Innovation Strategy Investment Program
SUMMARY

OHIO’s Innovation Strategy Investment Program (ISIP) is a signature strategy, designed to channel special investments into multidisciplinary initiatives that respond to problems of significance to society and in which OHIO has strong capabilities.

THE INNOVATION STRATEGY PLANNING PROCESS

OHIO initiated its Innovation Strategy planning process in 2013, with a leadership team that included academic deans, the Provost, Vice President for Finance and Administration, Vice President for Research and Creative Activity, and senior administrators.

Data collection included reviews of existing metrics and new inquiry undertaken specifically for the CICEP IEP designation project. For example, Ohio University’s Economic Impact Assessment, completed in 2014, provided economic impact data. Our consultants also conducted extensive one-on-one interviews with internal and external stakeholders to gain diverse perspectives on the University’s economic-engagement efforts. Interviewees included representatives of the City of Athens, Athens County, Appalachian Ohio, and public- and private-sector partners involved in the University’s expansion into Cleveland, Dayton, and the Greater Columbus area. This process helped us understand what these stakeholders think we do well now and what they think should be our main priorities for generating economic prosperity going forward.

PORTFOLIOS AND NICHES

The leadership team proposed four broad portfolios of innovation and specific niche areas within those portfolios as candidates for special university-level investment. The portfolios, sub-portfolios, and niches for potential strategic investment then evolved through a campus-

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Framework for Innovation Strategy Investment Priorities

Preliminary criteria used in development of the portfolios, sub-portfolios, and niches are that they:

- Must respond to a big problem or need in the economy or for society
- Must be an area in which OHIO already has strengths/assets
- Must be multidisciplinary, and involve faculty from more than one college

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Innovation Portfolios

- Digitally Connected World
- Energy, Environment and the Economy
- Health and Wellness
- Vibrant Societies and Economies
wide vetting process. Faculty provided perceptive and highly valuable comments through four university-wide open forums and via written feedback. The Vice President for Research and Creative Activity also met with many academic units and held topical meetings around each portfolio. Deans initiated college-wide meetings to further discuss implications of the strategy within their organizational and disciplinary contexts.

ABOUT THE ISIP

In any university, a challenge to fully leveraging the institution’s interdisciplinary potential is the size of the university and the insular nature of discipline-based college and department structures. The structure of this program expressly reflects the fact that, while discipline-focused work is essential to knowledge creation, pressing social problems benefit from interdisciplinary approaches. To do both, a university sometimes must create incentives that bring together faculty who might not otherwise join their work.

The OHIO ISIP’s proposal-driven process structured around a defined portfolio structure provides a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. The grant program invites faculty and staff from any OHIO campus to form interdisciplinary teams to propose innovative activities that relate to one or more niches identified in the Innovation Strategy. Teams must include participants from at least two colleges. Partners outside OHIO are encouraged if the partnership enhances the proposed activity’s value. Importantly, given our emphasis on connections, funding can be requested for innovation in research/scholarship, creative activity, instruction/talent development, or institutional operations. Because the project ideas flow out of a strategic process focused on our strengths, which derive from our setting, place is inherent throughout.

Multiple levels of awards have been created in order to support innovative projects and teams in various stages of development. Projects that meet a high standard for significance and probability of successful execution will have access to major one-time awards of $1M or more. Because such interdisciplinary partnerships and initiatives take time to develop, smaller grants also will be available for planning grants (up to $20,000) and seed grants (up to $50,000).

Total projected funding for ISIP’s inaugural cycle is approximately $4M for large awards and $1M for planning/seed grants. (Depending on the quantity and quality of proposals received, allocation of funds between the two categories may be adjusted.) Projects that receive major or seed grants must outline plans for sustaining support or durability of impact once their grant ends.

The ISIP Application Process
An RFP process was created by the leadership team; vetted with faculty; and then shared through a series of open meetings for Q&A sessions and networking among parties seeking collaborators. To encourage new partnerships and nascent ideas, an escalating series of steps was built into the proposal process: first a Letter of Intent, then a brief pre-proposal stage, followed by invitations to submit full proposals. The process intentionally lowers the barrier to entry; incentivizes and nurtures new interdisciplinary collaborations; and limits participation in labor-intensive development of full proposals to only those projects with a high degree of promise.

**PROGRESS TO DATE**

In response to the inaugural RFP, we received 60 Letters of Intent (LOIs) from multidisciplinary OHIO teams that collectively included 317 individuals. Ultimately 49 pre-proposals were submitted from a diverse cross-section of 77 departments across the university. The large response rate indicates a high level engagement of faculty and staff, and promises effectiveness of the grant program in incentivizing multidisciplinary collaborations—and ultimately, results in our quest to advance the greater good.

The ISIP not only tangibly demonstrates OHIO’s commitment to implement the Innovation Strategy but also incentivized an unprecedented burst of interdisciplinary and cross-college conversations resulting in a larger-than-anticipated number of proposals in the first funding cycle.

While we are still in the proposal review process, the number and quality of the collaborations proposed are harbingers of a cultural shift in the way our OHIO community approaches innovation.

**CONNECTIONS**

OHIO’s Innovation Strategy is rooted in **place**—who we are as an institution and in the needs of our region. Yet as the name makes clear, it is equally about **innovation**: thinking in new ways about how to bring our assets to bear on big problems and advance the human condition. Also, the emphasis on multidisciplinary collaboration is bringing faculty together with new partners. Many of our strategic niches (and pre-proposals) involve **Talent development** directly. In addition, multidisciplinary collaboration stimulates team members’ own creativity and knowledge—another form of **talent development** at its essence.