

Research Funding and Infrastructure Advisory Committee Interim Report

This interim report summarizes key observations, concerns, and preliminary findings of the Research Funding and Infrastructure Advisory Committee regarding the proposed changes to Research Investment Fund (RIF) allocation and research support at the University.

The committee's findings and recommendations are that:

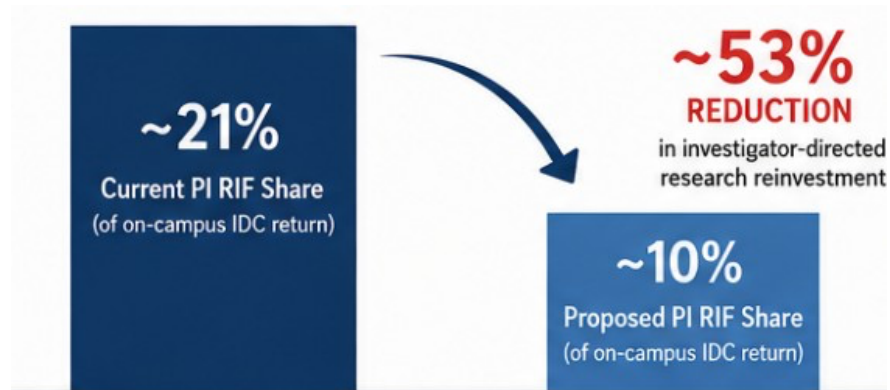
- RIF money is currently used to fund activities that are essential to conducting research.
- Any change in the funding model will need to be accountable and reversible.
- Any change in the funding model will need a well-documented transition plan and well-defined success metrics.
- The faculty is not, in principle, opposed to changes in the funding model, but distrust of the administration is high, and any change will need to address demonstrable needs in a concrete manner with a transparent spending plan.

Executive Summary

The committee has surveyed the faculty, reviewed the documentation provided by the administration, and assessed the policies of our peer institutions. These sources show that RIF funds are heavily used to directly support research activities, especially student researchers, research staff, travel, pilot projects, equipment, and proposal development. Peer comparison must be read with care. UML's return to the PI is high relative to some peer institutions, but so is the share of research support that investigators must directly provide for themselves. The two facts are connected. Where central services are thin, the PI return is not a premium; it is a substitute, and the RIF expenditure data provided to the committee clearly show this.

The committee's central finding is that the case for reallocation has not yet been made, and that the proposal as presented does not correspond to the way the central pool is actually used. The proposal is argued on the ground that a larger central share will improve research support services. In practice, the majority of the current Provost RIF, approximately 55 percent, funds startup packages for newly hired faculty. This is a legitimate and productive use of research funds. While the committee supports competitive startup packages without reservation, it does, however, leave the proposal facing a fork. If additional central funds would also go principally to startup packages, then service improvement is not the operative rationale, and the committee has been asked to evaluate the wrong question. If instead they would go to services, then no track record supports the expectation of improvement: the central share has already grown substantially, by approximately 38% between FY23 and FY25, without a corresponding improvement in faculty-facing services. The committee therefore asks the administration to state, in writing, whether the proposed increase in the central share is intended primarily to support faculty startup packages or to improve research support services, and to provide the rationale and evidence supporting that intended use.

Faculty express substantial concern regarding a reduction of PI-controlled RIF from approximately 21% to 10%, a



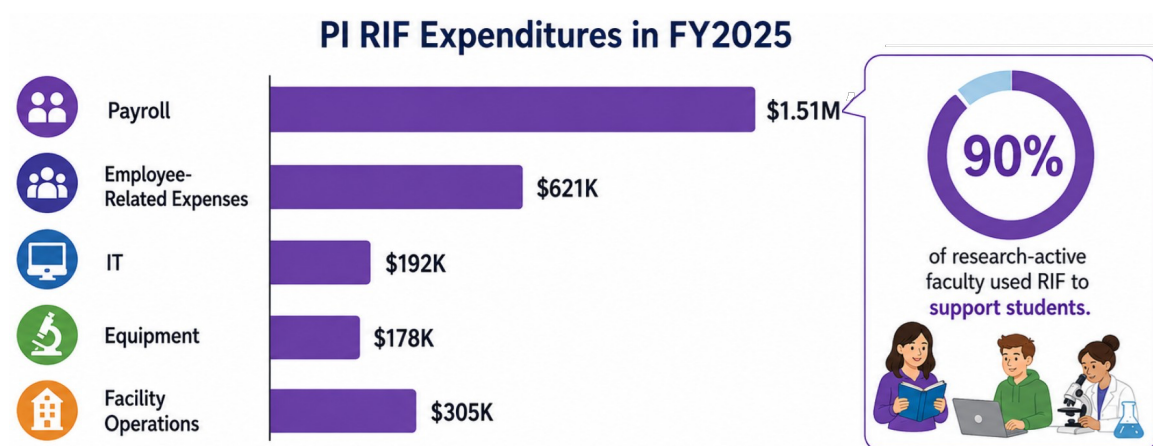
reduction of roughly 53 percent (see Figure) in investigator-directed reinvestment, and transition to higher central research support, particularly in the absence of a clearly articulated spending and transition plan. The committee notes separately that awards carrying the University's off-campus indirect rate of 26 percent, against a negotiated on-campus research rate of 57.5 percent, return nothing at all to the investigator or the center. On that portion of the University's portfolio, central retention is already total. Although the committee is not opposed in principle to shared investment and returns to that question in its conclusions, it is opposed to shared investment funded on faith. The committee also outlines, later in this report, a conditional middle ground under which a

measured reduction in the PI share would be exchanged for specific, verifiable upgrades in research support, implemented gradually and subject to automatic reversal if commitments are not met. This would need to be implemented with full transparency and accountability. Faculty concerns are amplified by a documented record of difficulty in research administration.

Committee Findings

RIF as Research Reinvestment

University policy is explicit that PIs may not pay themselves summer salary or other additional compensation from their own RIF. The one exception is a course buyout to pursue an exceptional research opportunity, governed by a separate published procedure. The committee notes this once, with the citation, so that the point is not raised later as though it were open. Current expenditure data indicate that RIF funds are primarily reinvested into the research enterprise, which is the intended use of these funds as described in the University's strategic plans. This is what is shown in the **RIF Expenses Document** that was provided to the committee: In 2025, PI RIF expenditures included approximately \$1.51M in payroll, \$621K in employee-related expenses, \$178K in equipment expenses, \$192K in IT, and \$305 in facility operational expenses (see Figure). These categories alone total approximately \$2.8M, all of it directed at people, equipment, and the operating cost of research. Those payroll and employee expenses frequently fund support services not provided centrally.



Importance of RIF to Student Training

In a survey of the faculty, 90% of research active faculty used RIF funds to support students and staff, for professional development, and to engage in career-connected learning experiences. Reductions in RIF of the magnitude proposed would have direct consequences for staffing, student training, and opportunities that cannot readily be supported through external grants. For example, federal funds cannot support students for time spent assisting with proposal development, even though participating in the development of a competitive research proposal provides valuable hands-on training in research design, grant writing, budgeting, and project planning. RIF gives faculty the flexibility to involve students in these opportunities and other formative research experiences that fall outside the allowable costs of sponsored projects. Substantial reductions in RIF would not only reduce faculty research capacity, but also the range of research experiences that faculty can make available to students.

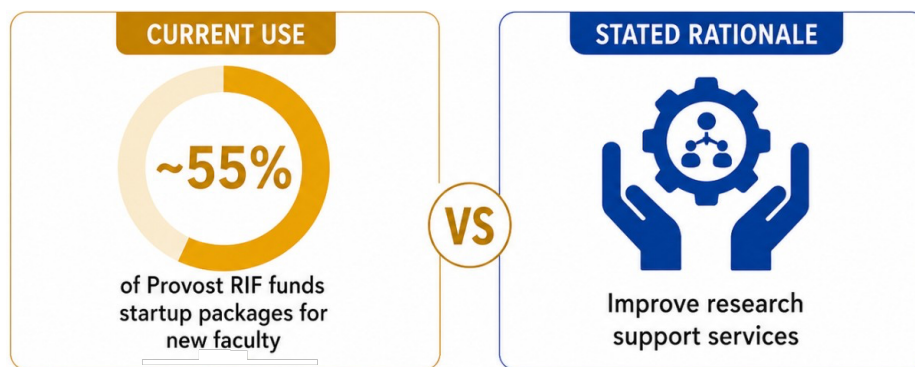
Importance of RIF to Research Development and Support

UML faculty heavily utilize RIF dollars for developing new research projects and to support ongoing projects not only through hiring of students and post-docs, but also to initiate new research efforts (seed funding) and maintain lab equipment. Currently, seed funding is quite limited and there are no other avenues for faculty to repair and/or replace aged equipment, especially equipment used on multiple projects, other than RIF dollars. Furthermore, the ability for faculty travel to interact and present their work to create new research teams is severely limited by the travel funding limitations in federal grants. Attendance and presentation in international conferences, while critical to the expansion of UML reputation as R1 institution, is generally not allowed in federal awards.

Startup Packages and the Source of Recruitment Costs

The largest single use of central RIF is the funding of startup packages for newly hired faculty, approximately 55 percent of the Provost pool (see Figure). The committee is unequivocal in supporting strong, competitive startup packages. Recruiting excellent research faculty is essential to the University's trajectory, and new colleagues should arrive equipped to succeed. Nothing in this report should be read as questioning that commitment.

The question the committee raises is not whether startup packages should be funded, but from where. Faculty recruitment is a core institutional function, and at many peer institutions startup packages are carried principally by the general operating budget as an investment in institutional capacity. Funding them instead by increasing the levy on IDC recovery means that the faculty who currently generate the University's research revenue are financing the recruitment of colleagues who have not yet begun to do so. That may be a defensible institutional choice, but it is a choice about the operating budget, and it deserves to be made openly rather than arrived through a distribution formula.



Because startup funding is quantifiable and carries a known return profile, it also offers the clearest available test of whether central investment performs. The committee therefore requests the number and total cost of startup packages funded from RIF over the last five years, together with the external funding subsequently won by those hires. If the return on that investment is strong, it is an argument the administration should want to make. If it has not been measured, that is itself a finding, and it bears directly on the confidence the committee can place in projections of what further central funds would achieve.

Awards on Which No Return Is Made

The committee notes a feature of the current model that has received little attention in the proposal materials. Awards carrying the University's off-campus indirect-cost rate of 26 percent return nothing to the principal investigator or to the research center. State-sponsored work falls substantially into this category. On this portion of the University's research portfolio, central retention is already total.

The University's negotiated rate agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services, dated June 11, 2024, sets the on-campus research rate at 57.5 percent of Modified Total Direct Costs for July 2025 through June 2027. The off-campus rate of 26 percent applies to activities of significant duration performed in facilities the University does not own and to which rent is directly allocated, and it is lower precisely because it excludes facilities costs. The committee can see the logic by which a rate composed largely of administrative recovery might be retained centrally. What it has not seen is that logic stated as policy or reconciled with a proposal that simultaneously seeks a larger central share of on-campus recovery, where facilities costs are fully recovered. The committee asks the Office of Sponsored Programs to state the governing rule, explain its rationale, and clarify how it is applied. Two consequences follow. First, faculty whose work is performed off campus — field research, community-based studies, clinical and public-health work, and much state-sponsored activity — carry the full burden of those awards, including the same proposal preparation, the same compliance obligations, and the same post-award management, drawing on the same support services, and receive nothing back. That burden falls unevenly across the colleges, since the balance of on-campus and off-campus work differs considerably by discipline, and the faculty most affected are now being asked to accept a further reduction on the remainder of their portfolio.

Second, and more consequential for the question before the committee, it is not clear that the distribution figures presented capture the whole of what the center already retains. The committee asks whether recovery from off-campus awards sits within the RIF pool as presented in the town-hall materials or outside it. If it sits outside, then the shares shown understate the central position, and the committee has been asked to evaluate a proposal against an incomplete account of current resources. This should be resolved before any distribution change is considered further.

The committee records this not as an argument for extending differential treatment, but to establish a fact about the present model: there is already a category of awards on which faculty and centers receive no return at all, and it was not faculty who proposed it.

Sources: *Office of Sponsored Programs, Indirect Cost Rates,*
www.uml.edu/research/osp/proposal/budget-development/indirect-cost-rates.aspx;
and *Research Investment Funds Expenditure Guidelines,*

www.uml.edu/research/osp/policies/rif-expenditure-guidelines.aspx. Both accessed in August 2026.

Faculty Preference for Local Control

Faculty prefer investigator-directed research funds to remain close to investigators generating and using those resources. At the same time, respondents were open to limited pooling of funds to support genuinely shared infrastructure benefiting the broader research community.

Underlying that preference is a principle that can be taken directly from the University's own policy. The published Research Investment Funds Expenditure Guidelines state that the intent of RIF is to stimulate further growth in UMass Lowell research and innovation, and that the funds must be spent by the PI for research purposes, with permissible and impermissible uses enumerated. That is not the description of a discretionary pool. It is the description of restricted funds assigned to investigators for a stated institutional purpose. The committee accepts that RIF are institutional funds rather than direct grant funds, as the policy says. The question before the committee is therefore not one of ownership but of design: the University created this mechanism to drive research growth, that growth followed, and the proposal would reduce the mechanism without establishing that its purpose would be better served elsewhere.

The committee draws attention to one further feature of those guidelines. They close by stating that they apply equally to center, department, and college RIF accounts. They do not name the Provost, VCRI, or Infrastructure and Computing shares. The committee asks what published expenditure guidelines govern those shares, and where they may be read. As matters stand, the proposal would move funds out of accounts whose permissible uses are published and confined to research purposes, and into accounts for which the committee has not been shown an equivalent published constraint. Whether or not that is the intent, it appears to be the effect, and it should be addressed before any reallocation proceeds.

Research Support and Administrative Capacity

Faculty frustration with administrative processes emerged as a consistent theme in our survey. Survey results and committee discussions identified concerns

regarding responsiveness, post-award support, procurement, travel processing, account management, and overall administrative burden.

Institutional investment in research administration has grown while faculty-facing service quality has not improved with it. The relationship between central resourcing and service outcomes is the central empirical question before this committee, and the record to date does not support the proposition that additional central funding produces better service.

The committee also noted concerns regarding faculty recruitment and retention, particularly among highly research-active faculty, and the extent to which administrative burden may contribute to these challenges.



Assessment of the Proposed RIF Reduction

Reducing PI-controlled RIF from 21% to 10% represents a substantial reduction in investigator-directed research reinvestment capacity. The committee further notes that the terminal-year illustration presented understates the long-run effect: at full phase-in the reduction to investigator-directed funds approaches 53 percent, materially larger than the figure a single-year snapshot implies.

The committee also observes that under the current model Infrastructure and Computing already receives the largest single share, approximately 38 percent, nearly double the PI share. No explanation has been offered for why the largest

category requires further growth, funded from the two categories that have been shrinking.

Committee members repeatedly questioned how functions currently supported through PI RIF, including student employment, research staff, pilot projects, equipment acquisition, and bridge activities, would be funded under the proposed model.

Documentation provided to date does not clearly define how additional centralized funds would be allocated, what outcomes are expected, how success would be measured, or how affected personnel and activities would be transitioned to a new model.

Effects on Research Centers

Many of the University Research Centers and research labs use RIF funding to support essential administrative and research personnel, including long-serving employees whose roles provide continuity and institutional knowledge. Any change to the RIF funding model must therefore account for these existing commitments and ensure that adequate resources are allocated to sustain personnel and functions on which the research enterprise depends. Care must be taken to avoid unnecessary layoffs or furloughs of GRACE, and other research support staff. This is particularly important for personnel involved in proposal development and preparation, whose activities generally cannot be charged directly to sponsored awards and therefore require institutional support.

More broadly, Research Centers on campus serve as a function that extends well beyond administrative support for individual grants. They provide a scientific and professional home for faculty, bringing together investigators with shared or complementary interests and creating an infrastructure for collaboration that would be difficult to reproduce at the level of individual departments or investigators. Centers support interdisciplinary research, facilitate the development of new research teams and proposals, provide shared expertise and resources, and create opportunities for faculty, staff, students, and trainees to engage with a broader research community. They also provide continuity between individual grant cycles, allowing research programs, collaborations, and specialized expertise to be sustained even when particular awards begin or end.

For these reasons, funding for Center-based personnel and infrastructure should not be viewed simply as an administrative expense that can be shifted to individual grants. These functions constitute part of the University's research infrastructure and contribute directly to faculty's productivity, competitiveness for external funding, and the development of a strong and collaborative research environment. Any reallocation of RIF should therefore explicitly identify how these Center-based functions and personnel will be supported under the proposed model, rather than assuming that they can be absorbed through direct grant funding or eliminated without consequences for the broader research enterprise.

R1 Status and Research Growth

The committee recognized that UML has experienced significant growth in research expenditures, sponsored awards, and overall research activity during the period in which the current RIF model has been in place. The committee finds that the present model contributed materially to research growth and advancement to R1 status by allowing investigators to reinvest grant-generated resources into new research opportunities. The model now proposed for reduction is the model under which that growth occurred. The committee observed that emerging R1 institutions often face increasing demands for research infrastructure, faculty support, graduate student funding, and administrative capacity. Any change in RIF policy should therefore be evaluated within the broader context of sustaining research growth.

Conditions for Further Consideration

The committee does not offer the following as requests for information alone. They are the conditions under which any reallocation could be evaluated at all. In the absence of each of them, the committee would not be able to assess a revised model, however it was designed.

The committee requests a detailed explanation of how centrally retained RIF funds would be allocated and governed.

The committee requests measurable goals, performance indicators, and accountability mechanisms associated with any proposed central investments. At minimum these should include published service metrics covering pre-award turnaround, cost-transfer processing time, and payroll accuracy, reported to the faculty on a fixed schedule.

The committee requests a stated allocation of any additional central funds as between startup packages and research support services, expressed as a proportion and committed in writing. The two purposes are argued differently, measured differently, and warrant different levels of faculty confidence, and they should not be presented to the faculty as a single undifferentiated request.

The committee requests that any change carry a sunset clause, so that a revised distribution expires and reverts back to 2025 levels (21%) unless renewed on evidence, and a clawback provision, so that the reallocation unwinds on its own if published targets are not met rather than requiring faculty to petition for its reversal.

The committee requests a transition plan addressing existing personnel and research activities currently supported through PI-controlled RIF funds.

The committee requests comparative analyses demonstrating how the proposed allocation model will improve research productivity, faculty support, and institutional competitiveness. The committee also requests indirect-cost recovery reported by source of funds, separating competitively won federal and foundation awards from state, infrastructure, and earmarked funds, for the most recent three fiscal years, together with a statement of how recovery at the off-campus rate is accounted for and whether it falls within or outside the RIF pool as presented.

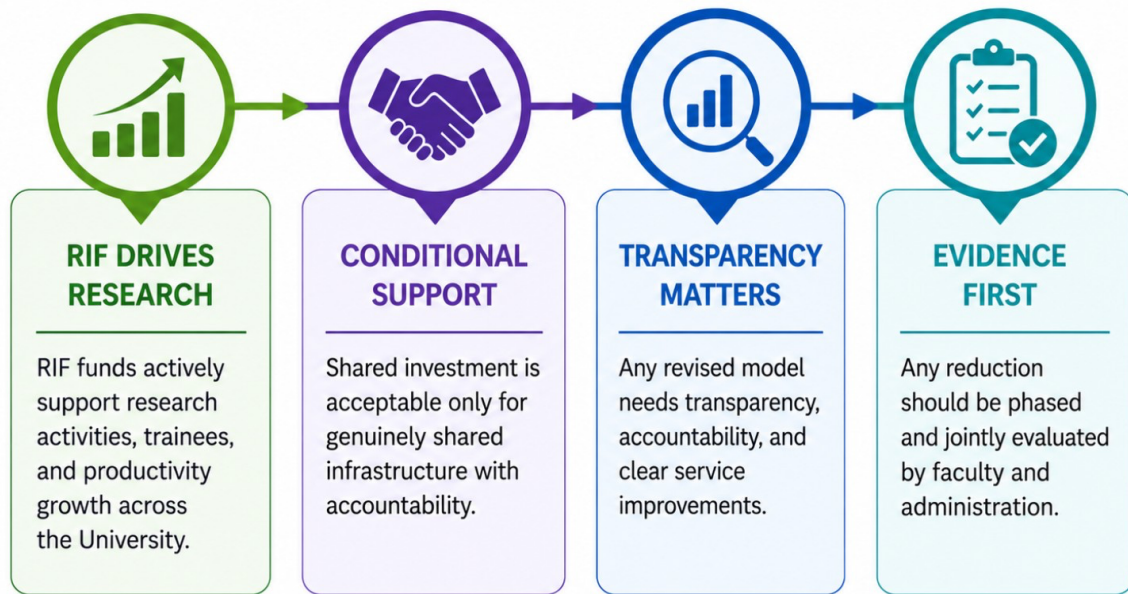
Exchanging Return for Support

The committee's objection is to reallocation without a clear path for improving research infrastructure and clear metrics quantifying the improvements. A measured reduction in the PI share could be supported in exchange for specific, verifiable upgrades in pre-award and post-award support, while avoiding destructive disruption in the ability of faculty to conduct independent and impactful research. The data before the committee define what those upgrades must be. College-based research administrators currently support 156 proposals per FTE against a benchmark of 30 to 80, and each manages \$20.8M in expenditures against a norm of \$5M to \$15M. The Huron staffing analysis commissioned by the administration targets roughly 24 college-based FTEs even under its most conservative assumptions. The committee would accordingly consider credible a package with two elements. First, any change now and in the future will require a clear budget and transition plan associated with the reduced

faculty RIF percentage to compensate for the current usage of such accounts. Second, the new centralized capacity would carry published service standards, including cost-transfer, ePAF, and re-budget processing times, as well as improved and timely payroll accuracy, reported to the faculty on a fixed schedule. In practice, this would mean that if the PI share were reduced to, for example, 15 percent (keeping UML at the upper range of documented peer practice and representing a 29 percent reduction in faculty RIF account income), the use of the reallocated funds would need to be accounted for in detail through research-support investments and staffing positions until at least the mid-tier Huron benchmark is reached (64 proposals per pre-award FTE and \$8.8M per post-award FTE), with positions assigned by college workload. We note that a significant fraction of the committee, and the faculty, feels that 15 percent is too low to allow continued research efforts at the current level. Under these terms faculty would be asked to support a clear transition to an R1 model (beyond simple percentage numbers) with defined service improvements, rather than surrendering funds against an undefined promise.

Sequencing and Accountability of Any Reduction

The implementation of any proposed reduction within these parameters must be gradual and reversible. The reduction would apply to new awards only and would phase in over three fiscal years, in no more than three equal tranches, so that no investigator absorbs the full change at once. Each tranche would take effect only after the commitments attached to the preceding one are verifiably met, meaning the positions funded by the prior tranche are filled and the service standards are published and reported. If hiring or service targets are missed, the next tranche pauses automatically. Consistent with the sunset and clawback provisions requested above, a persistent failure would unwind the reallocation without requiring faculty to petition for its reversal.



Preliminary Conclusions

Much work remains before anyone can assess how these changes would affect faculty research. The proposed RIF reduction would not simply lower the volume of faculty-controlled research funding. It would shift UML's research funding model from investigator-directed reinvestment toward a centralized administrative structure, and it would do so before there is evidence that the centralized model will prove more effective.

Thus, the committee's concern is with the sequence being proposed, in which the transfer of funds precedes the evidence that would justify it, rather than with the possibility of a different allocation as such. Absent commitments that would generate that evidence, the current distribution should remain in place while the administration establishes a measured baseline of service performance and demonstrates improvement in the functions the existing central share already funds.

There is, however, a second path, one that would produce the evidence rather than assume it. Should the administration accept the exchange set out in the preceding section, the committee is prepared to support a phased reduction of the PI share on the schedule and conditions described there, because that exchange builds the demonstration into the process itself through joint and ongoing evaluation, by faculty and administration together, of service implementation and the associated budgeting.

The committee finds strong evidence that RIF funds are actively used to support research activities and trainee development and that this reinvestment is visible in the growth of research productivity across the University.

The committee finds substantial faculty concern regarding reductions in PI-controlled RIF without corresponding clarity regarding replacement resources and support structures. Based on discussions with the administration to date, the committee has not been given grounds for confidence that any centrally administered replacement would serve the research enterprise as effectively as the funds now do in investigator hands.

The committee is not opposed to shared investment. Members would support a limited central pool where it funds genuinely shared infrastructure and carries the accountability mechanisms set out above. That openness is conditional, and it should not be read as agreement with the proposal as presented.

The committee concludes that transparency, accountability, improved administrative support, and a well-defined transition strategy will be necessary to build faculty confidence in any revised RIF model.

These findings are preliminary and may be refined as additional information, data, and stakeholder feedback become available.