

2008 UNOLS Issues and Priorities

The difficulty in setting priorities for costly facilities within our community.

The near-term future for UNOLS, and all organizations with oversight over oceanographic facilities, will be difficult. The National Science Foundation and other federal agencies have struggled mightily to keep their part of the bargain that grew out of the Stratton Commission, that the fleet would be assured multi-year funding, but it has been increasingly difficult with the federal budget deficit situation. For UNOLS to continue to serve its community, it will have to do more than just its historic functions of scheduling and managing facilities. It will have to take on a larger role in helping to set priorities through its ability to reach out to the community of facility users. If UNOLS fails to take on this responsibility, and engage in a meaningful way with other facilities operators, the task will be done for us, and UNOLS will be increasingly irrelevant as it continues to manage an ever shrinking and less capable asset pool.

UNOLS Committees often provide recommendations to agencies and operating institutions which have a cost impact on the overall budget available for other UNOLS facilities. These recommendations are often, but not always, vetted and approved by the UNOLS Council, usually dependent on the costs involved. In referring to the recommendation of all UNOLS committees, the UNOLS Charter states, “**Their recommendations to funding agencies shall be delivered through the UNOLS Council or Executive Committee.**” However, to date, UNOLS has lacked a consistent process to route those recommendations through Council.

Therefore, UNOLS Council is implementing a process whereby all significant recommendations from UNOLS Standing and Ad-hoc committees be reviewed, approved and endorsed by the UNOLS Council before being transmitted to the Federal Agencies and facility operating institutions.

Significant would mean any recommendation or endorsement that would involve major direct expenditure of funds or would have a major impact on the level of effort by facility operators that would result in added costs or compromise other efforts. Major would be defined as anything resulting in a cost of one million dollars or more in capital funds or having an annual operational cost impact across the fleet of one million dollars or more. Other recommendations that the Committee or the Council consider significant for other reasons can also be reviewed and endorsed by Council when deemed appropriate.

UNOLS through the UNOLS Council should recommend relative priorities for major infrastructure investments and facility operating budgets. This could include recommendations regarding facilities that impact the ocean sciences budget, but are not directly under the UNOLS purview such as Ocean Drilling, OOI and Antarctic logistics and research.

In order to do this, Council will need to be much better educated on the science driving the facilities needs across all aspects of oceanography and on all of the goings-on of the various subcommittees. Council and Committee members will have to learn about each others' fields of interests and where the real frontiers are that are driving the facilities upgrades.

UNOLS should maintain a living document or rolling list of major facility recommendations and issues with linked background information that would help new members of the Council get up to speed and would put new recommendations into context.

Process for Gaining Council Endorsement

1. Committee chair forwards letter with recommendations that the committee would like to transmit to the Federal Agency or the Facility Operator to the UNOLS Chair for consideration.
2. UNOLS chair transmits the letter to the UNOLS Council, along with a copy of the committee charge, for Council comment, along with a deadline for comments (typically 2 weeks).
3. If there is no dissent, the UNOLS Chair prepares a cover memo indicating UNOLS Council endorsement of the letter that is transmitted along with the recommendations to the Federal Agency or the Facility Operator.
4. If there are objections to the recommendations as drafted, the UNOLS Chair arranges a conference call among concerned members of Council, any other Council members who wish to participate, the Committee chair, and other interested Committee members, for the purpose of reaching agreement on the content of the recommendations.
5. All members of Council will see and approve the final version of the recommendations before transmittal.
6. In the situation in which Council and the Committee cannot come to agreement, the recommendations may be transmitted with a qualified letter from Council explaining points of disagreement, but the recommendations will clearly have far less impact. This outcome should be avoided at all costs.