



Northeastern University
Office of the Faculty Senate

Report of the Special Senate Committee for Research Policy Oversight 2016 – 2017

March 18, 2017

RPOC Committee: Phil Brown, Jerome Hajjar, Alisa Lincoln, Joanne Miller , Sanjeev Mukerjee, Cristina Nita-Rotaru (chair), Elizabeth Podlaha-Murphy, Sheila Puffer, Carey Rappaport, Gary Young.

SUMMARY

1. This report builds on the report of RPOC committee for 2016-2017. The committee conducted additional meetings with administrators engaged in providing research infrastructure support at Northeastern University.
2. The committee confirmed the findings from the previous report. Specifically, there is a systemic problem with effectively managing grants due to a reporting structure where the administration and finance of the grants are decoupled. The problem is worse for cross-colleges grants due to a decentralized setup which prevents cross-college visibility and an accurate view of grants spending. Post-award management remains a critical problem, offices are understaffed or have insufficiently trained staff due to high churn, there is a lack of procedures similar to those at other research universities, and the quest for the best IT packages for grants management continues.
3. Additional pressure on the post-awards office was put by the compliance requirements due to the recent NSF audit. The result was that many new awards suffered processing delays and money became available late through a shadow system that added more work.
4. As our meetings progressed, it became clear that things are getting worse from previous years and we are now in a critical point given the pressure on all the offices that are charged to provide research support at a time when the university growth continues at a rapid pace. Even offices that provide exemplary services, such as the IRB, are under continuous pressure while operating with no FTE increase since 2002. The IT software is 15-20 years behind what other universities are using forcing staff to create reports by hand to report out on status of balance and expenditures not only on research grants but also on restricted accounts and, to some extent, operating budget.
5. This report should be seen as a call to action for a *plan* on how to systematically address these challenges by (1) defining appropriate processes and procedures, and (2) hiring, training, and retaining the right people. The committee recommends that faculty with experience in providing

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feedback on these issues to be actively engaged by the administration in creating and implementing such a plan. Providing adequate research infrastructure support is imperative given the Northeastern 2025 Strategic Plan.

Context

Following up on the 2016-2017 report of the RPOC, the present committee decided to meet with several administrators: Dana Carroll, Associate Vice Provost, ORAF, Greg Condell VP for Finance, Doris Schultz, Director of Research Finance, ORAF, and Nan Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection (IRB). In addition, the committee also met with Arthur Kramer, Senior Vice Provost for Research and Graduate Education. All of them were very responsive, meetings were scheduled in a timely manner and they provided the committee with a lot of information about structure of offices, processes they follow, current plans, and challenges they have been facing. Note that Greg Condell is no longer with Northeastern.

The chair (Nita-Rotaru) has also met and exchanged information with the Information Technology Policy Committee (ITPC) chair, Dana Brooks.

New developments at the university level with implications on the research mission of the university are the new Northeastern 2025 Strategic Plan that was adopted in September 2016, and the inclusion of Northeastern in the “highest research activity”, by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions for Higher Education in the report released in February 2016.

Due to an NSF audit from last year, compliance has become a main concern, an Assistant VP for Compliance was hired, NSF Compliance Training Modules were put in place, and grants have been subjected through several compliance checks after being awarded.

Comparison with previous report 2015-2016

The committee was fortunate to benefit from the experience of several members who continued on RPOC from the previous year: Phil Brown, Jerome Hajjar, Sanjeev Mukerjee, Gary Young, and Carey Rappaport, previous chair of RPOC in 2015-2016. Thus, we were able to compare our findings not only with the report itself, but with the knowledge of several of the committee members.

The committee met with several members of ORAF to obtain an update on their activities from last year and follow up on finding from the previous report.

Our meeting with Dana Carroll confirmed the findings from the previous report. Specifically, there is a systemic problem with effectively managing grants due to a reporting structure where the administration and finance of the grants are decoupled. The problem is worse for cross-colleges grants due to a decentralized setup which prevents cross-college visibility and an accurate view of grants spending. Dana Carroll raised several other issues such as how the

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structure prevents retaining the best people because they do not see a career advancement path within the structure. This was an extremely informative meeting.

Our meeting with Greg Condell and Doris Schultz focused on a plan to collect information about what an ideal IT package would be, and about some smaller tasks such as how to obtain some level of visibility in grants. It is not clear what is the status of any of these items, given that Greg Condell is no longer with Northeastern.

One particular item that we learned more about is the IT software situation which became acute. For example, the committee learned that Banner is an accounting software, not a proper user-dashboard. Thus, staff in many colleges have to create reports by hand to report out on status of balance and expenditures not only on research grants but also on restricted accounts and, to some extent, operating budget. Due also in part to the version of Banner being used, it appears that we are 15-20 years behind other universities. The ITPC report provides more insights into the software situation along with recommendation of how to make the process of solving these issues in a more timely and transparent manner, with faculty involvement.

Findings 2016 - 2017

One of the new aspects that the committee investigated in comparison with previous year is the IRB office. The committee met with Nan Regina and Randy Colvin to learn more about the activities conducted by the IRB and the challenges encountered. All the committee members that had interaction with the IRB office praised the level of service it provides. However, during the meeting we learned that they are pushed to the limit and they are understaffed. Specifically, the FTE for IRB **has not increased since 2002** (14 years) while the number of awards has continuously increased, including being able to deal with new technologies such as Facebook. IRB also conducts class training and is represented (through Nan) in all compliance and safety committees. IRB is also supposed to conduct random audits to limit the exposure to non-compliances. However, they are not able to conduct such random audits because of lack of personnel. Given that human subjects research is a large part of research activity at Northeastern, and plans for growth include increasing amounts of faculty and student research, it is very important that the IRB office is receives adequate resources to ensure that the university has limited exposure to non-compliances, no funding opportunity are missed, and students are not prevented (or delayed) from conducted research that requires IRB approval.

Recommendations

Based on our findings we make several recommendations that while not addressing systemic issues can improve significantly some of the existing critical problems. Not all of these suggestions derive from meetings with administrators, but rather come from RPOC discussions of other problems faced by faculty and others.

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Stipend payments for NIH NRSA trainees in T-32, F-31, and F-32 graduate students and postdocs

The university has been paying these trainees as consultants rather than trainees, creating a tax burden for them. This practice is not done at other institutions, and needs to be altered.

Stipend supplements

In order to be competitive with other institutions, and in accordance with expected NIH stipend increases, we recommend that the university – at a central level, not department or college level – provide supplements to the existing, low NIH NRSA postdoc stipend levels. There are current estimates of the amount that would be required if the overtime bill is finally passed, but there is an expectation that departments will provide these supplements; that is an unlikely expense for departments to take on. We also recommend supplements to predoctoral fellows as well, since while their stipends may appear higher than some regular doctoral stipends, NRSA stipends are 12-month stipends, making trainees ineligible for additional summer support from federal grants.

Postdoc support and training

In a previous query to the VPR, before this committee was formed, it was learned that the university has no record of the number of postdocs on campus, and has no support system for them. We recommend that a mechanism be created to bring together postdocs from across the campus to have a social and intellectual support system, which will help them avoid the often “netherworld” between grad student and faculty status. Career development can include CV preparation, job talk presentation and critique, networking skills, job search techniques, and other relevant practices.

Internal research funding mechanisms should be more transparent

Faculty find that there is lack of transparency about how funding decisions are made, and that makes it difficult to prepare successful proposals. We recommend a more transparent process that will alleviate this problem.

Increase the IRB staff by at least 2 people

The committee praised the professionalism and the work done by the IRB office. However, they are understaffed, and without increasing the number of employees, many opportunities for funding will be missed and undergraduate students will be delayed or denied valuable research experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the committee found that the research infrastructure support situation worsened from previous years due to systemic problems, lack of procedures in some areas, additional pressure put by the increased number of grants, NSF compliance requirements, and the difficulty to hire, train, and retain staff. This report should be seen as a call to action for a *plan* on how to systematically address these challenges by (1) defining appropriate processes and procedures,

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and (2) hiring, training, and retaining the right people. The committee recommends that faculty with experience in providing feedback on these issues to be actively engaged by the administration in creating and implementing such a plan. Providing adequate research infrastructure support is imperative given the Northeastern 2025 Strategic Plan.