

The Value of PROPINQUITY:

Why Local Research Administration Matters

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Making it easier for faculty to find and use extramural funding to develop their ideas is a major goal of the research administration profession, accomplished by lessening administrative burdens on principal investigators. We frequently hear from faculty that they have many good, fundable ideas, but often do not pursue a search for funding to make these ideas a reality because of administrative burdens. Others may be actively practicing sponsored research, but could do more if some of their time were freed up from the administrative functions associated with such activity.

In response to rising administrative burdens, institutions have intensified efforts to provide quality research administration support to all researchers in a way that balances value and efficiency. As of this writing two distinct organizational models exist nationwide: department-based support and service centers. The more traditional department-based support model often relies on staff that are not full-time research administrators. Because of inequitable distribution of resources across all units and varying business practices, cross-unit collaborations can be difficult. Newer, centralized service centers offer more equitable access to resources, but in doing so remove the personal relationship between faculty and research administrator from the equation. We offer a third, middle solution: Locally-positioned clusters of full-time, highly trained research administrators. While still in the conceptual phase, we believe this model provides the “just right” Goldilocks balance of personal relationship and excellent, accessible service required by modern faculty to empower their work.

From department-centric to service center

Research administration support at many institutions spontaneously arose in the 1970s-2000s to relieve the increasing administrative burdens on faculty associated with extramural research. Because this growth was designed to

meet individual needs of researchers and was typically funded by a combination of grant and departmental funds, much of the support began and remained at the department level. As administrative burdens continue to rise, and the work of research administration becomes increasingly complex, it has become clear that this department-centric research administration model faces several logistical challenges. These include unequal support to faculty, non-optimal facilitation of internal research collaborations, and limits to opportunities for professional development, promotion, and retention of talented administrators. Additionally, housing research administration services within departments leads to variable expectations, inconsistent training across staff, and often the absence of backstopping in smaller units.

As a part of an overall movement toward greater efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and consistency of service quality in recent years, a growing number of organizations have transitioned or are transitioning to a research administration service center model. Service centers are an expansion of central research administration, taking over in a centralized way pre- and post-award duties that previously resided in the departments. As part of the transition to the service center model, research administrators are most often removed from physical proximity to investigators. We view this a major drawback, as it moves research administrators from their previous immersion in sponsored projects and the operations of individual investigators. Instead, interactions are more formal and structured, due to the remote nature of work with investigators largely via phone and email instead of in person.

Advantages of locally-positioned research administration

In the era of telecommuting and digital communications, research administration duties can be successfully performed remotely without being located within a department, and with limited face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, the factor of physical nearness, or *propinquity*, has

value that should not be overlooked, due to its ability to enhance social relationships (Huang, 2014, Haylor, 2012), and to build “more productive relationships between grant personnel and researchers” (Davis-Hamilton et al., 2015, p. 3).

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In our experience, post-award support and compliance are particularly enhanced by the availability of geographically co-located research administration staff. Face-to-face interactions and daily exposure allow for a deeper understanding between a research administrator and principal investigator, as well as the ability to quickly jump into a project due to a long-term knowledge of the work of a given investigator. These personal relationships strengthen the ability of a research administrator to serve as a link between the investigator and all other institutional units and function as “the locus of knowledge for all processes that intersect with the administration of grants and contracts” (Viviani & BrownGoetz, 2016, p. 6).

Local but centrally managed model

Given the lack of flexibility inherent in a department-centric model, and the limits of a centrally located shared services model, we suggest an alternative path: a centrally managed but geographically co-located infrastructure that combines the advantages of local research administration with the benefits of the service center. Such a structure would allow for in-person, on-the-ground support to investigators while also maintaining administrative alignment to maximize efficiency in the management of resources. In terms of design, this middle path could be composed of local research administration clusters of 4-5 staff, geographically and/or program based, potentially crossing departmental and school lines to allow for more efficient use of staff resources. We envision that these clusters would be virtually affiliated under the direction of managers (one per two or three clusters), with central oversight exercised via direct central reporting of the managers, with a dotted line to the schools or centers served to ensure local control is maintained.

In this model managers play the central role as the pivot between school and department needs and central administration responsibilities. Managers are envisioned as responsible for monitoring workflow within their overall unit, ensuring adequate coverage, backstopping, and the assessment of performance via quality control metrics. In addition, managers act as a resource for resolving the most complex matters in both pre- and post-award, and interact and partner with faculty, department managers, and senior leadership of supported schools and centers. Finally, they liaise with other research administration managers to ensure successful alignment of competing priorities across schools and programs. We think such a model would ensure an appropriate balance of local control, while also allowing central leadership to exercise oversight, provide guidance and training, and evaluate the effectiveness of the operation and of investigator support. Its flexibility allows for quickly shifting and reallocating the support as needed, and greater flexibility for research administrators

themselves to move within an organization. We recommend that such a model be centrally funded, with departments and schools providing salary offset for research administration personnel proportionate to the time devoted to supporting their portfolios.

An essential benefit of this model is its flexibility. The size and shape of clusters can be based on local cultures, fully adaptable to the needs of a given institution and easily scalable as needs change. This proposed design can also be modified to a school-based model with matrix reporting, as long as a strong network of research administrators is created and maintained by means of excellent communication and collaboration.

Conclusion

As the sponsored research landscape grows ever more complex and burdensome, research administrators will play an increasingly crucial role in maximizing faculty time focused on their research, and not on administrative burdens. To best fill this role, we suggest geographically co-located clusters of dedicated, full-time research administration personnel, close enough to work directly with faculty, but balanced in a way that ensures equitable support. This on-the-ground approach provides the face time of departmental-based staff, while the clustered approach gives the efficiencies found in many service center models. Finally, such a model has the flexibility to adapt to each institution’s unique needs and culture. ■

References

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