

Open Access to Core Facilities: Town Hall Meeting

In March 2014, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by the provosts of the three CBC universities (Northwestern University, University of Chicago and University of Illinois at Chicago) enabling open access to each other's core facilities. Open access allows researchers at each university to use core facilities at partner universities at the same pricing and availability as researchers at the host institution. Each university agreed to waive the indirect (F&A) costs that would otherwise be charged to researchers for using core facilities at another institution. Besides a cost savings to researchers, the initiative increases the number of facilities available to researchers as well as increases utilization and efficiency of facility operations.

In June, 2014, core facility administrators from CBC universities hosted a Town Hall meeting (as part of CBC Tech Day) to discuss details of how this initiative will work. The goal of the meeting was to allow core directors and managers an opportunity to ask questions to senior administrators about the initiative. Approximately 50 core facility directors, managers and staff attended the meeting held at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

Prior to the Q&A session, Aaron Rosen (Associate Department Administrator for Shared and Core Facilities at Northwestern University) made several brief announcements on how to manage purchase orders, payment processing and changes to the NIH Payment Management System. For more information on changes to NIH procedures, go to: <http://www.northwestern.edu/asrsp/federal-initiatives/hhs-pms-subaccounts.html>.

Questions and Answers:

- **Q1:** Many core facilities provide similar or identical services, but their prices are different. Won't this lead to price wars?

A1: Core facilities providing similar or identical services aren't expected to have the same pricing. The cost of a service is related to staff expertise and operating costs, as well as any subsidies a core may be getting internally from their university. It's up to each core to educate their users as to why their prices might be different and whether there are advantages to using their services. Communication between core facilities at CBC universities about services and expertise should raise the level of options for researchers.

It is an interesting question whether a researcher will prefer price over proximity. Core facility administrators will be monitoring this to determine how big a role pricing and proximity play. Part of the job of each facility is selling your expertise. You are all highly-trained experts, and you have a rate that you've established that's reflective of your skill set. You are out in the marketplace in a sense selling that skill set.

- **Q2:** We've been using another university's core for a while. They bill my office, and we pay the bill for the user. Afterwards, we bill our users (pass-through billing). The users think they are paying internally and don't see what's going on behind the scenes. Is this an acceptable practice?

A2: Yes. Pass-through billing is a model that all three schools should consider using. It makes it easier for users and leaves the details to administrators to work out.

- **Q3:** If each university is doing their cost study differently, this might explain some of the differences in pricing. Is it feasible for core facility administrators to provide oversight on cost studies among partner universities?

A3: Although each university has their own process by which rates are calculated, all universities must follow The Office of Management and Budget's Circular A-21 guidelines (soon to be replaced by OMB's Uniform Guidance or Omni Circular guidelines). These guidelines dictate what costs can and cannot be charged to users of a facility. While there are often differences in the amount of internal and grant support among facilities, pricing must reflect the cost of providing the service. There is no way at present to systematically change pricing of services under these guidelines.

The Open Access Initiative was established in part to encourage cooperation between similar core facilities. It's not intended for investigators to shop for the lowest price. Cooperation between cores should lead to more options and better service for researchers. The key is to let the researchers drive the needs and services. Researchers should start at their home institution's facilities first. If they aren't happy with the cost-benefit ratio, then price shopping may happen.

- **Q4:** The institution I came from created a consortium of five regional institutions. It started out as a good idea, but there were issues with regards to internal equipment funding and getting external grants approved through in-house approval processes. Northwestern has an internal equipment grant program twice a year. The application requires you to state that a similar instrument is not available to your user base at the University. If we want to apply for an instrument three years from now, will we have to say that his equipment isn't available in all of Chicago?

A4: Research offices at the three institutions make funding decisions based on whether there is enough anticipated need in-house. There are no plans to change that approach in the near future. External granting agencies already ask whether there are comparable instruments in the region, and this partnership could lead to joint grant applications especially for high-end instrumentation. This is another potential benefit of the initiative.

- **Q5:** Will priority be given to users at a core's home institution? What if this is required by a granting agency (like NCI)?

A5: The question of priority depends upon the facility's management plan and capacity. If the plan requires priority to internal investigators (for whatever reason), then the facility should make that clear to outside researchers. If the plan does not require this, then the facility should make that clear to internal users. An important part of the initiative is the option for core facilities to opt out of it (no questions asked). They simply make it clear that they are not taking business from outside researchers unless they are part of a joint research grant.

- **Q6:** I run a chemistry core that receives almost 50% of our funding through internal subsidies. Our subsidizers want us to provide service to them first. I don't think they'd mind sharing access to instruments and services, but they would want priority in scheduling. Is that acceptable?

A6: It is up to each core to decide how they will handle their customers. We are trying to be as flexible as possible in letting each core decide what's best for them. The only condition spelled out in the MOU is that each partner university must be treated the same. A core facility may opt-out of this initiative by refusing to accept work from a partner university, but this means that it may not accept work from *any* researcher at that partner university. Thus, enrollment is an all-or none option for each core facility. You can't cherry pick customers from a partner university; everyone must be on a level playing field.

- **Q7:** Many core facilities are subsidized by their home university. The language in the MOU specifies that F&A charges will be waived, but what happens when a university is heavily subsidizing a core below cost?

A7: From a pricing standpoint, researchers from all three universities will be treated the same. If there is a subsidized price, partner universities will receive the subsidized rate.

A distinction needs to be made between filling excess capacity and the wholesale movement of business from one institution to another. Many core facilities are subsidized. If a core has excess capacity to fill, then this is an opportunity to do so. It is unlikely that we will see wholesale movement of business to another university. If this occurs, then core administrators will investigate the cause and work to understand what can be done to rebalance the workload. The goal is to provide the best service possible.

Whether or not a core can generate enough income to justify its subsidy is something that will be tracked. Part of the annual evaluation of this initiative is to look at the numbers and ask if it's working for everyone. We are only now beginning to discuss how this will work, as the MOU was just signed in March.

- **Q8:** Is it a violation of Circular A21 to charge different rates to NIH supported investigators?

A8: A-21 requires that all users pay the same base rate for services. If a grant is available to pay for part of the cost (e.g., NCI grant), then this is allowed. In this case, the granting agency is covering the difference although the researcher is still charged the same rate, with the granting agency paying part of the cost. For external academic customers outside of this initiative, we recommend charging them the same base rate plus F&A. For more information about external customers, see this article - <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3605920/>

- **Q9:** What is the likelihood that we can come up with an agreement between the schools that would accept each other's animal protocols?

A9: Maybe. This is a complicated issue and is still being worked out at this point. The most feasible approach is to find a collaborator that you are going to work with that has their own animal protocol that you can put them on temporarily. It's possible that we can establish a committee within the universities for people that heavily use animals, so that we can get some resolutions on how we'd like this to work. There may be some innovative solutions for using animals across solutions that we may not have thought of before.

Continued oversight of this initiative will be addressed by the Inter-institutional Core Advisory Committee, a committee comprised of five senior faculty from each university and university business administrators. Future Town Hall Meetings will also be scheduled to discuss and resolve ongoing issues pertaining to the Open Access Initiative.