

School-Level Research Institutes and Centers (RICs)

School of Public Health

Responsible office: Office of the Associate Dean for Research

1. Purpose

SOPH research centers established through this procedure are academic organizational structures that bring together multidisciplinary researchers to advance research, training, and service around a defined public health problem or scientific area, consistent with SOPH priorities and the One VCU Research Strategic Priorities Plan. Their primary purposes are to:

- build multidisciplinary teams capable of competing for externally funded research centers and other large-scale team-science programs, including relevant NIH P- and U-series mechanisms, CDC and NSF center or cooperative agreement opportunities, PCORI large-scale collaborative awards, and comparable funding mechanisms;
- serve as visible expertise hubs for faculty, trainees, collaborators, community partners, government agencies, policymakers, sponsors, and the public;
- accelerate collaborative proposal development, methodological collaboration, and dissemination;
- strengthen research training and mentorship;
- accelerate translation of SOPH research into practice and policy to improve population health; and
- elevate SOPH's research visibility, impact, and reputation.

A center is not a department, business unit, or financial entity. Center designation does not create authority to receive funds. Sponsored awards and associated Facilities and Administrative (F&A) cost recovery will follow standard VCU and unit-level practices through the award's existing administrative home, ordinarily the PI's department, school, or other approved administrative unit; center affiliation does not redirect F&A recovery or create a separate claim to indirect-cost distributions. For purposes of this policy, "center" is used as shorthand for either a school-level research institute or research center approved under this process; both are governed identically under this procedure.

2. Authority and scope

These procedures establish the school-specific formation, governance, and review requirements for research institutes and centers seeking unit-level designation within SOPH under VCU's Research-Related Institutes and Centers policy. University-level RIC approval and evaluation procedures are not incorporated into this policy. For guidance on university-level RICs visit: <https://research.vcu.edu/resources/institutes-and-centers/>

The Dean approves, renews, modifies, or discontinues school-level research centers. For centers established under this procedure, the Dean serves as the RIC Oversight Official unless the Dean designates another unconflicted school leader to serve in that role. The Associate Dean for Research (ADR) administers the process on the Dean's behalf. Centers are housed academically within SOPH and may include faculty and affiliates from other VCU schools and external organizations. A SOPH center may coordinate and support sponsored research, but center

designation does not determine an award's administrative home. Grants, contracts, gifts, personnel, purchasing, and other financial activity remain within the appropriate existing VCU administrative unit. Center affiliation does not transfer an award, account, employee, dataset, space, or other resource. Center designation does not itself approve new academic programs, minors, certificates, or courses; proposed educational offerings must follow the applicable academic approval processes.

3. Minimum criteria for a SOPH research center or institute

A proposed center should demonstrate:

- a clear and important public health research mission that is not duplicative of an existing VCU research center or institute and for which coordinated school-level activity provides added value;
- a critical mass of faculty expertise, ordinarily including at least six VCU faculty in total with confirmed participation, including SOPH faculty from at least two SOPH departments who have defined scientific, methodological, training, or leadership contributions;
- added value beyond an individual investigator, laboratory, or departmental program;
- a credible plan and timeline to develop integrated, multi-investigator research and compete for center-level or large-scale programmatic funding, including relevant NIH P- and U-series mechanisms, CDC and NSF center or cooperative agreement opportunities, and comparable sponsor mechanisms, as well as research training mechanisms such as the NIH T32. Other collaborative research awards may support this trajectory but should not substitute for a clear center-level funding strategy;
- a defined expertise-hub function, including a way to identify and connect relevant faculty expertise;
- clear leadership, membership expectations, and relationships with overlapping VCU programs or centers; and
- measurable goals for research collaboration, proposal development, scholarship, training, and translation.

4. Establishment process

One or more faculty members, a department chair, the ADR, or the Dean may propose a center.

Step	Action
1. Proposal	Submit a proposal narrative of no more than three pages using the provided template. A brief founding-member roster may be submitted separately and does not count toward the narrative limit. The proposed Center Director must certify in the roster that all listed faculty have confirmed their participation in the proposed Center.
2. Consultation	The ADR confirms alignment with SOPH priorities, assesses overlap and complementarity with existing entities, and consults relevant chairs or unit leaders as needed regarding faculty participation and proposed resource commitments. The ADR appoints two unconflicted faculty reviewers, subject to Section 5.

Step	Action
3. Review	Two unconflicted faculty reviewers independently assess the proposal using the Section 10 rubric. Each reviewer rates each criterion as Meets Criteria or Does Not Meet Criteria and provides a brief written rationale. The ADR, or the unconflicted designee identified under Section 5, coordinates the review, confirms that the proposal addresses the Section 3 minimum criteria, and submits the reviews and a recommendation to the Dean. The ADR does not provide a separate rubric rating.
4. Decision	The Dean approves, approves with conditions, requests revision, or declines, consistent with Section 10. The written decision identifies the approved center name, director, effective date, initial term of three years, any conditions, and the next review date. An alternative decision-maker is used when required under Section 5.

No standing center-review committee, operating budget, or separate financial approval is required solely to establish a center. Any later request for staff, space, funds, or other institutional resources follows the normal SOPH and VCU approval process.

5. Conflict management

Reviewers must not be proposed center members and must disclose any professional, supervisory, financial, or other relationship that could compromise independent judgment. If the ADR is a proposer, proposed director, or otherwise has a material role in the center, the Dean manages the review and oversees subsequent annual assessment and renewal review. Any conflict affecting the Dean's decision-making role must be referred to an unconflicted institutional official designated by the Dean. Proposers and center directors may provide factual clarification, submit revisions, and prepare required reports but may not make the formal assessment or approval decision concerning their own center.

6. Leadership and membership

The Dean appoints the center director at the time of center approval and/or renewal. The director is responsible for convening members, maintaining an expertise roster, setting collaborative research priorities, developing a pipeline of team-science proposals, supporting trainees, documenting outcomes, and representing the center within its approved scope. Membership is based on active contributions to research, methods, training, policy, implementation, or translation and should be reviewed annually.

7. Reporting and continuation

Centers submit a 1-page annual report to the Dean and ADR. The report should focus on center-enabled activity rather than the full research portfolios of affiliated faculty. Center-enabled activities are those to which the center made a substantive contribution through team formation, proposal development, methodological collaboration, training, partnership development, or translation; faculty affiliation alone is insufficient for attribution.

At minimum, report:

- active members and areas of expertise;
- new cross-department or cross-school research teams formed;

- center-enabled grant concepts developed, collaborative proposals submitted, and resulting awards, identifying the center's contribution and the administrative unit responsible for each award;
- center-enabled publications, presentations, datasets, methods, tools, or other scientific products;
- trainee involvement and mentoring;
- community, practice, policy, or other translational activity; and
- priorities and major grant targets for the next year.

The Dean, as school-level RIC Oversight Official, conducts a formal review before the end of each three-year approval term, with the review coordinated by the ADR under Section 5. The review will consider the Section 10 criteria and progress against the center's approved milestones. The Dean may renew, renew with conditions, restructure, rename, or discontinue the center. Continuation requires sustained collaborative value, substantive benefits to SOPH research and training, and documented progress toward center-level external funding. Receipt of an external award is not, by itself, a prerequisite for renewal.

Following Dean approval, the ADR or the Dean's designee will notify OVPRI of newly established SOPH unit-level RICs and provide annual updates on active centers and material status changes.

8. Milestones

Each center must establish measurable annual milestones for its initial three-year term covering collaborative team formation, major grant development, proposal submissions, scholarship, training, and translation. Milestones must identify responsible leads and expected completion dates.

The plan should target submission of at least one center-level, multi-project, or comparable large-scale programmatic application during the initial term. Plausible mechanisms may include NIH P- or U-series awards, CDC center or cooperative agreement opportunities, NSF center programs, T32, or comparable sponsor mechanisms. Supporting milestones should address the integrated scientific concept, participating investigators, shared research or training functions, preliminary work, and sponsor fit.

Submission timing must reflect the availability of an appropriate funding opportunity and scientific readiness.

9. Name and communications

The approved name may be used in scholarly, proposal-development, recruitment, partnership, and communications activities consistent with VCU requirements. Center status must not be represented as a separate legal, financial, or contracting entity, or as a university-level VCU center unless separately approved for that designation.

10. Review criteria and decision standard

Each reviewer independently rates each criterion as Meets Criteria or Does Not Meet Criteria and provides a brief written rationale. Approval requires satisfaction of the Section 3 minimum criteria, subject to any expressly approved membership exception, and a determination that all four review criteria are met. When reviewer ratings differ, the ADR or the unconflicted designee identified

under Section 5 will recommend a course of action to the Dean, who may request clarification, revisions, or additional review and must document the basis for the final determination. An unmet substantive criterion requires revision before approval. Conditional approval may address implementation requirements but does not waive an unmet review criterion.

a. Scientific Rationale and Collaborative Value. The proposed center demonstrates a clear scientific rationale, appropriate leadership, meaningful multidisciplinary collaboration, and added value beyond existing investigators, laboratories, departments, programs, or centers.

b. Potential for Center-Level and Large-Scale Collaborative Funding. The proposed center demonstrates a credible strategy to assemble multidisciplinary teams and develop an integrated research program capable of competing for center-level or other large-scale programmatic funding. The strategy identifies plausible sponsors or programs, including relevant NIH P- or U-series mechanisms, CDC or NSF center and cooperative agreement opportunities, PCORI large-scale collaborative awards, or comparable funding mechanisms, and defines the shared scientific theme, complementary projects or functions, preliminary work needed, and a realistic proposal-development timeline. A specific funding announcement is not required at establishment.

c. SOPH Research and Training Impact. The proposed center demonstrates a feasible plan to strengthen SOPH research, interdisciplinary training, mentorship, and scholarly impact, with substantive roles and benefits for SOPH faculty and trainees.

d. External Visibility and Strategic Partnerships. The proposed center demonstrates a feasible plan to elevate SOPH's visibility and standing as a trusted, nonpartisan research partner for communities, health systems, government agencies, policymakers, legislators, and other external stakeholders.

APPLICATION TEMPLATE

Proposal narrative: maximum three pages, using black Arial 11-point text, single spacing, and 0.5-inch margins. A brief founding-member roster and confirmations of participation or institutional support may be submitted separately and are excluded from the narrative limit.

1. Center identity

Proposed name; proposed director; participating SOPH departments; participating VCU schools, departments, centers or institutes, and other relevant units; and key external partners, if applicable.

2. Mission and need

Define the public health problem and scientific mission. Explain why a center adds value beyond existing investigators, labs, programs, or departments.

3. Research priorities

Identify 2 to 4 initial scientific priorities and the expertise required to advance them.

4. Team science and grant strategy

4a. Demonstrated Expertise and Collaborative Capacity. Describe the existing expertise, research strengths, and collaborative relationships that provide the foundation for the center. Highlight prior multidisciplinary research, grant activity, and other evidence that the team can work effectively across disciplines.

4b. Strategy for Center-Level and Large-Scale Collaborative Funding. Describe how the center will assemble multidisciplinary teams and develop an integrated research program capable of competing for center-level or other large-scale programmatic funding. Identify plausible sponsors or programs, including relevant NIH P- or U-series mechanisms, CDC or NSF center and cooperative agreement opportunities, PCORI large-scale collaborative awards, or comparable funding mechanisms. Describe the shared scientific theme, complementary projects or functions, preliminary work needed, and a realistic proposal-development timeline. Commitment to a specific funding announcement is not required at establishment.

5. Expertise-hub function and external partnerships

Describe how the center will identify, organize, and make faculty expertise accessible to investigators, trainees, community partners, funders, and other collaborators. Explain how it will develop or strengthen relevant community, clinical, governmental, or other external partnerships and translate research into practice and policy. Identify planned activities that will strengthen SOPH's visibility and standing as a trusted, nonpartisan research resource.

6. Leadership, membership, and advisory structure

Describe the proposed director's responsibilities and demonstrated ability to lead the center; founding members' affiliations, areas of expertise, and expected contributions; membership criteria; decision-making; and trainee involvement. Identify the substantive roles of participating SOPH departments and confirm founding-member participation. Describe any planned advisory committee or other advisory structure, if applicable.

7. Relationship to existing VCU entities

Identify related centers, institutes, programs, or clinical/community operations and explain boundaries, complementarity, and expected collaboration.

8. First three years

Provide measurable annual milestones, responsible leads, and expected completion dates for collaborative team formation, major grant development, proposal submissions, scholarship, training, and translation. Demonstrate progression toward center-level or multi-project programmatic submission, consistent with the policy's milestone requirements.

9. Resources and administration

Describe any existing school, departmental, or institutional support that will contribute to center activities and identify any anticipated administrative or resource needs.