2.4 Recruiting and Restructuring the Faculty Team

The Director's role in recruiting is pivotal to the center's success. This process starts with the formation of the team that assembles the initial ERC proposal and includes all subsequent new-faculty and on-campus recruiting, as well as the involvement of faculty from core-partner universities and other institutions on a project basis. Many of the university's faculty researchers will watch the center develop with interest, but far fewer are willing to do the hard work required to make the center successful. From the very beginning, the Director needs to define and disseminate the value proposition of being part of the ERC. In particular, s/he has to make it clear from the outset that, large as it may seem, an ERC budget gets sliced thinly, often to the extent that any given faculty member only sees the equivalent of an NSF single investigator grant. Faculty who are truly invested will be "in" for reasons besides the funding. Effective administration of any research enterprise calls for a careful balance between the superstars and the sometimes equally talented workhorses, and the new Director should carefully select those individuals who are committed to working toward the success of the center and not just toward the furtherance of their self-interest.

Further, it is up to the Director to form a cohesive team who will work well together. This is especially challenging with regards to faculty at the partner institutions, who the Director is unlikely to know well. S/he therefore has to depend on the leads at those institutions to serve as his/her emissary in recruiting. One model that works well is to recruit faculty who already have a history of collaboration with each other because they will have likely worked through/past interpersonal issues.

The Director must also hold to his/her vision and keep the objectives of the ERC Program in mind; and to do that, he or she must recruit faculty who can build a truly world-class research team. It is not essential that all center faculty be also talented in education and technology transfer, but they must—at minimum—acknowledge, respect, and support those equally important center activities. A particular hang-up can be the ERC's intellectual property policy, which in general will require the ERC to give members of its Industry/Practitioner Advisory Board some consideration even ahead of the inventors. Potential consequences include thwarting the inventors' ability to form a start-up company or open-sourcing their invention. Again, the Director needs to make that abundantly clear. (Some ERCs even require all participants to sign a form acknowledging that they understand the nuances of the ERC's intellectual property policy.)

Perhaps the best evaluation strategy the Director can apply throughout the process of recruiting, is to project his/her honest enthusiasm about all of the center's activities and listen very carefully for any signs of arrogance or superiority, both of which are attitudes that do not mesh well with the team culture of an ERC.

2.4.1 Recruiting for the Proposal Team

Experience has shown that the dedicated band of true believers that surround the prospective Director during the proposal stage does not always survive intact to form the nucleus of the funded center. This may actually be fortunate, because a diverse and evolving difference in attitudes, opinions, and approaches among the center's main contributors often helps to form the vision of a really exciting ERC. Such a group may also include people with different perspectives on the needs and best directions in the center's chosen field. For this reason, the faculty who constitute the university's critical mass in the chosen research area will serve as a good platform on which the prospective Director can begin to focus and define his/her vision of the embryonic ERC. The eventual interdisciplinary nature of the ERC will be determined largely by the strategic plan and the composition of the organizing group.

The prospective Director is well?advised to approach the respective Deans and Department Heads for their support and buy-in before recruiting faculty and graduate students from other departments. Doing so helps ensure that their considerations are understood and respected (and helps get them onboard for the long haul). Conversely, not doing so could lead to undesirable tensions between ERC and departmental goals and procedures. For example, at some universities, collaborations with other faculty members (as opposed to an investigator leading his/her own research) penalize young faculty working toward tenure; hence, participation in an ERC can actually constitute a threat to the career objectives of talented young people at those institutions.

2.4.2 Recruiting for the Initial Center Team

The first few years for the fledgling ERC are a critical time in its development. Faculty who were interested only in

funding opportunities will begin to fall away, and the Director will need to rely on a significant commitment from his/her "recruits to the vision" for the process of delegation that will determine success or failure for the ERC. At least one, and preferably several, members of the successful organizing group should have a commitment to education and/or to technology transfer. NSF monitors these activities from Year 1 but, much more importantly, the full vision of the ERC Program cannot be expressed until pivotal ERC faculty embrace these parts of the vision. This is a period in which the Director must shape the initial team and aim it toward success at Year 3, but still keep his/her eye on the long-term vision for the center. This is also a time of exciting expansion and the Director should assess which disciplines need to be represented in the center in order for it to achieve world leadership, and make preliminary moves toward bringing the most effective proponents of those disciplines into the center .

To ensure that the allocation of research activities to affiliate institutions or PIs is successful and the activities are well-integrated with the center's educational and technology transfer protocol, it is also vital during these early years to have an established research alliance and a well-defined memorandum of understanding or equivalent binding inter-institutional agreement.

During the initial flush of the ERC's success, it is imperative that the new Director leverage the center's newly minted prestige to seed the long-term projects that, in his/her judgment, serve the center's vision. Conventional departments are looking for long-term center funding for new faculty, and the Director is now in a strong position in dealings with the university hierarchy to help achieve this. This is the time to staff the "long lines" of the Director's personal strategy for realizing the center's vision. This is the time to recruit, both from outside and from on campus, the people that the Director sees as being necessary for success at the third-year milestone as well as the people that he/she sees as being vital to the long-term vision of the center. Normally at this early stage of the center's development, these new recruits will be readily welcomed into the center.

Recruiting approaches can vary, depending on the ERC and its relationships with the departments involved, but some approaches are fairly standard. Usually one of the members of the Directors' executive committee is a member of the search committee in their respective departments. Center members attend the interview seminars, meet with the candidate in one?on?one discussions, and offer comments to the search committee based upon their experiences with the candidate. The decision about areas in which faculty should be hired usually remains with the individual department heads and their faculty. However, it is vital that the Center Director, as well as the participating faculty, be actively involved in the recruitment of faculty. The success of the center critically depends on the quality and interests of the faculty being recruited. Similarly, the Director and center faculty must work closely with the departments involved to ensure that the individuals recruited ultimately add value to both the center and to the department. This can be a major challenge. To make it easier, it is ideal if the center can be proactive in strategic planning with the departments with regard to mutual opportunities and responsibilities. The Director should try to meet regularly with Department Chairs in order to keep lines of communication open, and should make known the center's needs for faculty with particular qualifications. In some centers the ERC has taken the lead in recruiting a new faculty member.

ERCs can generally hire non-faculty research staff and other professionals devoted entirely to the center without a direct appointment in an academic department. Such individuals play an essential role in the management and operation of every ERC. Although this capability is valuable, it is important to realize that if the center’s strategic plan changes, these individuals may not fit into the new plan and may need to be reassigned or even terminated.

2.4.3 Restructuring for Years 3?6

The period between the third and the sixth year is the stage in the development of each ERC in which the Director must play an essential role in maintaining the center's vitality and renewing its vision. Because it is easier to write an internal justification for a portion of the existing ERC grant than it is to write a free?standing proposal to a granting agency, many center PIs will view with suspicion any new recruits who threaten their previous allocation of NSF money. The Director must control the funds that support recruiting at this and all stages of the center's development, and he/she must encourage the integration of new recruits through the systematic allocation of funds to these new faculty members, enabling them to hire and support graduate students. Established PIs, many of whom will have received substantial NSF support via the ERC, should now begin to decrease their reliance on center support, while new recruits now should be thoroughly integrated into center research teams with thrust area funding attached. Often some faculty who formed the initial nucleus start to drift away as the Center matures. This is natural and to be expected. As Director, remember that your principal task is to remain true to the Center’s vision, not to warp the vision as individual interests change.

Decisions that an ERC Director makes during this vital stage in the center's development will not only have a profound effect on success in Year 6 but, again more critically, will determine the structure that exists as the center

faces the scale-down of NSF support following Year 8. If faculty are allowed to selfishly emphasize their own research interests or de-emphasis education or technology transfer opportunities, the Director may be forced to initiate measures to broaden the research and educational programs of the center and to lead to a shared vision, so that the center is revitalized as it tackles its greatest challenge, which is that of sustainability for several decades.

In the early part of this stage in the development of an ERC, it is essential that a certain attitude becomes embedded within the center. Conflicts and competitions will be inevitable as long as the center's research establishment sees the NSF grant as a source of funding from which each party hopes to receive a portion whose size is commensurate with his/her own perception of their talent and potential value to the center. The Director should reinforce the attitude that the center is in fact a consortium of talents in which participants can conduct a large and varied number of research and education activities, thereby satisfying their personal desires and fostering the growth of the center while serving the center's equal interests in education and technology transfer.

2.4.4 Restructuring for the Mature Center

A mature ERC represents a considerable investment of NSF funds that otherwise would probably have been used to initiate other centers. To be favorably evaluated at the critical sixth-year milestone, a mature ERC will need to have achieved world leadership in its chosen field of specialization. In most mature ERCs, the university, the state, and industry will have invested more than twice the NSF total of funds and all parties will have begun to see concrete accomplishments in education and technology transfer that will justify their enthusiasm and their confidence. It is at this time that the Director's recruitment activities will become both more important and more difficult.

New recruiting may become more difficult because the Director can only offer center support for tenure-track appointments in allied departments, and the research must be aligned with the center’s strategic plan. Few academics would accept a faculty appointment exclusive to an ERC at this stage with only two or three years of NSF funding remaining. The center may not hold together if it has become strictly a web of research alliances, but it certainly will find continuity if its technology transfer programs are valuable to member companies and if its faculty have learned to appreciate the power of collaborative research. As the center matures, the Director may choose to recruit a fresh cadre of faculty with specific interests and talents in the area of team?oriented, industrially related, interdisciplinary education; this transition, however, cannot be abrupt but must be implemented in a smooth and steady fashion.

It is clear that the Director of an ERC is the keeper of the center's vision and that recruiting is his/her most effective weapon in the realization of that vision. The Director will make pivotal decisions on center administrative and research management structures, but these structures are only as good as the people that the Director can call on to staff them and make them work. If the vision articulated by the Director of an ERC inspires and sustains interest within the engineering and scientific communities, many of his/her colleagues will be interested in affiliations with the center that may range from simple exploratory visits to total commitment. This interest facilitates recruitment strategies that include the recruitment of established research faculty from the university and its core-partner universities, and the well-orchestrated opening and filling of new faculty slots in areas that strengthen both the center and the affiliated departments. The Director may face a challenge from established center members, but the recruitment and integration of new center faculty is the key to the revitalization of the center and to the center's response to new opportunities in the field. Many centers report that an intellectual atherosclerosis results when the strategic direction of an ERC remains unchanged because of the personal research interests of established PIs, so recruitment of new participants is the Director's most effective weapon in preventing this natural aging process. As the center matures, cooperative and imaginative recruiting can form the basis of excellent relationships with allied departments because win?win recruiting aligns the Center Director's main weapon with a means for Deans and Department Heads to bring new life into their faculties or departments. Recruiting must strive for balance and it must serve the interests of the education and technology transfer programs that assume special importance as the center matures and plans for self-sufficiency.

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