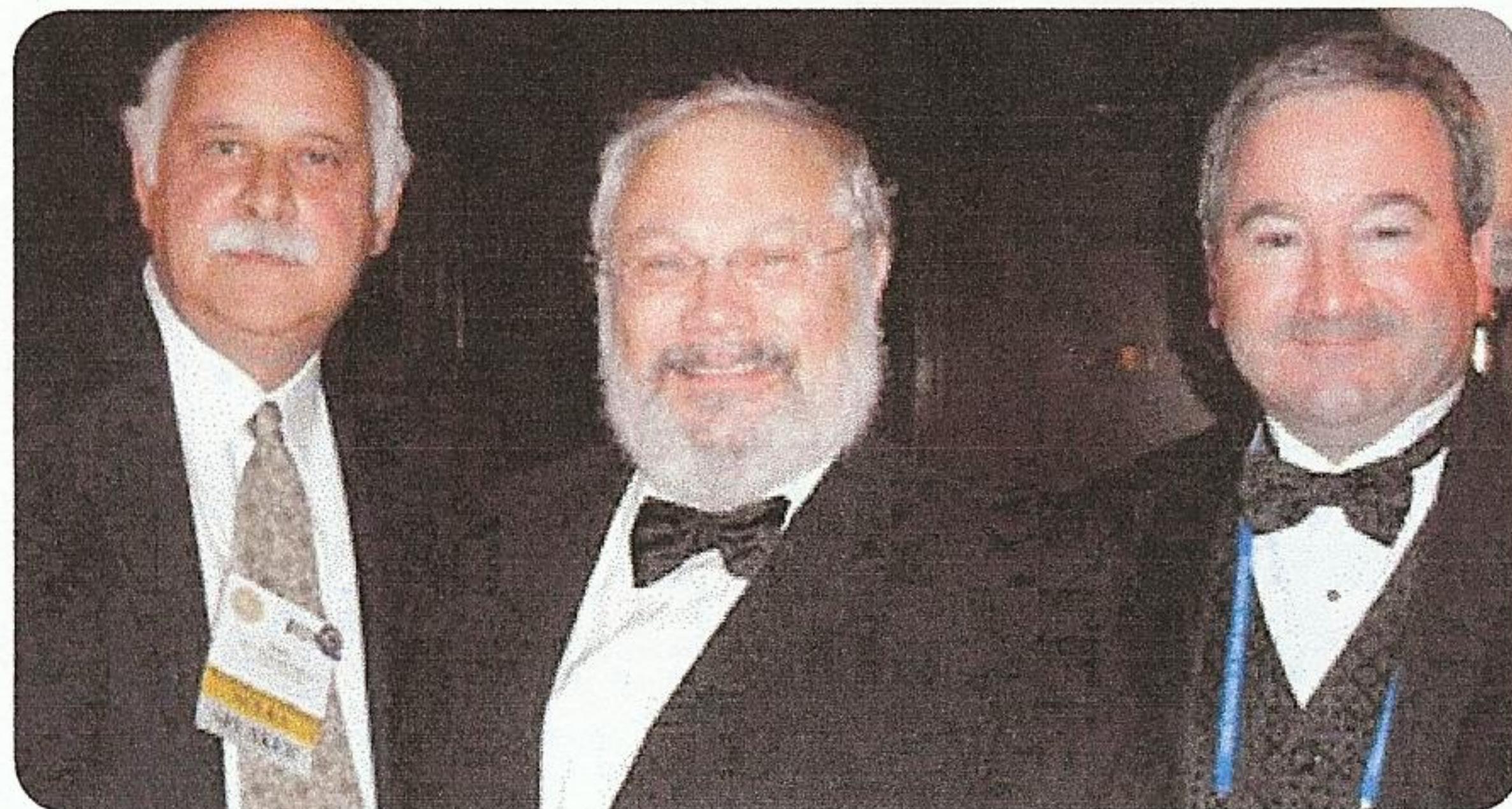




US research round-table examines ways to strengthen international research collaboration

By James Casey, Robert Killoren and John Carfora, United States



James Casey (right) is Director, Office of Contracts and Industrial Agreements, at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Robert Killoren (centre) is Associate Vice President for Research Administration at The Ohio State University. John Carfora (left) is Executive Director, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, at Loyola Marymount University. All three authors are co-chairs of I-Group. Any opinions present within this article are solely their own and do not represent the positions of I-Group, GUIRR or the National Academies.

Research administrators around the globe recognise that international research collaborations are playing an increasingly important role in higher education, discovery and innovation, knowledge transfer and economic development. Without this global collaboration how can we possibly begin to address our world's severest challenges in health, energy, environment, food and water?

Whether we are in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia or the Pacific Rim, we know that administering international research collaborations presents challenging aspects that differ from the activities of domestic research and sponsored programmes. This is why professional organisations such as EARMA, NCURA and ARMS have taken a more global view of research administration.

In the United States in July 2008, several research administrators who have been engaged in the international scene were invited by the National Academies in Washington, D.C. to help jumpstart a national project to explore the legal and administrative infrastructure needed to support the global research enterprise.

Convened by the Government-University-Industry Research Roundtable (GUIRR), a sub-unit of the National Academies, a Working Group on International Research Collaborations (I-Group) was formally established in October 2008. The founding member of I-Group is University of Maryland President and GUIRR co-chair, Dr. C.D. (Dan) Mote, Jr. The authors of this article are the working group co-chairs. Additional I-Group members come from other universities, US Government agencies and private companies.

This project has its own dedicated section within the GUIRR website. It is located at: <http://tinyurl.com/Int-Research-Collaboration>

Initially comprised of seven individuals, I-Group has grown to 17 core-group members and several associate members. The I-Group has been designing a work plan to conduct a systematic, practical study of international research collaborations. As new areas of study are identified, it is enlisting additional stakeholders and representatives. A handful of conference calls have been held and one meeting has been convened at the National Academies. A second meeting took place in late March 2009.

GUIRR brought the I-Group together out of a common desire to strengthen the platform for international research collaborations, and address major issues unique to international cooperation. A goal of GUIRR is to enhance America's participation in the global 'research economy', especially since American

universities and companies have a continued desire to connect with international counterparts. It is fully expected that the results of this project will contain lessons for GUIRR's international counterparts.

Common issues in international collaboration need to be addressed by all parties. I-Group, in conjunction with other stakeholders, wants to help facilitate a more structured approach to international research

collaborations and build a solid infrastructure to help companies and universities deal with a range of administrative and legal complexities.

Issues and concerns in international research collaborations

These are some of the challenges and potential areas of tension that have been initially identified in international research collaborations:

■ Cultural differences

In many instances, differences in culture are a root cause of significant challenges when forming international research collaborations.

■ Differences in ethical standards

These may stem from both cultural and economic differences. For example, standards for the protection of research participants and the proper care and use of animals must address both internationally accepted ethical concerns as well as local customs.



■ Responsible conduct of research

Public confidence in academic research is essential regardless of where it is carried out. When research is perceived to be biased or influenced by financial, political, or other pressures, public confidence in research is eroded. The necessity to train and teach the broader concept of objectivity in research is also crucial.

■ Intellectual Property

International systems of IP protection are varied, despite efforts to reach a common global approach. There are some areas too where IP protection is questioned or ignored.

■ Liability and Insurance

Working between states in the US can be challenging on this front - difficulties with global arrangements expand exponentially.

■ Research integrity

This is meant in a general sense, but also in connection with data manipulation and fabrication. There is a recognised international challenge to meet in universally defining, investigating, and prosecuting cases of scientific misconduct.

■ Safety and Security

Conducting international research in locations subject to a certain level of social and political instability or natural disasters immediately raise issues of safety and security.

■ Currency and other financial issues

How do they impact international research projects, particularly in the current economic circumstances when the world economic system is under severe stress.

■ Export controls

For the U.S., the transfer of American knowledge and technology overseas is a hot topic. Needless to say, this issue has international implications.

I-Group's vision

The vision of the GUIRR project team is to make a permanent contribution to intellectual discussions on international research collaborations. This will include the publication of a Primer on International Research Collaborations and other practice-oriented publications that are of use to professionals in higher education, industry and government. The final product should be available in hard copy and online formats.

Project outcomes

I-Group envisions the following outcomes from the project, though this list is not exhaustive:

1. A Primer that addresses major issues and questions in international research collaboration across industry, universities and government.
2. A case study publication (in both hard copy and online formats) illustrating successful and not-so-successful case studies in international research collaboration. This could also be produced as a separate publication or as an appendix to the Primer.
3. Additional practical materials that could be utilised by professionals in support of higher education, industry and government international research collaborations.

The next steps

I-Group met in Washington, D.C. in late March 2009 to discuss continued evolution of the project, including a workshop on international research collaborations. Additional stakeholders will be brought into the project as appropriate, representing higher education, industry and government on a global basis. Finding dedicated funding sources to maintain the viability of the project is also a priority. Needless to say, there is much to be done.

This project represents another exciting dimension to international efforts to strengthen international research collaborations. The I-Group co-chairs fully expect to see concrete results from the project and will keep EARMA up-to-date.

