SFU Research: “Working to Improve the Lives of British Columbians” the theme of President’s Research Luncheon

The social and economic impacts of Simon Fraser University’s (SFU) research excellence were celebrated at the President’s Research Luncheon in November. The sixth annual event of its kind, the Luncheon was held for the first time at SFU’s new Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, an ideal venue for facilitating communication and encouraging the flow of ideas.

President Michael Stevenson welcomed 115 guests from the community including business and government leaders and members of the media. Guests dined with nineteen SFU faculty and graduate student researchers from the social sciences, business, sciences, education and applied sciences.

In his opening remarks, President Stevenson noted that at SFU research activities are conducted across a broad range of academic disciplines, often in an interdisciplinary environment. “Our 700 faculty members in SFU’s five Faculties are searching out new knowledge through their research,” said Dr. Stevenson. “As you hear about the work of our researchers, you will see that the University is an innovative, contemporary research centre where both free and directed inquiry thrive. SFU has long been committed to the encouragement and nurturing of innovation.” Dr. Stevenson also cited the achievements of SFU researchers that helped place SFU consistently among the leading comprehensive universities in Canada.

Drs. Steven Holdcroft (Chemistry) and Peter Klein (Business Administration) delivered well-received feature presentations. Dr. Holdcroft discussed his studies concerning the development of fuel cell materials that are less expensive and more efficient than those currently available. His research could have a major impact on the commercialization and implementation of fuel cells. Dr. Klein described his research results that show that the taxation of the accrued capital gains of investors is responsible for certain stock market phenomena, which are often attributed to irrational investor behaviour.

“This event allowed me to see more clearly than I have before how university research intersects with the real world,” commented Diane Thorne, Acting
The Presidents of the three federal granting councils - Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) - have created the Panel on Research Ethics (PRE). It comprises a new governance structure to support the continued development, evolution, interpretation and implementation of the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS). The objective is to ensure stewardship by the councils for the governance of the research ethics policies and practices of institutions receiving council funding.

I am pleased to have been appointed to the 11-member Panel, a group which brings a wide spectrum of expertise and experience in research involving humans, ethics, ethics review, research administration, participation in research, and law, as well as a lay perspective to our task. Our first meeting was held on November 2nd.

The mandate of the PRE is the following:

- Promote high ethical standards of conduct in research involving humans
- Advise the councils on the ongoing development and evolution of the TCPS
- Establish or commission ad hoc expert groups to address specific issues
- Provide interpretations of the TCPS for its implementation and use
- Learn from and respond to evolutions in research ethics issues and practices, in a national and international context
- Promote and support the implementation of the TCPS
- Identify required educational activities and mandate the Secretariat of the Panel to promote and coordinate them
- Participate in the ongoing national discussion regarding the development of an oversight system for the ethics review processes
- Recognize the diversity of approaches used in research involving humans
- Report annually on the PRE’s activities to the presidents of the councils

My initial concentration will be on implementation of the TCPS.

More information on the PRE is available at: www.nserc.ca/programs/ethics/newmem_e.htm

1. What is “overhead”?

Overhead refers to the amount charged in a research grant or contract to cover “indirect costs”; i.e. those costs which are real but not easily identifiable with a particular research project. These include costs such as utilities; the provision of institutional facilities; space; accounting; payroll and personnel services; janitorial services; and provision for equipment replacement.

2. What types of research incur indirect costs?

All funded research results in indirect costs to the University, whether a grant, a contract, or a contribution agreement supports that research.

3. What is the approximate proportion of indirect to direct costs of research?

Cost studies at Canadian universities show that for every dollar a university spends on the direct costs of research, it incurs on average between $0.40 and $0.50 in indirect costs. Some individual research projects may incur substantially higher indirect costs. Research and Development companies charge out their services at rates ranging from 100% to as much as 270% of direct costs in order to ensure that the full costs of a project are recovered.

4. Do the national granting councils provide overhead on their grant funding?

Currently the federal granting councils do not pay overhead on their research grants. However, in the year 2000, the Canadian Advisory Council on Science and Technology recommended that the federal government should begin funding the indirect costs of university research in proportion to the amount of funding for the direct costs of research provided to universities through the granting councils. A specific proposal is presently under consideration by the federal government as part of its innovation agenda.

5. What are SFU’s current overhead rates?

Overhead is charged on research contracts. The rate charged depends on whether the contract is with a government agency or private firm. SFU currently charges 65% of payroll on government contracts when the work is performed on campus. The usual rate charged on SFU-authored contracts with industry is 40% of total direct costs. There is normally no charge on unrestricted grants paid in advance, irrespective of the source. For the most part, SFU overhead rates on contract research are similar to the published rates of most other Canadian universities.

6. What if a prospective research sponsor tells the researcher that it won’t pay overhead on a research contract?

Researchers should obtain advice on dealing with such sponsors from the Office of Research Services prior to submitting a proposal. Research Services will usually request a copy of the sponsor’s proposed funding agreement in order to determine the nature of the deliverables and proposed basis of payment. Research Services staff will undertake to negotiate with the prospective sponsor to cause the arrangement to be as “grant-like” as possible (see point 8). The principle in such cases is that if the University can reduce its performance obligations, deliverables, and risk of non-payment in the terms of a funding agreement, SFU may reduce or waive overhead.

7. What if overhead is permitted, but the research objective cannot be met with the amount of money that remains once overhead charges have been deducted?

It is up to the researcher to build a budget out of the funds available which includes the appropriate amount for overhead by reducing the scope of work or

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8. Sometimes a sponsor refers its funding of a research project as a grant. How does the University decide whether it will accept this designation and thus not charge overhead?

External funds for research are normally considered by the University to be grants if all of the following conditions hold:

- The project is initiated by the principal researcher.
- All project protocols are designed by the principal researcher and any such protocol can be changed by the principal researcher without further approval of the sponsor.
- The funds are not attached to a specific performance outcome and cannot be retracted as a function of level of performance.
- The principal researcher may publish findings from the research with no approval process or time delay involving the sponsor.
- Any patents or inventions arising from the research belong to the principal researcher or to the University, and not to the sponsor.
- There is no honorarium or other payment to the principal researcher.
- The project is open, with no restrictions involving the sponsor’s proprietary data or other such contractual restrictions.
- Equipment purchased from the grant belongs to the University and not the sponsor.
- The funds are provided in advance of expenditures.

9. What if the arrangement proposed meets all other conditions of a research grant but the sponsor is unwilling to provide funding in advance of the work?

The University may reduce or waive overhead on the understanding that the sponsor is a government-supported agency and that the benefits of continuing long-term support from that sponsor outweigh the risk of non-payment and the cost of additional reporting requirements.

10. Who in the University decides whether overhead must be charged on a funding agreement and at what rate?

Ultimately, the Vice-President, Research decides whether the University may accept a funding arrangement with a reduced rate of overhead or no overhead at all. This includes the decision as to whether to classify it as a research grant or a research contract, with or without overhead.

11. Where does the overhead revenue go?

At SFU, half the overhead revenue is retained by the University to pay the indirect costs of research and the other half is returned to the Dean of the Faculty where the researcher resides. It is up to the Dean how that Faculty portion will be allocated.

Are you eligible to hold a research grant at Simon Fraser University?

Under the terms of Simon Fraser University (SFU) Policy R 10.01, External Research Grants and Contracts, the University will generally administer research grants and contracts only on behalf of faculty members. However, in some cases research grants may be applied for and held by certain non-faculty members. For example non-academic staff who have been given permission by their supervisor and by the appropriate Vice-President to do research may be permitted to hold university-administered external research funds in their own name.

Adjunct Professors appointed under Policy A12.08, Postdoctoral Fellows appointed under Policy R50.03, and University Research Associates appointed under Policy R50.01 may apply for and hold research grants administered by the University on condition that: (i) their terms of appointment at the time of application span the period of funding; (ii) they agree to abide by all University policies and procedures related to research administration; and (iii) they will not be paid from the grant on which they intend to be a principal or co-investigator.

SFU Policies and Procedures can be found at www.sfu.ca/policies/. Adjunct Professors, University Research Associates, and Postdoctoral Fellows who intend to apply for research grants must complete and sign an Eligibility to Hold Grants Form which indicates their understanding of and agreement to the above conditions. This form is available at www.sfu.ca/ors under Grants.

To discuss your eligibility to apply for a research grant to be held at SFU, please contact Nancy McNeil, Research Grants Officer, tel: 604-291-4120, email: mceil@sfu.ca.
SFU establishes Research Advisory Council

A new council of experienced, accomplished researchers from across the University is now assisting the Vice-President, Research and the Vice-President, Academic in planning, policy development and priority setting regarding Simon Fraser University’s (SFU) research environment.

Members of the Research Advisory Council (RAC) were appointed by the Faculty Deans (normally one member per Faculty) in consultation with Dr. Bruce Clayman, Vice-President, Research and Dr. John Waterhouse, Vice-President, Academic.

The goal is to ensure that the RAC members will be drawn from the areas of the three federal granting councils:

- Two from the natural sciences and engineering (NSERC) disciplines
- Two from the social sciences and humanities (SSHRC) disciplines
- One from the health sciences (CIHR) disciplines

If this balance is not achieved, the Vice-President, Research and the Vice-President, Academic may appoint one or more additional members.

All members are to have achieved distinguished records of research accomplishment as evidenced, for example, by scholarly publications, awards, service on grant selection committees, and peer-reviewed research funding. Service is for two-year terms, with reappointment for one term possible; terms of initial appointments will be staggered to help ensure continuity. The Vice-Presidents Research and Academic are ex officio members.

The primary role of the RAC is to advise the Vice-President, Research and Vice-President, Academic in the following ways:

a) Based on scans of the internal and external research environments, identifying opportunities for strengthening existing research areas and developing new ones.

b) Advising on priorities among competing opportunities and among potential applications for major external funding that require commitment of significant University resources.

c) Planning medium- and long-range directions for the advancement of research at the University, taking into account the opportunities identified in a) above, and revising the institutional strategic research plan accordingly.

d) Advising about research infrastructure required to advance high-priority initiatives.

e) Advising about new and revised research policies to facilitate achievement of the objectives described above.

The RAC meets at least once per semester. Initial appointees are Drs. Bruce Brandhorst, William Davidson, Rob Grauer, Brian Lewis, John Tietz and Philip Winne. The first meeting of RAC was held in November 2001 and Philip Winne was elected as Chair. The RAC reports annually to the Vice-President, Research and Vice-President, Academic.