

Impressions of the RFI Responses

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In the last quarter of 2008, the University of Idaho (UI) central administration issued a Request For Innovations (RFI) solicitation aimed at developing ideas for transforming the UI as a new institution for the 21st century. The RFI solicitation netted 76 responses that were reviewed by an RFI Advisory Committee configured by the Provost's Office. The RFI Advisory Committee selected 16 submissions for final consideration and forwarded those proposals to the UI Faculty Council for comment. Following are my impressions of the Faculty Council's reactions to the review process and the 16 RFI finalists. Details of the 16 RFI proposals and the Advisory Committee's actions can be found on the Provost's web page:

<http://www.uidaho.edu/provost/universitytransformationsites/requestforinnovations.aspx>.

Discussions About the Process

Faculty Council started the discussions by asking for a copy of the RFI Advisory Committee's report. That request was denied by the Committee Chair, who stated the report was written for the Provost and it was the Committee members' understanding that their actions would not be generally distributed to the faculty. Several Council members expressed displeasure at the lack of faculty involvement and feedback in the selection of the final 16 RFI proposals. Other Council members noted that several Advisory Committee members were listed as sponsors of the 16 RFI finalists selected by the Advisory Committee. In subsequent meetings portions of the Advisory Committee's report were released, but not the whole report and nothing describing how the 16 finalists were chosen, nor how the other 60 proposals were eliminated from consideration.

As Council discussions progressed over the next few meetings, Faculty Council members expressed the need for increased faculty involvement and complete accountability as the RFI proposals move forward and are considered for funding. Of particular concern for several Council members was the definition of "revenue neutral," which was supposed to be a criteria for the RFI submissions. Almost all Council members interpreted "revenue neutral" to mean the RFI proposals would cost nothing, whereas Provost Baker interpreted it to mean that university money could be reallocated to fund the proposals. This difference of interpretation was not resolved.

Discussions About the Final 16 RFI Proposals

Due to time constraints the Faculty Council limited its discussion to the 16 RFI proposals selected by the RFI Advisory Committee. The Council has not (yet) seen the Advisory Committee's final report, nor did it review any of the 60 RFI proposals that were rejected by the Advisory Committee. Following is a synopsis of my impressions of the Faculty Council's concerns regarding each of the 16 RFI finalists. They are numbered and listed in the same order as found on the Provost's web page.

- RFI #1: Name: Improving the Quality of Instruction
Idea: Expand the Polya Center into other disciplines.
Budget: None provided.
Comments: Several members expressed general dissatisfaction with Polya Center experiences. The two student members, both of whom had Polya Center math classes, also expressed dissatisfaction.
- RFI #2: Name: Parfleche Exchange Program
Idea: Increased cooperation with Native American tribes and regional institutions.
Budget: \$145K/yr.
Comments: A good idea, but why does UI have to foot the bill? What are the tribes and other institutions contributing monetarily?
- RFI #3: Name: Ethics and Justice in the Age of Globalization
Idea: Integrate ethics and justice across the curriculums.
Budget: \$66K/yr.
Comments: The College of Engineering already did this as part of its ABET criteria, at no cost, so other colleges can do likewise. We already have a funded Ethics Center, why do we need another? Adding a \$1000 fee to all graduate students seems unethical.
- RFI #4: Name: Waste Minimization and Increased Recycling
Idea: Campus-wide standards for waste processing and recycling.
Budget: None provided; the program would be funded by fees added to departmental purchases (e.g., a \$50 per computer monitor recycling fee).
Comments: Some of the fees and purchasing guidelines seemed excessive, but otherwise this proposal was viewed favorably by Faculty Council.
- RFI #5: Name: Instituting Institutes
Idea: Centralize all existing institutes under the VP for Research.
Budget: Zero cost.
Comments: It's doubtful that centralizing institutes would save money or increase productivity. Do we have a process for establishing, reviewing, and terminating institutes now? Where is that process codified?
- RFI #6: Name: Bioenergy Bioproducts Institute
Idea: Create a new institute focused on Bioenergy.
Budget: \$200K/yr.
Comments: It's a good idea. In fact, it's such a good idea the sponsors should be able to get their own funding and start their own institute without needing any institutional reallocation.
- RFI #7: Name: Academy of the Environment at UI
Idea: Create interdisciplinary programs in environmental issues.
Budget: \$810K for 3 yrs.

Comments: How is this different from the Bioregional Planning - Building Sustainable Communities initiative? How many bio-environmental interdisciplinary programs can UI host without treading on each other?

- RFI #8: Name: Creating a New Structure for Interdisciplinary Education and Research
Idea: Develop models of cross-disciplinary courses leading to a new liberal arts degree.
Budget: \$133K/yr.
Comments: Why fund a new degree, with a new project director and new administrative support and faculty buy-outs, at a time when existing under-funded programs are turning away students.
- RFI #9: Name: Visualization
Idea: Use computer graphics for visualizing other disciplines, e.g., natural resources, biology, psychology, etc.
Budget: None provided, but \$50 per student fees and \$5 per hr. lab fees are listed.
Comments: Impressive graphics in the proposal, but no management or organizational plan is provided.
- RFI #10: Name: Enhancing Online and Distance Education At UI
Idea: Expand on-line and distance educational offerings throughout campus.
Budget: \$50K to \$80K/yr.
Comments: It's not clear if the sponsors worked with Engineering Outreach on this proposal. Is there a demand for (more) on-line classes? Is YouTube the model we want to emulate? Are interactive on-line offerings cost-effective?
- RFI #11: Name: Maximizing the Potential of the University of Idaho South
Idea: Defines three phases for developing and implementing a plan for better institutional operations south of the Idaho pan-handle.
Budget: None provided, but says reallocation of existing resources is needed.
Comments: It's a plan for a plan, so no details are provided. The need is clearly there, but how will all the planning be funded?
- RFI #12: Name: Cultivating a Respectful Community
Idea: Volentum (aka Magaly Rodriguez) "respectful contrary" workshops across campus.
Budget: None provided, but five workshops are specified and one of them is expected to cost \$25K.
Comments: Who pays? What's the real cost in faculty/staff time? What's the return on investment?
- RFI #13: Name: Refocusing the UI Around Scholarship
Idea: Make existing Departments responsible for only undergraduate education and create "Academic Research Clusters" responsible for graduate education and scholarship.

Budget: None provided, but the Clusters would be funded through savings by converting Department Chairs into undergraduate “degree program coordinators.”
Comments: Are academic departments an impediment to scholarship? Would the research clusters really be more efficient and less bureaucratic than departments? Don't the existing institutes serve as research clusters now?

RFI #14: Name: Continuous Improvement

Idea: Apply continuous improvement reviews and processes to the academic community. (e.g., remove administrative barriers to progress).

Budget: None provided, but it's recognized that cost is in the effort required by faculty and staff to review processes and suggest improvements.

Comments: We should be doing this now.

RFI #15: Name: Supporting the Dual Credit Program at the University of Idaho

Idea: Increase the university credits delivered to high school students.

Budget: None provided, but it requires reallocation of summer session revenues.

Comments: It is a good idea, especially if the program is self-supporting.

RFI #16: Name: Partnering Alumni Advocacy and Government Relations

Idea: Use the UI Extension system to develop statewide alumni advocates.

Budget: \$90K/yr. for a new Special Assistant and his/her expenses

Comments: What is the expected return on investment? Why can't the existing Alumni Association do this function? Could an existing administrator be tasked with this responsibility?

Conclusions

Several issues need to be resolved before the UI community can move forward with the transformational processes:

1. What does “revenue neutral” mean and where will the monies for the RFI proposal(s) come from?
2. What good ideas and innovations can be gleaned from the 60 RFI submissions that were rejected by the RFI Advisory Committee?
3. Which RFI proposals require Notices of Intent (NOI) for approval by faculty committees, and what proposals can be implemented by administrative fiat?
4. Who will write the business plans for the RFI proposals that are to be adopted by the institution? What are the expected returns on investments? How long will those investments be seeded? And what measures will be employed to determine if the transformations are succeeding or failing?