Northwestern University Research Institutes and Centers (URICs)

From Inception to Sunset

Northwestern is at the forefront of convergence research that harnesses diverse expertise to solve challenging problems. Over 50 years ago, Northwestern’s forward-looking strategy drove the establishment of the first University Research Centers and some of those pioneers are still thriving. University Research Institutes and Centers (URICs) involve faculty and students from multiple departments and schools and report to the Office for Research. The vision for URICs is to lead innovative interdisciplinary research and amplify Northwestern’s impact as a premier research and education institution that leads in improving the future.

To receive designation as a URIC, units are required to address a challenge that has a societal impact, be a University strategic priority, and demonstrate a cross-disciplinary approach. A URIC must be outstanding in comparison to similar centers at peer institutions and is expected to increase Northwestern’s eminence in its realm. URICs aim to secure multi-million-dollar grants from federal agencies involving collaboration between multiple PIs. They may also be expected to seek philanthropic support and establish broad local and/or international collaborations. In addition, URICs provide an academic home to research core facilities, as appropriate. Indeed approximately 70% of OR’s core facilities on the Evanston campus are housed in URICs.

URICs have been a preferred choice of self-assembled faculty to conduct their interdisciplinary research and have been a driving force in recruitment and retention of talent. Typically, a new URIC starts as a bottom-up, faculty-led initiative. Requests for establishing a new URIC come in different forms; these have included award from an extramurally sponsored Center grant, philanthropy, new University priority, faculty recruitment or retention, etc. Requests are typically made to University leadership, specifically the Provost, Vice-President for Research (VPR), or a Dean. The requests may initiate the establishment of a task force, followed by a series of discussions, including programmatic and administrative planning, assessment of the program alignment with a URIC or a school-based center, short-term and long-term resources that are required, and sustainability.

The prospective director is required to submit a proposal including:

- The Center’s mission and vision
- Societal impact
- Demonstrated need; evidence that the new initiative could not be undertaken in the absence of the proposed URIC
- Impact on Northwestern eminence
- Assessment of similar units nationally and internationally
- Current and planned interdisciplinary research collaborations that provide a foundation for the URIC’s activities
- Proposed research and educational activities
- Proposed team and a strategy for membership growth
• A business plan – current and future external funding (federal and non-federal), as well as internal support
  • Budget
  • Sustainability plan
  • Metrics to assess success

• The Associate Vice President for Research (AVPR) that oversees URIC Administration (URICA) typically works with the prospective director on the proposal development.
• The proposal is reviewed and approved by VPR, Office for Research Senior leadership, and the appropriate schools.
• The establishment of a new URIC requires a mutual agreement of the Office for Research, the appropriate deans, and the Provost.
• Institutes are umbrella organizations for thematically linked centers and cores, which enables a more efficient utilization of resources. As such, when appropriate, a new center is established under an existing institute.
• Once a new URIC is approved, the VPR appoints the director for a 3-year term, agreed upon by the director and the appropriate research deans.
• Based on satisfactory annual review (detailed below), the appointment is subjected to renewal or termination.
• URICs are subjected to a rigorous annual review by Office for Research senior leadership. Each URIC Director is required to submit a comprehensive report on previous year activities and a plan including budget request for the next fiscal year.
• Maintaining a URIC status requires the satisfactory execution of responsibilities by the Director, including but not limited to:
  • Developing, reassessing, and implementing a strategic plan
  • Securing external funding in support of the URIC’s mission, such as large collaborative awards that emphasize interdisciplinary research
  • Stimulating new research activities, collaborations, and directions, in part by organizing meetings, workshops, as well as educational and outreach activities
  • Supervising the technical and administrative staff, and overseeing their professional growth
  • Overseeing the finances and accounts, working closely with the Office for Research on these activities
  • Submitting an annual report to the Office for Research
  • Maintaining the URIC’s leadership position in its mission area as benchmarked against peer research institutes and centers
• Following the review of the annual report, the leadership of each URIC meets in-person with appropriate AVPR or the VPR to discuss the programmatic and administrative performance of the unit. This meeting serves as an in-depth information exchange and discussion about the URIC performance and future plans.
• URICs that are judged to no longer meet the URIC criteria and institutional strategic value may lose their Office for Research status including any associated financial support. At that point they may be sunset or, in agreement with a school, transition into a school-based center.