INTERNAL COMPETITIONS MODEL FOR WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Washington University has a long history of recruiting outstanding junior faculty and being successful at winning prestigious awards targeted to new investigators. In recent years, faculty and administrators had noted that the success rate for some of these awards had fallen off. In response, the chancellor and the provost had charged the OVCR with reviewing the internal competitions process, recommending changes and implementing these changes. This review was begun by Dr. Evan Kharasch, former Vice Chancellor for Research and the implementation continued by Dr. Jennifer Lodge, current VCR. The process has involved getting input from many faculty, Deans, department chairs, and administrators across both campuses. Critical elements identified for an effective internal competitions process include communication of opportunities and eligibility; formation of appropriate selection committees, a strong partnership with the Corporate and Foundation offices, streamlined internal application, time sensitive candidate selection, and strong mentorship of candidates. The dual aims of the new process are:

1. Creating clarity, consistency, transparency and trust in the process
2. Improving the success rate of Washington University candidates

A 2014 report of the review and assessment is provided below. Further information about the implementation status and current internal competition program may be found on the OVCR website here.

Report: A New Model for Internal Competitions at Washington University

Background

Many extramural grant programs allow only a limited number of applications per institution, whether by invitation-only submission (typically foundations, e.g. Pew, Searle, Mallinckrodt, Rita Allen) or an open call by a federal agency. The early career awards of prestigious foundations provide substantial career benefit, recognition and reputational value to faculty and to WUSTL. Federal programs provide strategic funding for research instrumentation and center support. The process for communicating funding opportunities and selecting the faculty or programs to represent WUSTL as the external applicant(s) is referred to as “Internal Competitions” or “Limited Competitions”.

Key objectives of the new Internal Competition process are:

- Maximize faculty awareness of and access to all research funding opportunities on both campuses
- Establish a single website where all information and announcements are available to all faculty
- Ensure that adjudication of internal competitions is representative across Schools and disciplines, equitable, bias-free, and selects the most qualified candidates with the greatest likelihood of competitive success
- Mentor the selected nominees to craft applications customized to the target foundation
- Increase the success rates of WUSTL applicants

Internal competitions are best viewed by staff and faculty adjudicators as a strategic activity rather than administrative task. With that transformative change, the goals will be to:

- Communicate and market funding opportunities to the entire university research community
- Identify and encourage candidates
- Implement transparent, quality, accountable review with vigorous discussion whenever possible
- Enlist past winners to assist in reviewing and mentoring
- Preserve a time-line advantageous to the eventual nominee
- Debrief applicants to record critical feedback for future years
The challenge of communication

OVCR and Alumni and Development are enhancing their current collaboration to create a single, integrated WUSTL effort to support the internal competitions process. This partnership includes all campuses, all research domains and schools, and both Danforth and Medical School Alumni and Development (A&D) staff, and operationally span the spectrum from information intake, identification, notification, dissemination, marketing and communication, adjudication, and mentoring. The revised process map is:

A single central, comprehensive portal for information will be created. This will include a single email listserv for announcements and a single website for both federal and foundations internal competitions. The website will be fully accessible to the WUSTL community. Sensitive foundation-specific information, advantageous to WUSTL faculty, will continue to be placed behind the WUSTL Key for controlled access. (Until this portal is complete, University-wide information on internal competitions will continue to reside at http://wustl.edu/community/faculty-staff/internalcompetitions/. The coordinating administrator for the OVCR is Catherine Determan in the Office of Sponsored Research Services).

Foundation opportunities and invitations are often based on the critical relationships between WUSTL and the foundations. Knowledge of the “unwritten rules and cultures” of foundations is often a paramount factor in WUSTL being competitive for the awards.

The creation, cultivation, and stewardship of foundation relationships, and the generation, storage and dissemination of the feedback from previous WUSTL applicants and scientific reviewers, is the expertise of Alumni and Development, Corporate/Foundation Relations. They will continue to contribute this knowledge for the benefit of WUSTL applicants.

Early Career Awards (Foundations)

OVCR and Deans together will work to raise consciousness and communicate the importance of these awards to faculty development and to both faculty and institutional reputation and prestige.

Recruitment and Preparation of Candidate(s)

- Identifying a winning candidate to represent WUSTL begins well before the review/adjudication process.
Candidates should be alerted to opportunities (by Chairs), and understand the programs for which they are best suited.

The Funding Information Officer will anticipate foundation invitations and make announcements far in advance to enable time for application, adjudication, and mentoring.

The Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations will coordinate and lead educational sessions to provide information about general and specific foundation opportunities, with guidance about the types of research and applicants that are being sought by the foundation.

Early career awards are often more about a person and his/her recommenders than the specifics of the proposed projects. Foundations have their own personalities and preferences. WUSTL reviewers must be well informed about the foundation and think strategically to make the best match between a candidate and the current vision of the sponsor.

Past winners are often enthusiastic and committed reviewers who know the culture and history of a foundation and what they seek. They are also excellent mentors to coach the WUSTL candidate in preparing the best possible foundation-specific application.

Committee Formation and Operation

Standing internal adjudication committees will be established, with members and leadership from both campuses, advisory to the VCR.

Life sciences and other research spans both campuses. The committee must have appropriate representation for quality, breadth, and fairness, as well as sensitivity to diversity goals. Committees must also have appropriate membership to prevent conflicts of interest in reviews. A prototype model engages members from the Medical (⅓-⅔) and Danforth campus schools (¼-⅓). Committee leadership must also represent both campuses. There will be a Chair and a Vice Chair, serving defined three-year terms, whereby the Vice Chair succeeds the Chair after the specified term, and a new Vice-Chair is appointed by the VCR. At any given time, one of the two individuals would be a School of Medicine faculty member and the other would be from a Danforth campus school. Committee Chair would alternate between the School of Medicine and Danforth schools.

Committee membership will include concerned and dedicated faculty, willing to volunteer to serve WUSTL. Members will be accomplished faculty and former foundation award winners. Members are appointed by the VCR, in consultation with Committee Chair and Vice-Chair, and Deans as appropriate. Committee membership is for a four-year term, renewable by the Committee Chair and Vice-Chair.

Service on the Committee is viewed favorably by members and deans and department chairs, and as a mark of accomplishment and service. Service on this committee will require several days per year, and is recognized as an educational and service contribution.

Committee leadership and membership should be public, as a mark of distinction and towards scientific integrity and transparency. Similarly, the general review criteria for internal competitions should be public. These will be available on the Internal Competitions website.

Committee process will include in-person discussion about internal applications, which will be pre-ranked each reviewer prior to the selection meeting.

The internal competitions process will be simplified. Pre-proposals should be as brief and succinct as possible. Committees may determine whether to forego a formal chair letter until the winner needs it for sponsor.

After internal selections, committee members will identify mentors who voluntarily help the selected applicant to tailor their applications to specific foundations with assistance from Corporate and Foundation Relations staff in Alumni and Development.

Research/Center/Instrumentation Internal Submission Proposals (mostly federal):

Although many issues are shared between private and federal competitions, research, center, and institutional proposals have unique barriers for researchers. Faculty need to be recruited and encouraged long before the program deadline is announced; successful center proposals take many months or longer to prepare.

There currently exists a federal internal competition process, largely for federal major instrument awards, which is working well and will continue as currently implemented. There is a standing Internal Competitions Committee for Federal Funding Opportunities. Committee structure and composition includes a base membership of nine faculty, all serving three-year terms, with the goal of at least five reviewers for any competition. The VCR or designee chairs the group.

Opportunities for future enhancement, which could include (resources permitting):
- Compiling histories of nominees and winners of federal internal competitions, as is done for the NSF Major Research Instrumentation grant program, using a TBD list of major programs of interest to the two campuses.
- Collecting and cataloging information and feedback about successful and unsuccessful applications for use as strategic data going forward.
- Supporting every PI authoring a proposal, even if there is no adjudication process necessary, providing strategic information, connecting to past winners, and reviewing drafts.

Please direct any questions about the new Internal Competition Model to Christa Johnson, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Research Services.

The Internal Competitions Program description can be viewed in its entirety here.

\[\text{Note: Internal competitions outside the scope of this process include, but are not limited to, scholarships, buildings, professorships, and some institutional proposals.}\]