Background

Kent State University (KSU) wishes to increase its level of research activity as an important element of its future as a research university. Increasingly, tuition dependent universities and colleges, unless underpinned by a large endowment, have a cloudy future in comparison to universities with a strong culture of scholarship and new knowledge based discovery research. Research and scholarly activities rarely produce a net positive revenue balance, and most often must be subsidized from other funding sources to be competitive. However a stronger research program at Kent State will enhance the undergraduate learning experience (increased opportunity for undergraduates to participate in professors’ research), will enhance high quality academic programs (stronger new faculty hires), will raise the institution’s national and international institutional reputation, and will produce new fundraising opportunities. In short, it is important for Kent State to increase its level of research activity as part of the university’s larger effort to move the university forward.

Recent changes in university level leadership present a rare and important opportunity to take stock of current conditions and levels of research activity and make decisions that will put the university in a favorable position to grow its research portfolio going forward. Central to this is the elevation of the chief research officer position to the level of vice president reporting directly to the president; recruitment to fill this position is currently underway. In comparison to other similar universities that are increasing tuition funding, KSU is in a favorable position to undertake a strategic increase in research because of strong demand for student enrollment.

Kent State University is a public research university composed of multiple campus locations in Northeastern Ohio. It is one of the largest universities in Ohio with an enrollment of over 35,000 undergraduate and 5,500 graduate students, with approximately 28,000 on the main campus in Kent.

KSU is ranked by the Carnegie Foundation as a public research university with high research activity and also strong in community engagement. In 2010, Kent State was ranked as one of the top 200 universities in the world by Times Higher Education. Kent State offers over 300 degree programs, among them 250 baccalaureate, 40 associate, 50 masters, and 23 doctoral programs. Notable programs include aspects of nursing, business, psychology, library science, aeronautics, journalism, fashion design, and the Liquid Crystal Institute.
While funding is not a complete means to measure scholarly success, research funding processed through the Division of Research and Sponsored Programs declined significantly in real dollars and especially on a percentage basis from $27.2M in FY2013 to $22.6M in FY2014. The vast majority of the decline was the result of reductions in State funding. During the first quarter of 2015, research awards increased over 2014 by more than $2M. The majority of awards were to researchers in the College of Arts and Sciences followed by the College of Education, Health & Human Services.

Key Observations and Findings

Expectations for scholarly activity have increased at Kent State, but are uneven across the university because of differences in departmental criteria and culture. Departmental culture and associated support influence the level of success and feelings of support by researchers. The predominant view is that KSU researchers are successful in spite of the culture and university support rather than because the support that is provided provides them with a competitive advantage. Faculty salaries and benefits are not a limiting factor beyond concerns about annual merit performance increases being too widely distributed and thus providing minimal rewards or motivation. The good news is that Kent State has untapped research capacity and some high quality research programs (see appendix) that can be freed and enhanced with the proper administrative nurturing.

There is broad and deep dissatisfaction with administrative support for research with the notable exception of the Division of Research and Sponsored Programs (RASP). RASP is viewed as being helpful, but is overextended. At best, the predominant view is that Finance and Administration, Human Resources, Governmental Affairs, and especially the KSU Foundation and Graduate School don’t support research to the degree they should. At its worst, the view is that they may actually interfere if not undermine research competitiveness and success of the faculty. Academic affairs was generally viewed as being supportive, but turnover in key administrative positions and the Responsibility Centered Management (RCM) financial structure were noted as points of concern.

Kent State’s research portfolio when measured by number of publications and presentations has made some progress, but not to the same degree as other universities where research and associated increases in funding were made a priority. However, when measured by quality, Kent State researchers do very well and on average often exceed that of peer universities, especially in selected areas. Thus, the issue is one more of the culture and institutional capacity to support or motivate researchers to pursue external funding and to conduct research rather than a lack of talent. In short, Kent State can improve research by first facilitating the application for, and subsequent administration of, funded research. It can increase the amount of funded research by better encouraging existing faculty, some of whom have “dropped out” of the funding world, to enter into this world again. Efforts underway in the College of Education, Health and Human Services at Kent State can serve as a model. In the past years the college has built its own research administration and support, and as a result its professors have increased dramatically their funded research.
There is confusion related to research funding metrics which can prevent an honest understanding of the current situation and progress associated with any changes that are put in place to grow research. Currently, external funding is generally reported as the combined amount requested and awards received, which includes external funding for not only research but also for instruction and public service. For example, in FY14, total awards were $22.6 million for all external funding, of which only just under $13 million was for research. In addition, research awards being processed through Institutional Advancement’s Corporate and Foundations Relations office apparently are not included in these numbers so the full externally funded research is likely to be under reported.

In addition to improving the culture and support for research, Kent State’s leaders should understand that a financial structure based on RCM acts to undermine research activities and generates unhelpful levels of competition for research overhead funds. Under RCM the priority for a dean is to balance the unit-level budget rather than invest in research programs, because research is unlikely to produce a positive financial balance. This extends into having increased teaching workloads at the expense of time for research and the appointment of instructional staff with no research expectations. Especially in an RCM model, campus leaders should provide greater centralized support for research.

**Recommendations**

1. The conditions and administrative structure that will provide for the recruitment of a high caliber individual and their success as Vice President for Research (VPR) need to be put in place. Success of the VPR is critically connected to KSU meeting its goals of growing its research and scholarly activities. As a start, the VPR should report directly to the president, and should be a cabinet member.

2. Enhancing the culture, atmosphere, and administrative support of scholarship and inquiry will provide the foundation to grow research and will also support KSU’s other priorities: student retention and graduation rates, national branding and recognition, local and regional economic development, and institutional financial stability. Kent State’s national identity should include a brand focused on areas of scholarly excellence and robust opportunities for undergraduate students to be directly engaged in original research that are less commonly available at tier-1 research universities.

3. Research is a team sport, requiring combined and well-coordinated administrative support in order for researchers to be competitive. This is especially true at institutions such as KSU where teaching levels are generally higher. While student recruitment efforts generally compete with institutions that are similar to KSU, researchers compete against faculty from all types of universities and research organizations, from Stanford to the University of Michigan and from University of Washington to UCLA. Therefore, it is recommended that KSU combine and adequately fund all research related functions under the direction of a Vice President for Research who reports to the president. It is important to have an administrative structure in support of research that emulates that of the research universities that Kent State researchers compete against in order to win
grants and contracts. The emerging trend is to have research administration combined as a “one-stop shop”.

4. The VPR should have direct responsibility for administrative functions that support research, which include among others combining pre- and post-award functions, Institutional Advancement’s Corporate and Foundation Relations proposal preparations and processing (except those involving Foundations where Foundation-Foundation agreements are required), research infrastructure (equipment and space), and human resources. Less important but related is close coordination with other administrative functions such as governmental affairs and economic development. However, these functions are also reporting to the VPR with increased frequency at other research universities.

5. On a number of campuses seeking to increase research the first tendency is to spend significant resources in recruiting research focused new faculty. At Kent State it is unlikely that this would produce a significant increase in research. In large part, this is because the conditions and administrative structure necessary to have these new faculty reach their potential is not in place and they would stretch already inadequate support just that much further. The data suggest that KSU faculty has the ability to produce high quality publications, but are not motivated or administratively supported to the degree necessary to have them successfully compete for external funding. In addition, there are some deans who do not view extramural funding as being a priority, being necessary, and/or being a wise investment of limited resources. Given that KSU has untapped research capacity, harnessing this through increasing administrative support will produce quick growth in research funding at a high return on investment. However, there will be a point where this capacity will be attained, and, at that point additional growth in funded research will require the addition of new faculty.

6. While RASP is the singular administrative unit that is viewed by researchers as being helpful, it is understaffed and there is a growing level of concern that the services they provide will not be available. Combining research administrative functions and the associated staff and budgets will create critical mass and the ability to shift support as required to meet demand. In addition, to produce successful research proposals additional funding for RASP is needed. In short, the expanded RASP capacity to support researchers must be ahead of the level of support needed by researchers in order to pull proposals from researchers who have the qualifications to win grants and contracts but not the time or experience (this is the untapped research capacity). This extends to administratively “buying down” the time faculty spend on research administrative functions. Nationally, 40% of a researcher’s time is spent on administrative functions. The odds are this is higher at KSU, so additional administrative support will provide a quick boost to faculty performance and satisfaction.

7. The research overhead distribution formula and the fact that RASP is mostly or totally supported by overhead create unnecessary and unhelpful conflicts. The RCM budget model serves to further raise the stakes by creating disconnects in motivations that produce conflicts. Overhead recovery has not been shown to be a strong motivator and
causes attention to be taken away from direct research funding as being most valuable. The solution is to either have the deans or the general administrative budget receive all of the overhead, but in doing so assume increased financial responsibility to support research. Because the logic of RCM pressures deans not to support research, and because of the small amount of overhead that is available, distribution of overhead to the deans is not a workable approach at this time. As such, overhead should be rolled into the general central administrative budget and the VPR should be provided with an annual budget sufficient to support research administrative function and productively partner with deans to cost share faculty recruitment/retention and equipment start-up/maintenance costs. In part, this system in and of itself will send the message that research is an institutional priority.

8. The VPR should be viewed as a key advisor to the president and the primary administrative partner of the provost. Odds are that only the president, provost, and VPR are tenured faculty members. It is important that the university community see the academic and research missions as being strongly connected by seeing the provost and VPR as being partners. The VPR should attend dean council meetings on a regular basis and the provost should attend research advisory committee meetings. The provost and VPR should function as a team related to faculty recruitment and retention decisions, promotion and tenure recommendations to the president, and annual evaluation of dean performance.

9. The number of research centers and institutes should be limited to those that provide specialized infrastructure and support resources. Having 53 centers and institutes seems well beyond what is reasonable for KSU’s current level of activities. Generally, these will require a base budget funded centrally.

**Summary**

Strong messaging from the central administration will signal that growing research is critically important to the university’s future. Research support and growth should be included as an element in all administrators’ key performance indicators in a fashion similar to the increased research performance expectations for faculty. As such, at many universities the provost and VPR work together to review the research portion of a dean’s annual performance evaluation.

To reach its goal of increasing research, Kent State’s leaders should elevate the visibility and functions of the VPR position and provide a portfolio and administrative policies that allow the position to successfully have a positive influence on the campus culture and to drive the research mission.

Restructure and invest in research administrative support to harness the external funding potential of current faculty before recruiting new research faculty.
University leaders should modify the RCM financial model, including but not limited to overhead recovery distribution, so that it reduces conflicts and motivates a collective desire to support and grow research.

**General Conditions for Advancing Academic Research and Scholarly Activities**

**“The 4-C’s”**

**Culture**  
Research / Scholarship are viewed as critical to the institution’s future by everyone, from the chair of the board to the freshman that just arrived on campus

**Commitment**  
Policy, Practices, and Procedures designed on first principles to support research and scholarly activities

**Capital**  
Intellectual, Financial, Physical resources that are appropriately deployed to provide a competitive advantage

Resources:
- People
- Money
- Infrastructure (equipment and space)

**Courage**  
Administration and faculty willing to only accept excellence, not just being adequate. Only worth doing, if there is a plan that makes it reasonably possible to do exceptionally well against the best universities. This is a case where good is the enemy of best.

1. Research is the most culture and morale sensitive activity on a campus. This is both an opportunity and a challenge.

2. Research is not a direct revenue source on its own (it almost always loses money), but it is the most powerful reputation driver (outside of athletics) and as such, it enhances the potential of other revenue sources (tuition, development, public support).

3. Research requires a strongly supportive environment to allow faculty and students to reach their full potential as scholars. Few were able to do this on their own in the past and even fewer will be able to be “Lone Rangers” in the future. The university of the future will distinguish itself less by size and more by having an exceptionally supportive environment.

4. Policies and practices should be designed to achieve the behaviors and achievements that the institution seeks.
5. The administrative and budget structure needs to be such that it provides the new VPR the best chance of being successful. Overhead should be removed as a source of conflict and as motivator for unhelpful behaviors.
Each circle represents an area of global research strength at Kent State. The size of the circle relates to the number of researchers working in the area and the location relates to the discipline. Circles towards the center are more interdisciplinary.

Circles in the upper right quadrant have leadership in both the quality and quantity of the research. Circles in the upper left quadrant have good quality but would benefit by producing more research. Circles in the lower right would benefit by focusing more on the having higher impact. Circles in the lower left, while having global strength would benefit by having both more research produced and of being or higher impact.
Research productivity was keeping pace with number of similar universities until between 2004-06 when UTA, UNT, and UWM significantly increased. Other universities were also not able to keep up. On the other hand, it is very important to note that when it comes to quality of research produce, Kent State leads of these other universities.
For its size and structure, Kent State enjoys a strong number of research programs that rank highly within the area of research they represent on a global level. These include a number of dedicated competencies (DC) and emerging competencies (EC). It is important to maintain the position of strength in the DC while providing support for the EC to continue to develop and reach their full potential.
Examples of areas of global research strength at Kent State University. It is noteworthy that for a number these Kent State has a stronger position than very well know and much larger and research intensive universities, such as Harvard, Michigan, Illinois, UCLA, and Georgia Tech.