

## OVERVIEW OF ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY'S INDIRECT COSTS PROGRAM (ICP)\* EXPENDITURES IN FISCAL YEAR 2014-2015

Athabasca University (AU) is committed to fostering a robust and supportive culture that effectively balances disciplinary and mission-critical (i.e., pedagogical, cognitive, technological and student support aspects of distance/distributed learning, open access, learning technologies) research. The federal Indirect Costs Program (ICP) grant continues to make a significant contribution to enhancing AU's research enterprise.

Being able to offer a broad range of research-related services is a critical element in building research capacity within AU and recruiting and retaining highly qualified academics, research chairs and research trainees (e.g., undergraduate and graduate students; postdoctoral research fellows). Providing the infrastructure required to support researchers and build research capacity is however costly. Whereas the direct costs of research are funded through grants and awards, indirect costs such as the day-to-day operational expenses incurred in supporting researchers' endeavors (e.g., costs of facilities and resources; administrative support, including staff salaries and benefits; adherence to regulatory requirements), are normally the responsibility of the university.

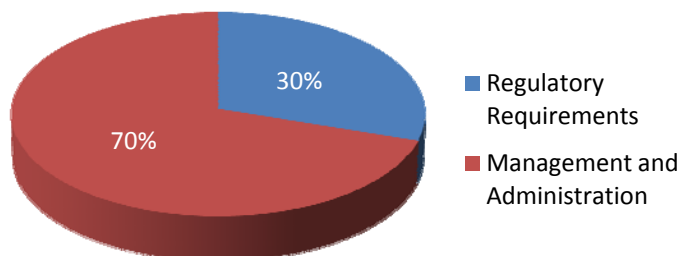
The receipt of funding from the ICP has meant that internal resources that would normally be devoted to research support staff salaries and benefits can be redirected to fund other research-related initiatives. For example, it has allowed AU to:

- Provide matching funds, as required in some grant applications, and allow researchers to apply to a broader range of competitions than would otherwise be possible.
- Provide competitive internal research grants to support small-scale and/or pilot projects to lay the groundwork for a grant application to the federal granting councils and/or other funding agencies.
- Support graduate student research endeavors (discussed earlier).
- Provide bridge funding in anticipation of the receipt of external funding.
- Offer training to enhance researchers' skill sets (e.g., data management and data analysis).
- Support the dissemination of research at national and international conferences.
- Defray the costs of publication in open access journals.
- Provide seed funding to assist researchers to host disciplinary-focused workshops/seminars and to take advantage of opportunities to engage in research partnerships that arise outside normal grant application cycles.
- Purchase a three-year subscription to a searchable, electronic database, *Research Professional*, which provides current information about potential sources of research funding. This database has the potential to assist researchers in leveraging funds secured through the federal granting councils and to increase research capacity within the university and within Canada.

Initiatives such as these have increased individual as well as institutional research capacity.

During the past fiscal year, AU's ICP funds were earmarked to defray expenditures in two expenditure categories: (1) regulatory requirements and accreditation and (2) management and administration, both of which are priority areas for AU's Research Centre. The chart below provides an overview of some important activities that fall into each category; additional details are found in the narrative that follows.

### **Impact of the Indirect Costs Program Funding**



#### ***Regulatory Requirements and Accreditation***

Responsibility for the administrative functions of the AU Research Ethics Board (REB) and its sub-committees rests with the Research Ethics Officer. ICP funding in this category was used primarily to support the functions of this role, which include but are not limited to

- conveying information to researchers, and to the Research Ethics Board and its sub-committee members, about relevant human ethics policies and guidelines;
- providing administrative support to the Research Ethics Board and its sub-committees;
- offering feedback to applicants on their applications, both prior to and after the Research Ethics Board review process; and
- tracking applications and ensuring compliance with applicable policies and guidelines.

#### ***Management and Administration***

In addition to the preceding, ICP funding in this category was also used to support the acquisition and implementation of an integrated online database-driven system, known internally as the 'AU Research Portal'. This system has significantly streamlined the process for submitting, reviewing, approving and tracking grant applications (deployed January 2015) and applications for ethical approval of research involving humans (deployed March 2014).

Users, be they academics, students, committee members or administrative staff, can enter details directly, track the status of an application, receive automatic reminders for significant milestones (such as annual ethics certification renewals), and in some cases, compile individual and/or aggregate reports, and archive files in the system. The system has eliminated much of the labor-intensive manipulation of files that was previously required to submit, receive and review an application, prepare meeting agendas and minutes, and generate reports for various purposes.

This is, without doubt, the single most important new initiative funded by the ICP during the past two fiscal years. As noted above, its usefulness extends beyond the administrative staff of the Research Centre to multiple other stakeholders and end-users. Although the system has only been in place for a short time, its potential long-term benefits are readily apparent. For example,

whereas the generation of summative reports to support a grant application or tenure/promotion review sometimes took several hours or days to compile from our paper-based records in the past, such reports can now be compiled in mere minutes, with a high degree of confidence in their accuracy and completeness.

Investment in this important resource has allowed the Research Centre to substantially increase and enhance its services to researchers without increasing the number of staff required to do so. This is exceedingly important, given that fiscal constraints are expected to continue into the future.

Among other functions, the Research Centre provides assistance to researchers to facilitate the submission of research grant applications and the financial management of grants and awards. In the face of ever-increasing costs, ICP funding has been essential to enhancing the administrative support provided to researchers including:

- providing advice about potential funding opportunities;
- assisting researchers (e.g., faculty; students) with grant applications, including ensuring that the applications are complete, budgets are appropriately constructed and required signatures are secured;
- ensuring that grant applications are submitted to the respective funding agencies prior to the stated deadlines;
- coordinating the research ethics approval process; and
- supporting the financial administration of grants awarded thus allowing researchers to focus on conducting their research and advancing knowledge in their field.

The post-award financial grant administrator, whose position is fully funded by the ICP, is responsible for the following:

- establishing and overseeing financial accounts;
- assisting researchers to monitor accounts;
- processing purchase orders, expense claims, and timesheets;
- tracking expenditures and ensuring compliance with eligibility criteria;
- directing researchers to relevant policies and procedures and assisting with the interpretation thereof; and
- coordinating financial reporting processes, including the preparation of financial reports for validation by Financial Services.

These functions reduce the amount of time the researchers need to invest in the administration of their grant(s) and enable them to focus on research productivity and scholarship excellence. Without ICP funding, it would not be possible to sustain the level of service or the considerable efficiencies gained by locating these important functions within the Research Centre.

Another important outcome of the ICP funding is the grants mentorship that has been provided to AU researchers to assist them in developing their grant applications. This has been a particularly important asset for new researchers, researchers resubmitting applications, and those whom English is not their first language. Researchers who worked with the grants mentors in the past year have consistently reported that the assistance provided has been valuable in helping them increase the quality of their grant applications.

## **Summary**

One of the key research-related goals set out in the Athabasca University Strategic University Plan 2011-2016 is to provide appropriate support for faculty, staff and student research and scholarship. As described, ICP funding has played a significant role in enhancing the research services provided to AU faculty and students.

Being able to offer a broad range of research-related services available is an important asset in recruiting highly qualified research chairs, faculty and trainees (e.g., graduate students; postdoctoral fellows). Likewise, helping them establish a sound program of funded research is essential to their success and their retention within the institution. The contribution of the ICP program to these endeavors is invaluable in increasing AU's research capacity.

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\*ICP funds reported here refers to the federal government's investment used to cover a portion of the indirect costs of research supported by the three federal funding agencies (the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) at Universities and colleges, and at their affiliated research hospitals and institutes.