National Research Council Publishes Report on the Future of Research Universities

The National Research Council, the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences and National Academy of Engineering, recently published a report indicating that “American research universities are essential for U.S. prosperity and security, but the institutions are in danger of serious decline unless the federal government, states, and industry take action to ensure adequate, stable funding in the next decade.”

The report, requested by Congress, recommends 10 strategic actions the nation should take over the next 10 years to maintain top-quality U.S. research institutions. To read a summary or full version of the report, see: Research Universities and the Future of America: Ten Breakthrough Actions Vital to Our Nation’s Prosperity and Security or view the webcast.
Tips for the Development of Departmental Research Administrators

Hiring a departmental research administrator can be a challenge in today’s environment. There is a high demand for strong departmental administrators and not necessarily a large pool of candidates from which to choose. This article is geared towards departments that may not have been successful in recruiting the ideal research administrator and must work to develop employees with little or no research administration experience.

The departmental research administrator is often referred to as the “middle person”, the employee who navigates through the bureaucracy of the institution so that the PI is able to focus on his/her research with minimal disruption. A departmental research administrator is someone who facilitates all things administrative and essentially “make things happen”, be it hiring a new technician, processing purchase orders, or submitting cost transfers. The departmental research administrator is considered the “go-to” person for the PI and the central research administration offices.

Examples of best practices include monthly meetings with PIs (these can be quarterly for less active PIs) followed up with a summary of items discussed including: action items & timelines and weekly one-on-one meetings between the departmental research administrator and his/her supervisor to review outstanding issues. A log maintained by the departmental research administrator of all outstanding issues sorted by action types (e.g. new accounts, set up projections, salary distribution changes, progress reports, accounts ending in 90 days, deficits, etc.) and reviewed weekly is an excellent tool to keep departmental research administrators on track.

Open lines of communication are crucial. Holding regular meetings with the PI and the central research administration offices will help to make successful grants and contracts management as transparent and easy to facilitate as possible.

In order to remain consistent and focused throughout the grants management process, it is important for a department or center to have a mission/vision for its research administration team to follow. This will set the tone for what is expected from everyone in the group. Some examples might be to serve as an efficient and dependable source of information for PIs; to be a source of accurate and timely guidance to support PIs in advancing their research portfolio; to ensure that PIs are in compliance at all times; to be proactive with financial projections and reviews; to promote a sense of trust and stability for PIs.

Research is evolving and policies are constantly changing so there is a never-ending need for training. Supporting and encouraging all levels of staff to access external resources and stay educated is very important. Although focusing efforts on training new staff is critical, it is also important to remember that in order to stay compliant, continuous training is imperative. Training helps to keep staff engaged and empowers them to make decisions and act independently. Not only will you thank yourself for keeping your staff current, but your staff and your PIs will thank you.

“See, son….an impressive resume will get their foot in the door, but the interview is where you’ll find out if they’ve got what it takes to be a research administrator.”

Research & Animation by Dominic Nunziato

This article is an adapted excerpt from the an article written by Susan Zipkin, Director of Radiology Research Finance Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Lauren Robertson, Administrative Manager of research Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, in NCURA magazine - May/June 2011 edition.
Hot Topics in Subrecipient Monitoring

Due to anticipated reforms to the A-133 single audit process, Tufts will be required to more carefully scrutinize its subrecipients that are no longer subject to A-133 audits.

Recent National Science Foundation Office of Inspector General (OIG) audits have cited issues with subrecipients’ costs and effort reporting at two prominent research institutions. The OIG auditor reviewed the allowability of costs at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and visited the JHU subrecipient, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). The audit resulted in $169,532 in questionable costs due to inadequate supporting documentation at CMU. The audit also found that JHU did not have adequate internal controls pertaining to subrecipient monitoring activities that were deemed by JHU as “low risk”.

The institution’s invoice review process was also deemed insufficient. After another audit of the International Computer Sciences Institute, a University of California at Berkeley affiliate, the NSF OIG cited $300,000 in questioned personnel (effort) costs claimed by Stanford University, a subawardee, and an additional $151,189 in questioned costs related to insufficient subrecipient monitoring activities and travel violations (Fly America Act).

Other OIG audits have questioned whether “someone with firsthand knowledge” of a university project (for which a subrecipient agreement has been established) is reviewing the research activity and ensuring that payments to the subrecipient are in accordance with the work completed. In general, the OIG takes the position that monitoring sub-awards “should take place during and after the award, and should include site visits, reviews of performance and financial reports, and the development of risk assessments based on relevant factors to ensure the proper level of monitoring.”

In recognizing the need to more carefully scrutinize our subrecipients, developing a formal subrecipient monitoring checklist is on SPA’s FY13 Projects List. We have already begun working collaboratively with ORA and the Treasury office to achieve more robust subrecipient monitoring around evaluation of risk. In addition, SPA and ORA have started to discuss drafting guidelines for issuing advance payments to subawardees as well as to consultants.

Reduction of Effort Commitments

A PI may need to secure university and sponsor approval for an extended or significant absence (generally 3 months or more). In addition, a significant reduction of the PI’s and/or other key personnel’s effort, specifically named in an award (25% or more from the level of effort approved at the time of award), requires the prior approval of most sponsors. If a reduction in effort commitment is made, the salary must be reduced commensurate with the reduction in effort.

Additional Pay on Sponsored Projects

Additional pay on federal grants is unusual and should be rare. OMB Circular A-21 limits the ability to receive additional pay (above base institutional salary) on federal grants.

OMB Circular A-21, section J.10.d states:

“Charges for work performed on sponsored agreements during all or any portion of such period are allowable at the base salary rate. In no event will charges to sponsored agreements, irrespective of the basis of computation, exceed the proportionate share of the base salary for that period. This principle applies to all members of the faculty at an institution. Since intra-university consulting is assumed to be undertaken as a university obligation requiring no compensation in addition to full time base salary, the principle also applies to faculty members who function as consultants or otherwise contribute to a sponsored agreement conducted by another faculty member of the same institution.”

There are rare exceptions noted in A-21:

“However, in unusual cases where consultation is across departmental lines or involves a separate or remote operation, and the work performed by the consultant is in addition to his/her regular departmental load, any charges for such work representing extra compensation above the base salary are allowable provided that such consulting arrangements are specifically provided for in the agreement or approved in writing by the sponsoring agency.”
Travel News

In anticipation of the new e-Expense travel and business expense system, slated to roll out this summer, and as part of Sponsored Program Accounting’s efforts to streamline the post award research administration process, approval requirements relating to sponsored project travel have been simplified. Effective September 1st, SPA will continue to approve all foreign travel expenses but will no longer approve travel authorizations or domestic travel reimbursements. Sponsored Program’s review of domestic travel will be via a post audit process. As the new on line e-Expense system is rolled out over the summer and fall, any foreign travel reimbursement outside the system, via paper, should be forwarded to Sponsored Programs for review.

As part of the e-Expense projects commitment to excellence, we took a critical look at our approval process and determined that the approval / signature process in the new system assigns approval responsibility appropriately to the traveler and his/her approver. This shift also complements Sponsored Programs management of institutional risk.

To ensure a smooth transition we have created a Sponsored Travel Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines document. These guidelines were written to assist Tufts researchers and administrators who charge travel directly to sponsored projects.

In addition to the guidance offered, the document contains links to a number of resources that will help clarify federal and university travel policies. Our website (http://finance.tufts.edu/spa/travel-on-sponsored-projects/) has been updated to include this document, as well as other sponsored travel related resources and information.

We will be offering a training session called ‘Traveling on Sponsored Projects‘. Please check the Tufts Employee Learning and Development (TELD) website at http://go.tufts.edu/teld for future training dates or call Carol Liedes to request a departmental training.

Since the e-Expense travel and business expense system was also designed to provide a more efficient and accommodating way to obtain reimbursement for trips or business activities, we wanted to take this opportunity to let you know that SPA will continue to review business expense reimbursements over $500. We will now audit business expense requests on a post expense basis for all reports processed via e-Expense. Departments who are not yet using the new e-Expense travel and business expense system should continue to forward all Business Expense Reimbursement forms charging expenses to sponsored projects to Sponsored Programs Accounting for approval.

New Facilities & Administration and Fringe Benefit Rates

The Finance Division is pleased to announce a new rate agreement with Health and Human Services for the recovery of costs related to sponsored grants and contracts for facilities and administration (F&A) and fringe benefits. The new rates were effective beginning July 1, 2012 and should be used on all new grant and contract proposal submissions.

Components of all the fringe benefit rates and the latest HHS Rate Agreement are available on Finance & Planning's website at:

http://finance.tufts.edu/budgetacc/facilities-and-administration-overhead-rates/
Guidance on the NIH Salary Cap

The NIH salary cap is a limitation placed on the salary rate that may be charged to an NIH grant, primarily for PIs, but applies to all salaries charged directly to NIH grants. The cap is not on the number of dollars that can be charged to an NIH grant. Rather, the cap is on the monthly pay rate that can be charged to an NIH grant.

Salary expenses to a sponsored research award from the (HHS) agencies cited above cannot be paid at a monthly rate that exceeds 1/12th of the maximum annual rate of pay in effect. The capped rate in effect as of December 23, 2011 is $179,700. This means that salary paid on or after December 23, 2011 cannot be paid at a monthly rate that exceeds $14,975. The Salary Cap of $179,700 is based on a 12 month appointment. If the actual appointment is for less than 12 months, the equivalent prorata salary cap must be used.

Some examples are provided below:

Example 1: Award issue date on or after 12/23/2011 and PI with 12 month appointment and an institutional base salary of $200,000 devoting 25% effort to an NIH grant

- Charge to NIH grant $179,700 x 25% effort = $44,925
- Charge to Salary Cap DeptID ($200,000 x 25% = $50,000) - $44,925 = $5,075

Example 2: Award issue date on or after 12/23/2011 and PI with 12 month appointment and an institutional base salary of $200,000 devoting 25% effort to an NIH grant and cost sharing 5% effort

- Charge to NIH grant $179,700 x 25% effort = $44,925
- Charge to cost sharing DeptID $179,700 x 5% effort = $8,985
- Charge to Salary Cap DeptID ($200,000 x 30% = $60,000) – $44,925 – $8,985 = $6,090

Example 3: Award issue date on or after 12/23/2011 and PI with 9 month appointment and an institutional base salary of $150,000 (if annualized PI salary would be $200,000), devoting 25% effort during the academic year and 100% effort for two months during the summer to an NIH grant

- Prorated cap = $179,700 divided by 12 months x 9 months = NIH cap $134,775
- Academic year: Charge to NIH grant $134,775 x 25% effort = $33,694
- Academic year: Charge to Salary Cap DeptID ($150,000 x 25% = $37,500) - $33,694 = $3,806
- Prorated monthly cap: $134,775 divided by 9 months = $14,975
- Summer Salary: Charge to NIH grant $14,975 x 2 months x 100% effort = $29,950
- Summer Salary: Charge to Salary Cap DeptID ($150,000 divided by 9 months x 2 months @100% effort = $33,333) – $29,950 = $3,383 (if allowed by department).

Training and Outreach

Sponsored Programs Accounting offers the following instructor-led training sessions to the Tufts Research Administration community:

- Grants Management
- The Fundamentals of Post Award Research Administration

The Grant Management course is designed for the faculty member/Principal Investigator or department administrator who is responsible for the management of grants. Some of the topics covered include A-21 administrative costs, effort reporting, cost transfers, A-110 regulations and grant closeout.

The Fundamentals of Sponsored Research Administration course is designed for the new faculty members or department administrators just entering the grant field. It focuses on post-award administration. Topics include award life cycle, types of agreements, types of award actions, award management and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

Please contact Carol Liedes at carol.liedes@tufts.edu if you are interested in one of our training opportunities.

Visit The Learning Center at http://learncenter.uit.tufts.edu to self-enroll in any of the web-based training courses (below) or register to attend an instructor-led class.

- A Grant Compliance Overview
- Effort Reporting at Tufts
- Expense Transfers on Grants
- The Grant Closeout Process

T-32 Roundtable

Do you manage an NIH Training Grant? Training grants are complex and can be challenging. Sponsored Programs Accounting is hosting NIH Training Grant Round Table discussions.

Please contact Joyce Ferland, Manager of Sponsored Programs Accounting, if interested.

Upcoming NCURA Conference

NCURA 2012 Sponsored Projects Administration Workshops ~ Save the Date! September 5 – 7, 2012 Portland, OR ~

4 Workshops Include:
*Departmental Research Administration
*Fundamentals of Sponsored Projects Administration
*Financial Research Administration
*Sponsored Projects Administration Level II

For more information please visit: http://www.ncura.edu/content/educational_programs/workshops/spaii/ and click on the calendar tab!

NCURA National 54th Annual Meeting ~ Save the Date! November 4 – 7, 2012 Washington, DC ~ for more information please visit: http://collaborate.ncura.edu/Annual54/Home/

NCURA National Annual Meeting ~ Save the Date! March 10 – 12, 2013 New Orleans, LA ~ for more information please visit: http://www.ncura.edu/content/calendar/2013.php

NCURA “YouTube” TUESDAYS

Check out NCURA's YouTube Tuesdays at http://www.youtube.com/user/ncura1959 where each week your colleagues will be sharing tips and information on topics of interest to research administrators.

Do you have information that you’d like to share? Please direct any questions or comments about the newsletter to our SPA Manager: Joyce Ferland (joyce.ferland@tufts.edu)