2008/09 has been an outstanding year for the Faculty Council on Research (FCR). Like many councils, the economic difficulties of the State and University made the issues addressed by the FCR all the more critical and complex. However, unlike councils like budget & planning who were focused on cuts and shrinking resources, research was focused on a stimulus bump (predicted to be @$300 Million on a more than billion dollar annual effort) and the fact that research was becoming an increasingly larger percentage of the overall university budget. In this environment, many regular FCR issues took on new aspects while other new issues emerged. Throughout the year, faculty FCR representatives worked closely with staff and faculty in the Provost’s Office of Research to address these myriad issues.

One key area of interest was the nature of and policies guiding university centers, institutes and other research units. This has traditionally been an FCR issue but in the new financial environment, issues associated with these research units arose in new ways and with new interpretations. For example, in previous years when FCR examined the issue of indirect cost returns to support interdisciplinary cross-campus research units, we were told that the justification for these costs were the facilities and administration that supported these research activities; therefore a unit needed to own space to have a claim on those costs. This was a key part of the justification that Deans and Chairs owned those Research Cost Recovery (RCR) funds passed on by the central administration after taking their portion. However, in the new financial environment Deans and Chairs now want to use RCR returns to replace lost State funds—in this case these funds will not pay for facilities or administration that can be linked to research, but rather for teaching, travel, and other non-research related items. When this was questioned we got a revised interpretation: while the rate of indirect cost returns is justified by expenditures on facilities and administration in support of research, there are no legal restrictions on how these monies can be spent once they are received.

This interpretation is now being used to justify Deans and Chairs who have chosen not to return any indirect costs to the faculty who generated them and instead use these funds for general expenses previously covered by State funds. However, this interpretation also opens the door to a fundamentally different perception of who “owns” those funds, especially the portion that is passed on by central administration, through Deans, to department Chairs. Since space ownership is no longer a consideration in how these funds can be distributed and spent, it is reasonable to see the faculty who generate them to have as reasonable a claim as their department chairs. The university has no general policy on how departments deal with passed down RCR—some departments allow faculty to vote on an openly distributed policy, others have no policy at all with the Chairs proceeding however they see fit.
The nature of research units and the distribution of resources that support faculty involved in research will continue to be an important topic in 2009/10. The Office of Research has provided us with a draft guidance policy and we will use that to move forward on what may ultimately become Class C or even Class A legislation. One possible solution would see Chairs and faculty who generate funds as co-owners, with a requirement for an open policy agreed upon by unit faculty and with the Vice-Provost for Research acting as a judge in any disputes.

More generally, as the university moves to a budgeting model where funding is linked to performance (e.g. more student credit hours equals more tuition dollars), we will need to think about how this model impacts the model for how we handle funded research, the single largest component of the university budget.

Issues associated with Research Faculty are another ongoing FCR subject that was impacted by current economic conditions. As State funds become scarce, so too do funds that are needed to keep research faculty from being 100% funded on grants (which might mean they cannot legally write new grants or participate in departmental activities). This exacerbates an already difficult situation that we have wrestled with on a yearly basis. There are many aspects to this issue—not just available non-research funds but yearly reporting requirements as well. A recent development is the switch from quarterly to six month reporting, which should help but needs to be managed. Numerous issues associated with research faculty and their interactions with the rest of the university will continue to be an important topic for FCR in the coming year.

FCR dealt with many other issues this year, some of which were impacted by the economic situation and some of which were not. Our role in approving classified, proprietary and restricted research focused more on the mechanism by which this is done than on the ongoing approval on individual projects. Last summer we completed a blanket approval of the Applied Physics Lab’s (APL) Navy multi-year contract, and since most of our classified proposals come from APL, there were fewer number of projects to review. However, an existing award from the Office of the Director of National Security (ODNI) that had not been reviewed because it did not involve classified information, led to a request for information and then a series of reviews. In the end, FCR found no problems with the award although one aspect of the award concerning student foreign travel was modified by the grantee in negotiations with the new Vice Provost for Global Affairs. FCR also concluded its joint work with the University Libraries Council, culminating in Class C legislation that will now need to be overseen and guided as publishing mechanisms continue to evolve.

It has been my pleasure to serve as FCR Chair for 2008-2009 and I look forward to working with Gerry Miller as I continue as a member of FCR next year.