ACADEMIC SENATE
BERKELEY
320 STEPHENS HALL
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

October 28, 2025

CHAIR MARK STACEY
Academic Senate

Re: The Urgent Need to Transform Research Administration at UC Berkeley

Dear Chair Stacey,

I submitted the following to you on behalf of the Committee on Research (COR).

The Current Crisis and Call for Innovation
UC Berkeley, like other leading research universities, faces unprecedented external pressures that threaten its research mission. These pressures have exposed and exacerbated longstanding inefficiencies in administrative systems affecting nearly every process that supports research, including grant submissions, fund tracking, procurement, reimbursements, travel, hiring, and staff management. The resulting administrative burden drains faculty and staff time from research, teaching, and proposal development.

In light of federal funding trends and political pressures, it is even more urgent to improve the efficiency of our own systems. The Committee on Research (COR) encourages the campus to innovate by streamlining processes, tailoring oversight to risk, and improving transparency and accountability.

In a spirit of collaboration, COR submits this memo to:

1. **Reinforce recommendations** from prior task forces and pilots that identified clear, actionable paths toward reform.
2. **Call for urgent action** to ensure that Berkeley's administrative systems support, rather than hinder, its research enterprise.
3. **Broaden COR's advisory role** in shared governance to support institutional accountability and continuous improvement.

Building on Prior Work
Many campus task forces have already diagnosed the core problems and proposed solutions. COR strongly supports renewed implementation of the recommendations from the following initiatives:

- Reducing Bureaucratic Burden Task Force (2022–23)**:** Surveyed >800 respondents, identifying pain points and recommending cultural and structural reforms, and summarized findings in a final report.

- Collaborative & Community-Engaged Research (CCER) Pilot (2022): Demonstrated practical innovations, including streamlined vendor insurance and delegated travel approvals. Created a Quick Start Administrative Guide.
- Institutional Change Initiative for Community-Engaged Research: Partnered with administrators and IRB to clarify compliance and reduce friction in partnered research. Authored a memo on Payment Process Innovation.
- Social Justice Research Task Force (2021–22): Recommended equitable support structures for community-engaged scholarship.
- Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Life Sciences (CACLS): Documented deficiencies in infrastructure and administration across life sciences research units. Their recent work includes a 2022 report on the State of Buildings, Physical Plant, Core Facilities and Research Administration that Support Life Sciences, and a letter submitted in 2023 in response to the UAW strike settlement.

Across all these reports, a consistent picture emerges of a research administration system that is fragmented, risk-averse, understaffed, and overly complex, producing widespread frustration for faculty, staff, and community partners alike. Processes for hiring, procurement, contracting, and grant management are described as opaque, duplicative, and slow, with responsibilities scattered across multiple uncoordinated offices and frequent hand-offs that waste time and erode accountability. Chronic understaffing in research administration, especially pre- and post-award support, compounds these problems and discourages proposal submissions. A pervasive culture of risk aversion and compliance creates structural barriers to innovation, community partnerships, and timely project delivery. Across previous task force documents, the most common recommendations call for simplification, clearer points of contact, better staffing and training, improved cross-unit coordination, and a cultural shift toward trust, accountability, and proportional risk management.

Structural and Systemic Reforms
To address systemic inefficiencies, COR recommends the following priorities:

1. Create a Unified Research Portal
Establish a single digital and service entry point for all research-related processes: grant proposals, contracts, compliance, and post-award management, with real-time status tracking and a single escalation pathway. The goal should be to eliminate duplication and confusion.

2. Designate an "Award Lifecycle Owner" with Shared Metrics
Assign end-to-end responsibility for each project's administrative lifecycle under the Vice Chancellor for Research (VCR), with authority to coordinate across the Sponsored Projects Office (SPO), Industry Alliances Office (IAO), Berkeley Regional Services (BRS), and Finance Division. Define clear Service Level Agreements (SLAs)—internal performance benchmarks that specify expected turnaround times, communication standards, and accountability measures for each unit—and make performance metrics publicly visible.

3. Integrate Public and Industry Sponsor Pathways
Merge intake and tracking for SPO (public sponsors) and IAO/IPIRA (industry sponsors). Maintain specialized expertise within each office, but unify intake, routing, and communication to ensure consistency.

4. Consolidate Compliance Guidance
Designate Research Administration and Compliance (RAC) as the authoritative source for compliance information, with all other offices linking back to RAC's resources. Maintain version control and visible review dates on all policy pages.

5. Establish Joint VCR–CFO Governance for Post-Award Finance
Formalize collaboration between the VCR and CFO offices with shared accountability for award setup, invoicing, and financial reporting. Implement joint dashboards tracking key indicators such as cash aging, effort certification, and audit resolution.

6. Standardize Berkeley Regional Services (BRS) Practices
Develop a campus-wide research administration playbook to ensure consistent service standards and cross-training across regions. Provide professional development opportunities and retention incentives to reduce turnover and improve expertise.

7. Modernize and Integrate Campus Systems
Modernize antiquated platforms such as BearBuy, Phoebe, and the Berkeley Learning Center. Integrate them into a user-friendly portal leveraging hierarchical menus and AI-assisted navigation. Collaborate with faculty and students in Computer Science and Data Science to prototype and test solutions.

8. Strengthen Feedback Loops and Transparency
Implement regular, two-way communication channels (via COR, the Senate, and campus websites) to share reform progress and solicit input from researchers. Visible progress reports will improve morale and foster a culture of shared ownership.

9. Invest in and Empower Administrative Staff
Recruit, train, and retain skilled staff, ensuring they are fairly compensated, well-supported, and evaluated on service quality and problem-solving. Empower staff to manage processes holistically, reducing unnecessary handoffs.

Expanding COR's Advisory Role
Recognizing that COR is composed of a rotating group of faculty with significant research and teaching responsibilities, its most effective role is to use its standing and legitimacy within the Academic Senate to sustain attention to research administration as a campus priority. COR can add value not by taking on operational work, but by ensuring visibility, continuity, and accountability. Specifically, COR can:

- Institutionalize transparency and follow-through by requesting regular, data-informed reports from the EVCP and VCR on research administration reforms and by reviewing performance dashboards once or twice each year.
- Aggregate and elevate faculty feedback from departments and Senate committees to identify systemic pain points, rather than case-by-case issues, and communicate those patterns to campus leadership.
- Designate limited-term liaisons to advise on selected administrative pilots (e.g., new procurement or hiring workflows), offering early faculty perspective without imposing broad committee demands.

- Preserve institutional memory through an annual one-to-two-page handoff brief that documents progress, ongoing issues, and contacts for the next year's committee.

Broader Strategic Considerations
In addition to administrative restructuring, Berkeley must address broader budgetary and structural challenges that affect research sustainability. COR recommends consideration of two major budgetary issues:

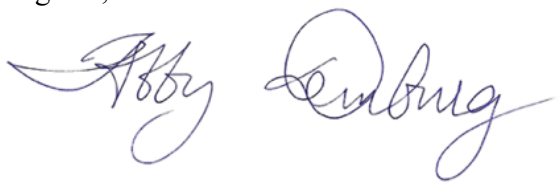
Allocation of Indirect Costs (IDC)
Revisit IDC distribution to ensure that research-generated funds directly support research infrastructure. Develop contingency plans for potential federal IDC reductions and consider returning a greater share to departments to incentivize grant activity.

Reduce or Eliminate Doctoral Tuition Charges
Ph.D. tuition remains a major barrier to sustaining research and training. Explore mechanisms to reduce or eliminate tuition for doctoral researchers, especially post-candidacy, and identify sustainable funding alternatives to preserve graduate training capacity.

Summary
Berkeley's research excellence depends on efficient, transparent, and responsive administrative systems that empower, rather than encumber, researchers. COR urges campus leadership to make administrative reform a top institutional priority, anchored in shared governance, measurable outcomes, and a renewed commitment to Berkeley's public mission.

Thank you for considering these issues and our request for collaboration.

Regards,



Abby F. Dernburg, Chair
Committee on Research

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