



Northeastern University
Office of the Faculty Senate

Report of the 2015-2016 Senate Committee for Research Policy Oversight

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RPOC Committee: Phil Brown, Rashmi Dyal-Chand, Jerome Hajjar, Natasha Frost, Sanjeev Mukerjee, William Russell Pensyl, Gary Young, Raymond Booth, and Carey Rappaport (chairman)

During the 2015-2016 academic year, the RPOC conducted several meetings with administrators associated with the research enterprise at Northeastern University. Each of these guests was forthcoming, eager to share ideas, and seemed to be dedicated to assisting the research faculty by listening to complaints, working to resolve them, and including faculty concerns in revising administrative procedures. The members of RPOC were all surprised to learn that the Office of Research Finance, while part of the Office of Research Administration and Finance (ORAF), does not report to the Provost, but falls under the responsibility of the University Comptroller (Theresa Wagget) and then to the University CFO. While grants are administered by the Provost's Office of Research Administration, the finances are not; they are handled by the former office.

It was clear that the Office of Research Administration and Finance is in a particularly difficult position of balancing legal and financial sponsor compliance with efficient research management. Although there is great room for improvement, there is currently a real effort to streamline research administration. Many of the particularly annoying aspects of conducting research at Northeastern University are common throughout academia, with rules set by the federal government and other funding sources. Other issues might be alleviated by adopting an enterprise-based research management software system rather than a research accounting system (i.e. Banner), but this was perceived as being prohibitively expensive. Future RPOC discussions, perhaps including members of the Senior Leadership Team, might address the cost/benefit of acquiring such a software system.

Our discussion with Dana Carroll, Assoc. Vice Provost for Research Administration, first identified the split structure of ORAF, and Greg Condell, Associate Vice President, Office of the Senior Vice President for Finance and Treasurer introduced the organization chart showing Dana responsible for Research Administration, while Doris Schultz, Director, Office of Research Administration and Finance (but part of the Office of Research Finance) handles research finance. This division may be efficient for budgetary considerations but is quite confusing from a

personnel point of view. Although ORAF runs the day to day operations of research administration, it is apparent that most faculty are unaware of this internal division, with the actual financial aspects being controlled outside the Provost's Office. RPOC was not critical of this division per se, but there was speculation that the Office of Finance may not have the same academic priorities as the Provost's Office

Dana was forthcoming with her efforts to improve the relationship between faculty and ORAF. Her three primary pre-proposal activity goals are:

- 1) Proposal development: identify opportunities, help craft winning submissions
- 2) Submission and management of proposals: ensure compliance, check budgets, meet deadlines
- 3) Work with faculty to address their research administration needs

In doing so, she has instituted several new policies: streamline routing, softening the requirement to use COEUS, adopt parallel proposal preparation tracts as appropriate (Grants.gov, Fastlane); speed up award setup procedures, allow quicker hiring of new staff/students; and anticipate, advise, and simplify no-cost extension process. RPOC suggested enhancing the Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects approval office, as there appear to be more applications for experiments involving humans. Also, we expressed general displeasure with the delays associated with legal approvals from the Office of General Counsel, but this is beyond Dana's purview.

RPOC met with Doris Schultz and discussed several pressing issues with research finance. Doris stated that she and her office are committed to transparency, ease of use, and equivalent capacity across colleges. We stressed the need for improved reporting, with concerns about the difficulty of knowing how accurate our expenditures are. Banner is hard to decipher, especially with regard to understanding encumbrances vs. actual expenditures. Faculty would prefer a report with a more granular format. Such concerns, perennially raised by faculty, have led to ORAF testing new software packages, Priority and Cognos, which may help manage accounts. These systems would allow for projections of overall spending, and perhaps be customized to set spending timelines for spend-down of grants. However, even if Priority helps us internally, it will not be able to show data from collaborating units internally and externally to Northeastern University. Thus, even with the ongoing efforts, ORAF's Office of Research Finance will not be able to adequately address the SAC charge to improve full reporting of expenses on a given grant to PIs in who might be in different units. Invoicing is a real problem, and Banner cannot include invoicing, which surprised us. To better develop reporting tools, ORAF will examine the University of Minnesota's dashboard system which is apparently very user-friendly for researchers. The university overall is looking to improve the IT structure for grant administration. RPOC suggested the possibility of a Research Help Desk with staff available to rapidly answer research finance questions.

RPOC was pleased to learn that ORAF will now have kick-off meetings with PIs for new grants. This will include delegating authority to ORAF to have certain access to entering and approving charges. This meeting will enable customized support to show the data our researchers want, such as balance and burn rate (based on individual PI needs). These meetings will also help forecast intersecting allocations and expenditures of multiple grants.

Our productive meeting with Greg Condell started with his presentation of the split hierarchy of ORAF, then he asked and addressed our concerns. RPOC noted that the SNAP report system is not as useful as it could be, with a time lag in expenditures and encumbrances and insufficient detail at the line item level. Post-award processing is another problem - especially when interfacing with agencies or companies (invoices not paid, checks not cashed, wrong invoice sent for the wrong amount). Greg noted that we now invoice every month, and that the senior leadership team has tasked six different teams to identify the most pressing technological needs that Northeastern University should tackle over the next five years, but that research is 1/6 of the emphasis of the IT strategy team. The hope is that Cognos will allow the Northeastern University to sunset the use of Banner for reporting. On the general issue of faculty being uncertain with who is administering post-award functions, Greg explained that ORAF has recently switched its service delivery to a single point of contact model, which roughly aligns to the PI's college. Three individuals now serve as the post-award single point of contact, with hope to add a fourth in the near future.

Finally, we discussed the frustration with differences between budget categories defined pre-award and expenditure categories established post-award. Greg explained that this is due to the difference between general ledger and a specific ledger, and by the transition from the sponsor to the university system, with many different budgeting categories required by the different funding agencies pre-award, and a set of consistent categories used in finance post-award.

Our final RPOC meeting was combined with the ITPC. We discussed: “What are the IT resources that will support facility research? What new policies need to be developed for research IT?”

Of specific interest to RPOC was the software used for financial management of research grants. Once again, we noted widespread faculty displeasure with the ability to manage the finances of grants on a day-to-day basis: “there is no way of knowing on a real-time basis how much money we have.” Faculty are dissatisfied with the ePrint and Banner systems, confused by the unfriendly front end and with inaccurate or out-of-date information. Poor information leads to challenging account management, and cuts into productive, creative research. Faculty are often forced to create their own off-line system to manage their own grants, generally using Excel. Improved software tools will be necessary to maintain Northeastern University's preeminence in the academic research community. One recommendation was to explore the software package SAP for payroll management, business transactions, and real-time management of grants. Asana

and Slack were also suggested for web and mobile applications designed to help teams track their work.

Amongst the software packages that were perceived to be important for general use are:

- 1) SAS - (Statistical Analysis Software) - advanced analytics, multivariate analyses, business intelligence, data management, and predictive analytics
- 2) Dedoose - cross-platform app for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research with text, photos, audio, videos, and spreadsheet data
- 3) Nvivo - qualitative data analysis
- 4) ATLAS.ti - workbench for the qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual, graphical, audio and video data
- 5) REDcap - web-based, user-friendly electronic data capture (EDC) tools for research studies; quickly customizable databases; data tracking from research studies; study event and survey scheduling

Software license management issues include difficulty in establishing the status of Northeastern University's licenses and who is covered by them, and determining how we balance unit-based vs. university-wide licenses. An improved communication platform identifying software needs and availability would be very useful. We should consider a model similar to the library, with easily accessible searching for resources and excellent publicizing and sharing of research-based resources for faculty.

It was generally agreed that faculty needs more access to server space, with various levels of permissions to use such servers, but it was questioned whose responsibility it was to purchase servers. In addition, an increasing number of faculty are developing mobile apps, which require greater need and access to servers.