

ORI@UT: Report and Recommendations from the Research Council

Affirmed by the Faculty Senate Research Council

October 3, 2019

At its September 11, 2019 meeting, members of the Research Council welcomed the opportunity to learn about the Oak Ridge Institute at UT (“ORI”) from UT Vice President for Research, Outreach and Economic Development Dr. Stacey Patterson, Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor Dr. David Manderscheid, and Interim Vice Chancellor for Research & Engagement Dr. Robert Nobles.

Dr. Patterson presented information related to the research funding goals for the campus and resolution from the Board of Trustees that includes developing a business plan for ORI. This presentation built on a similar presentation by Dr. Patterson at the July 29, 2019 “Ideation Session” at UTK. Both are available.¹ The various established research entities that would be collected within ORI were overviewed and certain administrative challenges related to efficient operation were highlighted. The ability to efficiently coordinate joint programs, increase research connectivity and impact, and grow research support were presented as central drivers for ORI. In addition to improving cohesion between programs, the intention to substantially grow the number of Ph.D students was featured. As planned, ORI will add 60 researchers/faculty members at UTK, who will be joined by an equivalent number of ORNL research scientists. The tenure status of the proposed faculty lines at UTK have not been specified.

The presentation also introduced the newly-formed Steering Committee, which is comprised of five UT/UTK representatives, five ORNL representatives, and Governor’s Chair Dr. Suresh Babu (jointly appointed) as its 11th member. The committee charge involves setting guiding principles, identifying key implementation steps, developing a timeline for implementation, and defining the basis for accountability of ORI performance.

Along with the presentation, there was an opportunity for discussion about the ORI. From this, a series of key points, ideas and recommendations for success are distilled:

- It appears that the process for developing the plan for ORI will extend beyond Nov. 8, 2019, which is the date at which the business plan for ORI is to be presented to the Board of Trustees. Thus, *the prospect of multi-tiered planning for phase-in that is marked by detailed planning and engagement with stakeholders at various levels across the UTK campus is viewed positively by the Research Council.*
- The benefits of ORI appear to be manifold. Nevertheless, there are deep concerns over the risk to UTK research that emerge due to the lack of visibility regarding the structure of ORI, the funding of the new institute, and the impact on existing programs that are connected throughout UTK. Noting that this is also a principal concern in the report derived from the July 29 Ideation Session,² *the Research Council reiterates the need for increasing engagement and dialog with stakeholders across campus as plans for ORI are evolved.*

¹ <https://research.tennessee.edu/oak-ridge-institute/>

² <https://research.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2019/08/ORI-Ideation-Memo-082719.pdf>; see Theme 2.

- The formation of a Steering Committee was regarded positively. However, a major concern is that research-active faculty who are not formally connected to ORNL are excluded and department- and college-level administrators are substantially under-represented. (Faculty member Suresh Babu of the Tickle College of Engineering is a Governor’s Chair; Heidi Goodrich-Blair is the only department head, and Janis Terpenney is the only dean on the Steering Committee.) The Research Council believes that a more inclusive Steering Committee would be beneficial and enhance the planning of the ORI.³ Those members would connect more closely with faculty and would be well-placed to identify possible unintended operational consequences to departments during the creation of ORI. Thus, *the Research Council recommends broadening inclusivity by adding representatives from the College of Arts and Sciences and Tickle College of Engineering.*
- Programs that are not connected presently by research or educational relationships with ORNL also express uncertainty over the impact of ORI on the broader UTK landscape, especially because the prominence and short timeline of activating ORI seems to have eclipsed strategic planning by UTK that will take place in Spring 2020. This uncertainty is enhanced because these programs are unsure as to whether their importance and value will only be considered in the context of ORI. *The Research Council views this as another important signal testifying to the need for broad engagement and dialog with the campus research community and for cohesion to exist between the ORI implementation process and the UTK strategic planning process that will unfold in Spring 2020.*
- Success in the ORI graduate program is viewed by the Research Council as being paramount to the success of the ORI. The Research Council was particularly heartened to learn that each ORI graduate student will be supported for the duration of their graduate studies. Beyond this, two specific recommendations are strongly endorsed by the Research Council:
 - Given the importance of mentoring in graduate education and to emphasize the partnership through joint research activities, *each ORI graduate student should be jointly advised by a member from each institution.*
 - Given the critical importance of graduate program size and research funding at the level of individual departments in rankings by highly-visible national bodies (e.g., National Academy of Sciences) as well as by peers (e.g., US News), *allow ORI graduate students the option to complete an existing accredited, disciplinary degree, rather than only choosing an ORI-based doctoral program.*

At the conclusion of the discussion, Drs. Patterson, Manderscheid, and Nobles were thanked for their time, candor, and willingness to engage with the Research Council on the matter of the ORI@UT. An invitation to return and present an update on planning activities and progress at a Research Council meeting later this year was made.

³ Steering committee members are listed at <https://research.tennessee.edu/oak-ridge-institute/>