997; Revision adopted February 2004; Revision adopted January 20, 2011; Revision to OVCERGE July 29, 2015.)

I. Introduction

The University encourages faculty to group together both across and within departments to promote shared teaching and research interests. Departments are the standard unit for organizing teaching, research and outreach in the University, as described in Faculty Policies and Procedures and other faculty legislation. Centers play a valuable function in organizing activities for groups of people who wish to work together in teaching and/or research and/or outreach on specialized topics. Some centers may be of enduring interest and could even be the basis of a new department in the future; others may exist for a more limited period.

The University Academic Planning Council (UAPC) is the governance body empowered to recognize centers as official units within the University. Approval is an advantage to the center because it assists with wide communication about the center's existence and activities and helps assure that other centers will not be established with a substantially overlapping mission or purpose. The approval process allows the University to better understand the nature and resource demands of academic activity that takes place outside the structure of departments.

Approved centers appear on a publicly available listing (<http://apir.wisc.edu/centers.htm>). This list of official centers provides a single point at which UW-Madison faculty, staff, and students may learn about the breadth and depth of center activity and consider opportunities to collaborate or coordinate efforts as appropriate. The list is also a reference to verify the formal legitimacy of a center and its connection to UW-Madison.

The approval process helps to ensure that all scholars who may be usefully involved in the work of a center are aware of its existence, may participate as appropriate, and may avoid redundancy of effort among centers. Since centers call upon a variety of university resources (space, faculty and staff time and effort, use of the university logo), it is important both to the center and the institution to understand how these resources are used, so they can be used wisely.

It is an institutional expectation that all active centers will be officially approved. To be formally recognized at UW-Madison, centers must be: (i) approved by the academic planning council of

the sponsoring school(s)/college(s), (ii) approved by the University Academic Planning Council, and (iii) reported to UW System Administration and the Board of Regents.

In most cases, approvals should be initiated before publicity appears about new centers; however, with the consent of the school/college dean, groups may use the terms “center” and “institute” provisionally for the purposes of seeking external funding. When funding is obtained, the group should seek and secure formal approval for the center in a timely manner. If an unapproved center comes to the attention of a dean or the provost, that office may, on behalf of the UAPC, request that the approval process be initiated promptly.

II. Defining Centers, Institutes and Center-like Units¹

Academic departments, as defined in Chapter 5 of Faculty Policies and Procedures, “consist of a group of faculty members recognized by the faculty and chancellor, and the Board of Regents, as dealing with a common field of knowledge or as having common or closely related scholarly interests.” They are the fundamental academic unit of the university and are charged with delivering the teaching, research and public service missions of the university. Tenure-track faculty positions reside in academic departments, and every faculty member has a primary departmental tenure home. Departments are intended to be long-lived units that provide stability to the academic life of the university. The authority and governance structure of departments are specified and share uniform features across the campus.

In contrast, the provision for centers as recognized units within the university encourages the formation of faculty groups around the scholarly interests and expertise that are not accommodated by the department structure. Centers provide a mechanism for faculty and staff to collaborate to develop depth in a defined range of problems within a discipline, or apply a broader vision to issues that cross traditional departmental structures. A center may provide a useful structure to develop emerging or multidisciplinary approaches to research or teaching, provide a relevant focus for service to external or internal constituencies, promote sharing of resources (e.g. equipment or laboratories), or otherwise support the focused scholarship of groups of faculty and staff in their areas of specialty.

Centers exhibit a wide range of appointment and governance structures. As a result of their focused missions, centers often will have a finite lifetime as the defining scholarly questions are resolved or evolve into new disciplines.

Some centers will have department-like characteristics when they are established, or they may evolve into department-like units over time. Department-like units are governed by Chapter 5 of FPP and should follow guidelines that apply to departments. The provost and the University Committee will resolve questions concerning the interpretation of FPP in relation to structures that have both center-like and department-like characteristics.

UW-Madison has more than 250 centers. Every five years, the provost and the office of Academic Planning and Analysis will work with the deans to review the list of centers to assure

¹ Throughout this document the term “center” will be used to designate centers, institutes, and other center-like units.

that it is complete and current and that appropriate approvals are sought for establishing, restructuring, renaming, or discontinuing centers.

III. Establishing New Centers

Official approval of centers is required because centers represent UW-Madison to the external community. The approval process involves peer review to assure that the center activity meets a defined academic need unmet by other structures, that faculty with an interest in the center activity have an opportunity to comment, and that the resource needs of and resource contributions to the center from various campus units are evaluated and vetted by appropriate governance bodies.

To begin the approval process, the group seeking approval should develop a short proposal of no more than ten pages. Proposals should address the following topics, and should include, but not be limited to, the questions raised below:

Purpose and Mission. What is the proposed purpose and mission for the new center? Explain why this activity could not be as successfully carried out in an existing department or center.

Name. The center's name² should convey the center's focus clearly, even to those outside the field. If the proposed name is similar to that of another unit (an existing school, college, department, academic program, or center), a letter of endorsement from the existing unit with the similar name should be appended to the proposal.

Organizational Structure and Governance. How will the center be organized? Will it operate within a department, within a school or college, as a unit of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Education, or across multiple schools and colleges? If it is interdisciplinary, how will interactions among departments and schools/colleges be managed? What will be its governance and administrative structure? How will its leadership be identified and to whom will its leadership report? What are the proposed responsibilities of the director? By what process is the director appointed, evaluated, and/or reappointed?

For centers that will be active in more than one school or college, the proposal must specify how the deans will coordinate responsibility for center oversight and review. Ideally, a lead school/college will be specified. If the center will operate such that there is no single lead dean, then the proposal should make the organizational structure and lines of responsibility very clear.

Financial Support. What kind of funding is needed for the center and what will be its source? If the identified support is lost, what are the prospects for continuation of the center? Please note in particular whether state funds, particularly new state funds, will support the center.

Administration of Grants. When faculty members who participate in a center succeed in grant-getting associated with the center's mission and activities, will the grants be administered by the center or the faculty member's home department? Will it be possible to share administration and in what cases could that be appropriate? What process will be used to

² The term "center" is preferred. Although "center" and "institute" were used interchangeably in the past, today the term "institute" is used for units that have an overarching academic or administrative role and wider academic interests than is characteristic of a focused research center. Furthermore, if "Wisconsin" is to be part of the name, it is appropriate to use "University of Wisconsin-Madison" to avoid confusion with other state entities.

assign or share credit for extramural funding between the center and the Primary Investigator's department?

Staffing. It is important to identify faculty and staff who plan to participate in the center's activities. By what mechanism is the participation of new members solicited? Where the interests of centers and departments intersect, it may be important to clarify how activities of participants (faculty and staff) are allocated or credited among participants' various units, or to have procedures for engaging interested parties in discussion of this topic. How will administrative support be provided? Is it adequate to support the mission of the center? If an existing campus unit or an academic department will provide such support, include this information in the letters of endorsement appended.

Space. Where will the center's staff and activities be housed? Is the space adequate? If there is a need for more space, what plans exist to accommodate this need? Have the departmental/sponsoring unit and school/college facilities staff been consulted? If an existing campus unit or an academic department will provide such space, include this information in the letters of endorsement appended. Has the Office of Space Management been consulted and informed of the space to be used by the Center?

Endorsements. Here, it is important to address two issues: shared, similar or overlapping interests, and shared resources. Letters of endorsement may be appended to the proposal.

1. Does the center's function or organization overlap the efforts of departments, schools, colleges, or other centers at the university? Does the center have the support of those who may be affected by it? The proposal should provide evidence that all interested units are aware of plans for establishing the center and were afforded an opportunity to comment on the plan to establish the new entity. Early communication may help in discovering individuals with similar interests and in fostering their participation.
2. Will the center draw on another unit's resources?³ If so, those units should be asked to provide a memo of support for the endeavor, and in it, to articulate a shared understanding of their contribution to the center.

Proposals should include written comments on the proposal, and endorsements from department chairs, deans, directors, and/or key faculty who will provide essential support for and who have an interest in the new center. This process assumes that units have received drafts of the proposal and that concerns are addressed or accounted for in the final version submitted for approval.

Evaluation. What is the proposed evaluation process for the center? The process should reflect the size and breadth of the center's activities. Evaluation plans must comply with section IV and include both an annual report to the responsible dean and a periodic review process that includes evaluators external to the center. Annual reports should be shared with units involved in the center's activities, and should be submitted to the dean. Central questions should include whether or not the center is fulfilling its mission, if improvements are needed, and if the center should persist.

Life Cycle: Growth or Discontinuation. Centers should have sharply defined missions that address specific goals. The issues that stimulate creation of these units will evolve, and it's important to consider the ongoing need for the center. The proposal should address the expected life cycle for the center: Under what circumstances might the unit evolve into a

³ "Resources" should be understood to include staff, courses, and space as well as faculty time and energy.

department? Under what circumstances should it cease to exist? For example, centers should be closed when faculty cease to participate or when new leaders cannot be identified or when external resources that support the center are no longer available. The proposal must include specific “sunset” provisions appropriate to the center being proposed.

Process for Proposal Review and Approval

Proposals to establish new centers should first be reviewed and approved by the proposing group and then by any units with which they are nearly connected (e.g. academic department or program).

The next step is to seek approval by the Academic Planning Council(s) of the school/college in which they will be housed. After these groups have approved the proposal, the dean(s) will send a request to the provost, with a cover memo that clearly signals the need for the center, the center’s contribution to the mission of the school or college, and the fiscal or other resources (if any) that the school or college will provide.

The provost will then forward the proposal to the UAPC for review and approval. Upon approval by the UAPC, a center will be formally reported to the UW System and Board of Regents, and added to the official list.

IV. Evaluating Centers

Centers must undergo periodic evaluation. These processes should be informed by good practice for similar units, and involve annual tracking of information related to mission-focused activities (e.g., events hosted, number of participants served in outreach efforts, grants administered). A brief (one page) report should be submitted annually to the dean, and to other units involved in the center’s activities (e.g., to the department homes of participating faculty). If the center was established in a structure other than under a single dean or lead dean, then the evaluation process must follow the process described in the originating proposal.

The report should include, at a minimum:

- mission and purpose
- center activities and trend data
- evaluation of center activities in view of the mission/purpose
- an evaluation of challenges and opportunities
- proposed changes

Each dean’s office may set expectations for annual reports that suit the needs of the school/college.

Every five years, the provost will initiate a request to deans for a summary report on center activity since the prior review. Deans will review the list of centers and use the annual reports on file or any other appropriate mechanism established by the school/college to determine if the centers are all still active. Any centers that have ceased operation or that have been formally discontinued will be reported as such. Any center that has had a change in structure that wasn’t already reported will be reported at this time. Any center that was created but not approved and comes to the attention of the dean through this process, will be considered for approval at this time. All active, approved centers will appear on the official list of centers, which signifies that they may represent themselves as recognized UW-Madison entities.

V. Changing Existing Centers

The responsible school/college APC, the dean, and the UAPC must approve changes to existing centers. (Centers that are cross-college or cross-departmental should make use of the approval sequence that was approved as part of the original proposal.) All of the changes enumerated below are reported to the UW System, as required by UW System policy.

1. Renaming Centers

Proposals to rename centers should be approved by the school/college APC and by the school/college dean, and then forwarded to the provost. Center names should not overlap with those of existing departments, schools, colleges, centers, or other units. Appropriate endorsements should accompany the request. Proposals to rename centers will be considered by the UAPC, typically as part of an automatic consent agenda.

2. Reorganizing or Restructuring Centers

Proposals to reorganize or restructure centers should be approved by the school/college APC and by the school/college dean, and then forwarded to the provost. Reorganizations may include combining two or more centers into one, creating umbrella structures, splitting a center into two or more separate centers, or other significant restructuring. Appropriate endorsements should accompany the request. Reorganization requests will be considered by the UAPC, typically as part of an automatic consent agenda. However, if restructuring appears to result in the creation of a new center, then it must be approved by the UAPC according to the guidelines outlined in Section III.

3. Discontinuing Centers

When faculty support for a center no longer exists, if there is no interest among the faculty in participating in or leading the center, or when a center is no longer financially viable, the center should be formally discontinued. Requests for discontinuation may be initiated by the center faculty and submitted to the school/college APC. If, at the time of the five-year review, the dean cannot verify that a center is viable, the dean may recommend discontinuation to the school/college APC. Approved requests will be forwarded to the provost for approval by the UAPC, typically as part of an automatic consent agenda.