

TO: Senate Agenda Committee
FROM: Research Policy Oversight Committee (RPOC)
DATE: [Day Month Year]
SUBJECT: Final report for RPOC

Research Policy Oversight Committee (RPOC) SAC Liaison: Joan Collins

Faculty	Title	College
Owen Skinner (Chair)	Assistant Prof.	COS
Jessica Oakes (Co-chair)	Associate Prof.	COE
Vladimir Shapiro	Asst. Teaching Prof.	CPS
Dami Ko	Assistant Prof.	BCHS
Jane Saczynski	Full Prof.	BCHS

The RPOC committee has had 8 meetings and conducted 4 interviews during the 25-26 academic year. The committee worked on the specific charges assigned by SAC. The charges were addressed as follows with recommendations.

Charge 1

Because of ongoing changes to the university's procurement process and system updates, the RPOC will work with the Associate Deans of Research to identify where communication channels are broken so that faculty receive timely information about Northeastern research policy updates.

Background

Northeastern University has undergone significant changes to its procurement processes and research administration systems in recent years, specifically with the transition to Workday Finance. These transitions have introduced complexity in how research policy updates are identified, communicated, and acted upon at the college and department level. Prior RPOC cycles did not address this charge directly; it was assigned to the current committee in recognition of growing faculty concern that timely, accurate information about policy changes was not reliably reaching researchers. The College-level Associate Deans of Research were identified as key intermediaries between the central administration and the faculty, and the committee was tasked with assessing whether that channel is functioning effectively.

Activities

The RPOC committee met with the Associate Deans of Research from COS and BCHS to discuss the flow of procurement and research policy information from central administration to faculty. The committee received unsolicited complaints regarding the rollout of the new production system (Aatmesh Shrivastava - COE). In parallel, the committee submitted targeted questions as part of the Faculty Senate Survey to assess faculty awareness of recent policy changes and their confidence in available communication channels.

Findings

The committee identified significant, wide-ranging gaps in the communication and implementation of research policy updates, with survey results consistently indicating dissatisfaction across procurement, discretionary funding, and faculty notification.

1. Lack of adequate advance notice of changes to the procurement system

Regarding communication specifically, a substantial portion of respondents reported receiving no adequate advance notice of changes to the procurement system, and many learned of policy changes only after they had already taken effect. When asked how they first learned of the changes, few respondents reported being notified through official or proactive channels. The absence of a clear point of contact for policy questions was a recurring theme in both the survey and in consultations with the College Associate Deans of Research, who noted that information from central administration often arrives without sufficient lead time for effective dissemination to faculty.

2. Orders take much longer than with the old system, and longer than in other Boston area universities

The new procurement system restricts access to a small number of individuals in each college and ensures that only those entitled can make purchases using approved means (credit cards). The operational consequences of these restrictions are severe. Respondents report that orders now take weeks to months rather than days, with some faculty forced to purchase research materials with personal credit cards to avoid jeopardizing time-sensitive experiments and grant deliverables. Faculty report running out of basic supplies, including paper and printer ink, for extended periods, and as a result, some have delayed or canceled research plans entirely. One respondent noted that a \$22 million contract was put at risk due to slow spending rates. Faculty report that other Boston-area university purchasing systems, specifically MIT, allow much faster turnaround time for some items.

3. Newly imposed restrictions on fund spending

Discretionary and startup fund restrictions have compounded these problems. Faculty report sudden, unilateral spending caps imposed without PI input, with some describing the freezing or confiscation of accounts built through years of responsible fiscal management. Junior faculty are particularly affected, with many unable to establish labs or generate preliminary data for grants. Multiple respondents stated they are considering leaving the university if conditions do not improve.

The committee spoke with Dr. Debra L. Franko, Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs at Northeastern University, regarding these concerns. Dr. Franko indicated that she is unaware of any spending changes originating at the Provost level, noting that college budgets are held by the dean and filtered down to chairs. She recommended that affected faculty speak directly with their chair to explore whether adjustments can be made.

Summary:

Taken together, the findings indicate that communication breakdowns, suboptimal advanced planning, and inconsistent execution occur at multiple points in the chain from the central administration to individual researchers, and that these breakdowns are actively harming research productivity and faculty retention.

Recommendation

The committee recommends that the RPOC continue to monitor this issue in the coming academic year and work with the College Associate Deans of Research to pilot improved communication practices for future policy updates. This should include:

- Establishing a designated point of contact in each college for research policy questions. In many cases, this may be the College Associate Dean for Research, but this should be a designated role that is communicated to the faculty, staff and students.
- Developing a consistent protocol for notifying faculty of changes to procurement systems and related policies with sufficient lead time. Allow time for feedback.
- Rolling out adequate and timely training of the relevant personnel in the new procurement system

No Faculty Senate resolution is recommended at this time; however, RPOC should remain engaged and revisit this charge if conditions do not improve.

Charge 2

The committee shall review the policy on policies, including the tenure clock, and provide a summary report on existing policies on research. Specifically, the committee shall identify the specific policies that address research disruptions due to circumstances such as funding delays or disruptions or regulation changes.

Background

This charge was assigned in direct response to a confluence of pressures facing Northeastern researchers: significant changes in the federal funding climate, new

university budgeting constraints, and the procurement system disruptions documented under Charge 1. Together, these developments have created circumstances in which faculty research programs may face serious disruption through no fault of their own, raising urgent questions about what institutional protections and formal policies exist to support affected researchers.

The current federal funding environment has introduced uncertainty, with shifts in agency priorities, reduced funding funding, delays in grant awards and renewals, and heightened regulatory requirements affecting researchers across disciplines. Simultaneously, internal changes to procurement and discretionary fund management have limited faculty flexibility in responding to these external pressures. Against this backdrop, the RPOC was directed to review Northeastern's "policy on policies" — the framework governing how institutional policies are created, maintained, and communicated — with particular attention to the tenure clock and policies addressing research disruptions caused by funding delays, regulatory changes, or other circumstances outside a faculty member's control.

This is a new undertaking for the RPOC and was not addressed by prior committee cycles, reflecting the urgency of the current moment and the need for the Faculty Senate to understand what formal protections are — or are not — in place for faculty navigating an increasingly volatile research environment.

Activities

The committee consulted with Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, Debra Franko, to inventory existing formal policies related to research disruptions, tenure clock adjustments, and institutional responses to funding or regulatory changes. This consultation focused on identifying both written policy and the degree to which informal or ad hoc practices have developed in the absence of formal guidance.

Findings

1. Unclear formal governing policy regarding research disruptions due to external factors

The committee found little to no formal policy governing the university's response to research disruptions caused by funding delays, regulatory changes, or other external circumstances. The Provost's Office considers each promotion and tenure application on a case-by-case basis — including tenure clock extensions in limited circumstances. With a few exceptions, these practices are neither codified nor readily accessible to faculty who may need them. No centralized, publicly available policy framework was identified that addresses the full range of research disruption scenarios covered by this charge. This absence leaves faculty, particularly junior faculty and those managing large grants, without clear recourse or institutional protection when circumstances beyond their control affect their research programs. Given the procurement and funding disruptions documented under Charge 1, the lack of a formal protective policy is especially concerning.

Recommendation

The committee recommends further study before any specific action is proposed. A more comprehensive review should map all existing informal practices across colleges, assess how peer institutions have addressed similar policy gaps, and engage faculty governance stakeholders to determine which protections are most urgently needed. The RPOC should report back to the Senate with a concrete policy proposal in the following academic year. The committee does not recommend a Senate resolution at this time but notes that the findings warrant continued attention.

Charge 3

The committee shall review the policies related to research activities and shared spaces. In particular, the committee should develop a resolution to implement a university-wide shared research space policy that works towards creating equitable agreements concerning the use and operation of shared resources within and among departments and colleges. The following items should be examined leading to resolutions: (a) The College of Engineering's Research Space Policy that includes a provision for the operation of shared spaces; (b) The "Shared Space Charter Template" in the Provost's office (see RPOC 2020-21 for a copy of the template); (c) work with the Sr. Vice Provost for Research for timely updates on university policies and regulations related to research space. The committee shall work with Associate Deans of Research and NU-RES in developing any new policy proposals. Please see the guidelines on the policy website for new proposals.

Background

This charge builds directly on several years of prior RPOC work on shared research space. The 2020-2021 RPOC developed the "Shared Space Charter Template," which proposed nine discussion points to create equitable agreements governing the use and operation of shared resources. The 2021-2022 RPOC surveyed college administrators on familiarity with the template, and the Senate passed a resolution calling on the Provost's Office to adopt it university-wide — a resolution that was ultimately not approved by the Provost or the Board of Trustees. The 2022-2023 RPOC noted that the topic had been thoroughly covered but flagged it as a growing concern given the university's expansion. The 2023-2024 RPOC revisited the issue and recommended revising the Charter to better address practical faculty concerns regarding scheduling, flexibility, and equity in shared spaces such as ISEC and EXP.

The current charge takes this work a step further, directing the committee to move toward a concrete university-wide resolution. Specifically, the committee was asked to examine the College of Engineering's Research Space Policy, the Provost's Shared Space Charter Template, and to engage the Sr. Vice Provost for Research, Associate Deans of Research, and NU-RES in developing any new policy proposals consistent with guidelines on the university policy website.

Activities

The committee reviewed the existing shared-space policies in the Charter Template and consulted with Sarah Stanton (College of Science) and Sandra Shefelbine (College of Engineering) to better understand the issues surrounding these spaces. The discussion covered the practical realities of shared space management across campus, the limitations of existing policy frameworks, and potential models for improvement. Additionally, the discussions also covered concerns over shared equipment. These consultations informed the committee's review of both the COE Research Space Policy and the Provost's Shared Space Charter Template.

Findings

1. Each shared space requires a designated person in charge and dedicated technical staff to ensure proper operation.

Shared spaces vary considerably in their purpose, scale, and user base, and a one-size-fits-all policy is unlikely to be effective. Each shared space requires a designated person in charge and dedicated technical staff to ensure proper operation. While some spaces, such as Mugar, have personnel fulfilling this role, others — including newer shared spaces such as ISEC — lack this structure entirely.

2. Communication failures are pervasive at every level

Problems arise not only when spaces are shared across colleges but also within the same college, where faculty and staff often lack clear channels to coordinate access, resolve conflicts, or escalate issues. This mirrors findings from previous RPOC cycles and underscores that the problem is structural rather than isolated.

3. Lack of a functional mechanism for equipment repair and maintenance in shared spaces

Colleges do not pay for repairs from grant funds or other discretionary sources, as the cost-benefit calculus rarely favors it. The result is that multiple pieces of shared equipment across campus are out of service with no clear path to resolution. Many wasteful purchases are made for equipment that is already available elsewhere in Northeastern or is out of order due to improper or unprofessional maintenance. A pooled resource model — in which colleges contribute to a shared maintenance and repair fund — was identified as a promising solution.

4. Lack of an established process for determining the priority of access among competing users

There is no established process for determining priority of access among competing users, which creates friction and inequity, particularly when spaces are shared across departmental or college boundaries. Shared consumables, such as autoclaves, present similar coordination challenges.

Summary:

Taken together, these findings confirm that the gaps in current shared space governance are not merely matters of policy language but rather reflect deeper structural and operational deficiencies that any university-wide framework will need to address directly.

Recommendation

The committee recommends that more groundwork be laid before a formal resolution is brought to the Senate. Specifically, the next RPOC cycle should convene a working group that includes the Associate Deans of Research, representatives from NU-RES, the Sr. Vice Provost for Research, and college-level space planners to develop a unified draft policy drawing on the strongest elements of both the COE Research Space Policy and the Charter Template. This process should be guided by the university's policy development guidelines and should explicitly address equity in access and use across departments and colleges.

The working group should give particular attention to two operational proposals that emerged from faculty consultations.

1. Stockroom model:

Shared materials, consumables, and equipment are managed through a centralized pool with controlled access — should be evaluated as a mechanism to reduce redundancy, enable cost sharing, and ensure more equitable resource distribution. Several peer institutions have implemented such models successfully and could serve as benchmarks.

2. Development of an online database with a booking mechanism for shared research equipment

It would improve visibility into available resources across campus and provide a practical tool for managing access and priority, reducing unnecessary frictions, and improving equipment utilization.

Once a draft policy is developed through this collaborative process, it should be brought back to the Senate for consideration as a formal resolution. The committee further recommends that the Senate continue monitoring shared space issues in the interim and that the Sr. Vice Provost for Research be engaged early in the process to improve the likelihood of administrative approval.

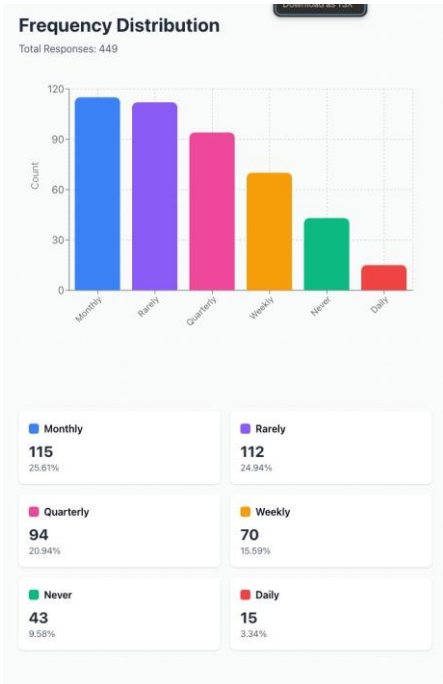
Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Owen Skinner", is written below the text "Respectfully submitted,".

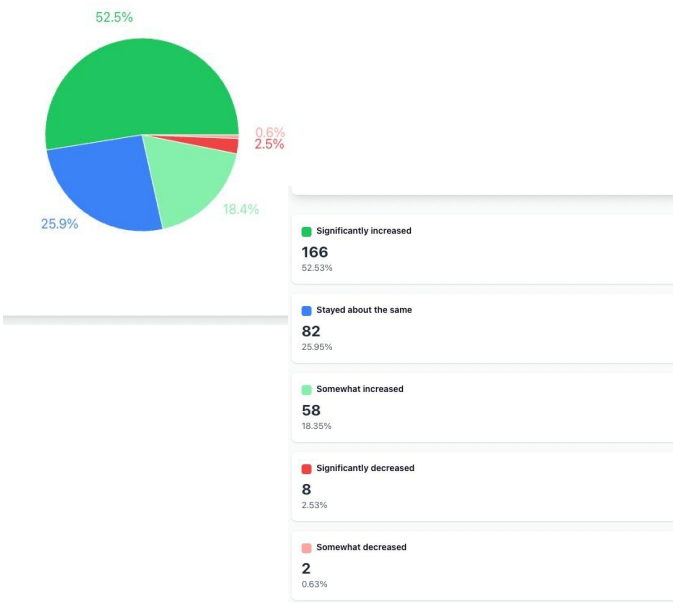
Prof. Owen Skinner, Chair, RPOC

Appendix I. Summary of Survey Results:

How frequently do you need to purchase materials, supplies or services for your research or teaching?



Since the transition to the procurement website system, how has the time required to complete purchases changed?

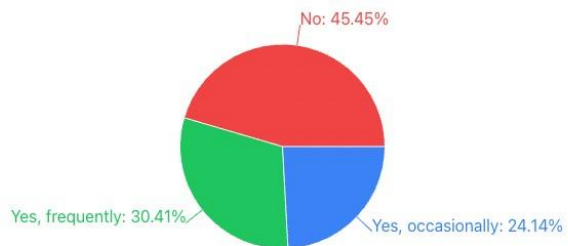


What specific challenges have you encountered with the new procurement website system?



Have you experienced delays in obtaining materials needed for time sensitive research or teaching?

Percentage Distribution



Summary of Responses

Severe Delays in Processing Respondents report orders taking weeks to months instead of days, with approval times ranging from 5 days to 4 months. Many mention that items previously delivered in 24-48 hours now take 1-2 weeks minimum. Critical research materials, teaching supplies, and equipment have been significantly delayed.

Impact on Research Multiple researchers report being forced to purchase materials with personal credit cards to avoid jeopardizing time-sensitive experiments, grant deliverables, and participant studies. Some have delayed or cancelled research plans entirely. One respondent noted a \$22 million contract at risk due to slow spending rates.

Vendor and Payment Issues Adding new vendors to the system is described as "cumbersome and lengthy." Researchers struggle with platforms requiring credit cards (like Prolific for human subjects), vendors not being paid on time, and inability to work with certain companies. International collaborations and subcontracts have become particularly difficult.

Teaching Disruptions Faculty report running out of basic supplies (copy paper, printer ink, blue books), delayed textbook orders taking 3 months, and starting courses without necessary materials. Some resorted to using previous year's activities because supplies arrived too late.

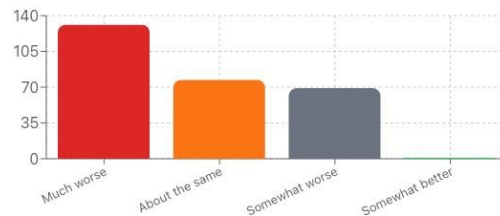
Participant Payment Problems Gift card inflexibility for research participants is a major issue, with inability to provide custom amounts and long approval delays frustrating study participants who expect immediate compensation.

Workarounds and Abandonment Many have stopped using the system entirely, purchasing items personally and requesting reimbursement (though reimbursement itself is now slower). Others simply avoid purchases altogether because the hassle isn't worth their time.

Basic Supplies Crisis Multiple mentions of being unable to access fundamental items like printer paper, gloves, paper towels, and ink cartridges for extended periods.

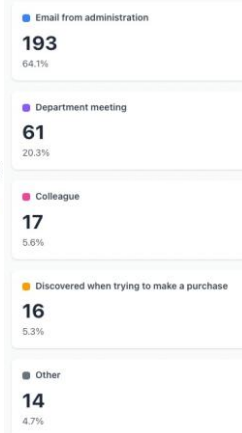
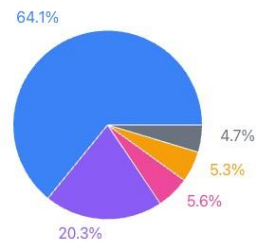
Compared to the previous credit card system, how would you rate the new procurement process?

Response Counts



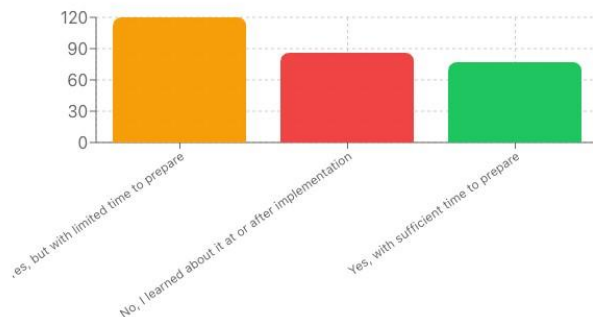
How did you first learn about the procurement policy changes?

Percentage Distribution



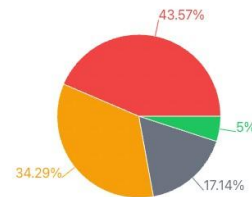
Did you receive adequate advance notice about these changes?

Response Counts



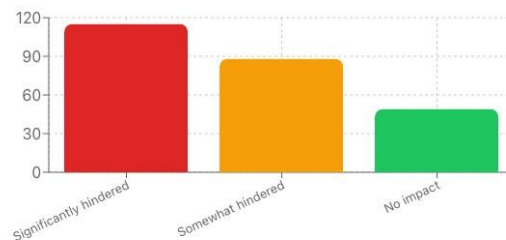
Have you
received
adequate training
or resources on
how to use the
new procurement
system?

Percentage Distribution



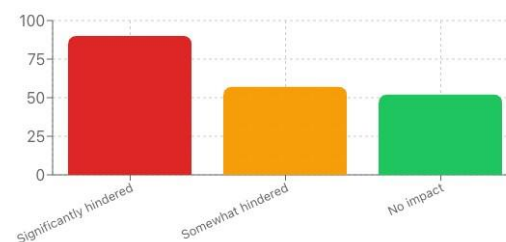
Have limitations on
discretionary funds
affected your ability
to conduct
research

Response Counts



Have limitations on
discretionary funds
affected your ability
to travel to
conferences

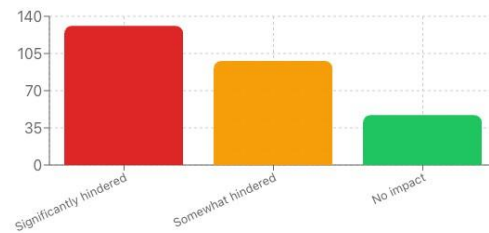
Response Counts



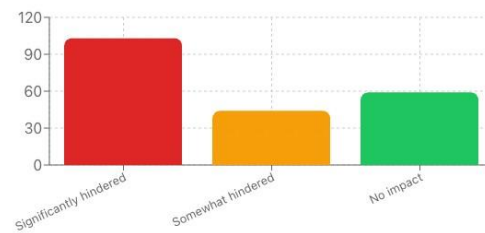
Have limitations on discretionary funds affected your ability to purchase equipment/materials

Have limitations on discretionary funds affected your ability to respond to urgent research needs

Response Counts



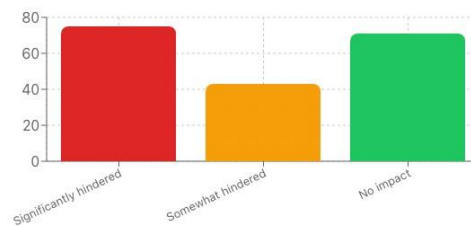
Response Counts



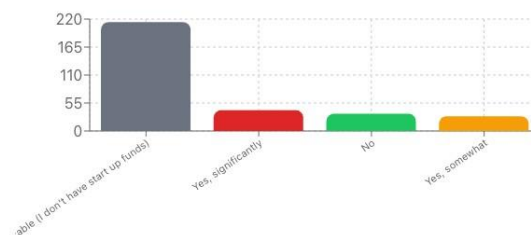
Have limitations on discretionary funds affected your ability to recruit or retain talent

Have limitations on start-up funds affected your research program or lab development?

Response Counts



Response Counts



Summary of Responses

Arbitrary Spending Caps and Restrictions Respondents report sudden, unilateral limits imposed on discretionary and startup funds without PI input. These caps are often based on previous year's spending, which doesn't account for new faculty who had no prior activity or researchers ramping up programs. The restrictions transform "discretionary" funds into highly controlled, non-discretionary budgets requiring extensive approvals.

Broken Contracts and Fund Confiscation Multiple faculty report the university violated contractual agreements, including zeroing out rollover balances, "stealing" overhead return accounts, and restricting access to 90% of promised startup funds. Some report colleges confiscating or freezing discretionary accounts built through years of responsible fiscal management.

Impact on New Faculty Junior faculty are particularly hard hit, unable to establish labs, purchase essential equipment, hire personnel, or generate preliminary data for grants. Many express concern that the university's investment in new hires is being "squandered" as faculty "wither on the vine" without access to promised startup resources.

Research Program Paralysis Faculty cannot pursue time-sensitive opportunities, must cancel or delay experiments, lose critical data from ongoing longitudinal studies, and face grant suspension risks. Several mention being unable to cover unallowable federal grant expenses that startup typically covers (software licenses, secretarial support).

Hiring Freezes and Personnel Issues Cannot hire needed staff, research assistants, postdocs, or temporary workers. Summer hiring restrictions particularly problematic. Some uncertain if they can pay current RAs next semester. The inability to quickly hire identified talent is eliminating flexibility critical for research.

Travel and Conference Restrictions Conference travel cancelled or severely limited. New pre-approval requirements for even small amounts (\$2K) force commitments months in advance, which is often impractical. This limits professional development for both faculty and students.

Student Impact Cannot support undergraduate experiential learning projects, graduate student independent research, or postdoc work beyond strictly grant-funded activities. Unable to pay research participants for ongoing studies or provide promised compensation.

Financial Planning Impossibility Faculty have no visibility into fund balances, receive conflicting information, face constant rule changes, and cannot plan or make commitments. Requests rejected while "balances are being updated" even for new faculty with untouched startup accounts.

Considering Leaving Multiple respondents explicitly state they will "seek employment elsewhere" if forced to personally fund their research or if conditions don't improve, particularly those with multi-million dollar grant portfolios.

System Dysfunction The spending restrictions compound procurement system problems - even when faculty want to spend within limits, the system makes it nearly impossible to actually execute purchases in reasonable timeframes.

Have these
funding
limitations
caused you to:

