

2021 ACOR Fellows Report to the Office of Sponsored Programs June 2021

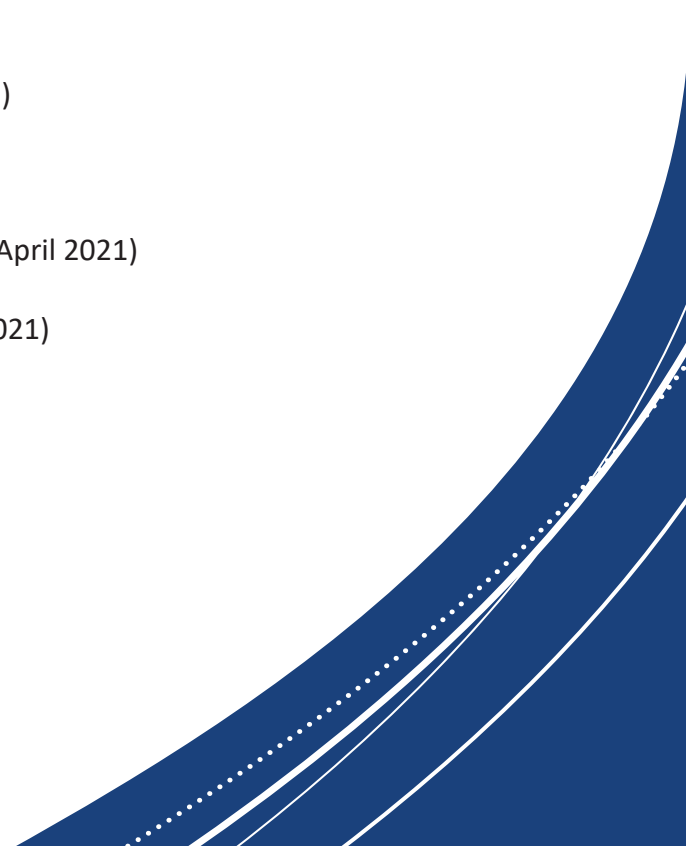
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Executive Summary

During the 2021 spring semester, the 2021 ACOR Fellows visited with the below units via zoom.

Office for Research Protections (18 February 2021)
Research Accounting (11 March 2021)
Office of Technology Management (18 March 2021)
College of Engineering (25 March 2021)
Applied Research Laboratory (1 April 2021)
Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) (8 April 2021)
College of Medicine: Office of Research Affairs (15 April 2021)
College of Agricultural Sciences (22 April 2021)
Office of Research Information Systems (29 April 2021)



Following the visits with the nine hosting units, the 2021 ACOR Fellows advanced several recommendations which have been grouped into four main categories:

- 1) System for Integrated Management, Budgeting, and Accounting (SIMBA)
- 2) Best Practices
- 3) Recruitment, Retention and Responsibilities
- 4) Enhancements to the ACOR Fellows Program

The ACOR Fellows provided Brenda Brooks and Robin Riglin, both Senior Associate Directors within the Office of Sponsored Programs, with a copy of our full report, which includes detailed findings and recommendations. We have prepared this executive summary to highlight some of the recommendations that were made within the full report.

SECTION 1: SIMBA

The Penn State University Research Community has been significantly impacted by the implementation of SIMBA. Every unit involved in grants management has been forced to revise their business processes and issues have been identified that create major challenges.

Recommendations:

- **REEVALUATING AND RESTRUCTURING SIMBA RESOURCES:** The University should assemble a SIMBA Relaunch Team to catalog lessons learned from the system rollout as well as process definitions and enhancements over the last year to create research administration GM training that follows the grant life-cycle process. There should also be an evaluation of how to adequately structure staffing, responsibilities, and training in a way that addresses the Research Community's needs. There needs to be a centralized delivery hub that encompasses SIMS, SIMBA, and grant management functions that cannot be handled by SIMBA. Having dedicated SIMBA Team positions (not external consultants) that are subject matter experts in Penn State's research processes would be ideal. This team could focus on providing SIMBA end-users with standardized system solutions, training, support, and reporting capabilities that will satisfy most user needs. Once that is done, they can start to help create more customized solutions and training for needs that are unique to specific units.
- **SIMBA HELP DESK:** Given the prominent level of support needed for SIMBA alone, the centralized SIMBA Help Desk should establish a better communication and support plan to address institutional needs. The SIMBA Super User, as the first point of contact for support, should not be the continued plan to provide SIMBA support to staff. The SIMBA Support Team site should be accessible to all SIMBA end-users regarding ticket submission for troubleshooting and general operation questions.
- **SIMBA TRAINING:** SIMBA training needs to be more robust to adequately address business needs; specifically, SIMBA Training should be tailored towards individual Unit/College needs

and specific end-user roles (i.e., task-based training, naming conventions, account setup guidelines). Super Users, if a continued part of the SIMBA support plan, should be provided additional training and support given their role expectations. The University should measure the workload required of Super Users to evaluate if additional dedicated staff are needed given the FTE requirements of specific job functions in addition to serving the expected Super User role. As with other areas, the grants section of the SIMBA Resources page should have Snip-its, Shorts, and FAQs dedicated to the variety of frequently performed grant management tasks.

- **SIMBA ENHANCEMENTS:** Dedicated support is needed to develop customized enhancements to SIMBA to meet institutional needs. Designated members of the SIMBA team responsible for addressing enhancement needs, configuration, and implementation should work closely with the entire University research community to determine their needs and how to address the obvious deficiencies through the enhancements. Working with a select few representatives of the research community does not enable all University needs to be compiled and addressed appropriately as the functionality and complexity of the Units and Colleges vary greatly.
- **SIMBA TASKFORCE:** The SIMBA Taskforce should evaluate metrics to measure the time required for data entry as well as the duplicated efforts now required to keep grants management information in shadow systems. The resulting metrics will likely identify the need for staffing increases for those impacted Units/Colleges. Additionally, the Taskforce should identify the challenges associated with SIMBA data entry duties and develop a solution to redistribute these tasks to admin-like roles.
- **ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM TO SIMBA TO INTEGRATE WITH SAP:** There should be more research into whether SIMBA can truly be a grants management system or if there is another solution that can more easily integrate with SAP. If another integrated grant management system is not determined to be a viable option, the University needs to provide adequate financial and staff resources to adapt SIMBA to meet grant management needs to properly support its \$1 billion in research expenditures.

SECTION 2: BEST PRACTICES

Many units have committed significant resources to fund and/or develop systems to enhance research administration within their units. “Systems,” as it applies to this report, is defined as any electronic tool that has been created or utilized to assist with research administration. These systems have not been made available to all applicable units across the University and this has prevented units with less financial resources and staff from reaching their full potential for managing all aspects of research administration.

Additionally, throughout our visits, it was evident that processes are currently siloed by individual Units or Colleges. The University would benefit from more standardized procedures, guidance, and

encouragement of best practices. The lack of standardization appears to have hindered collaboration and training. The University has an opportunity to exploit best practices, which would result in less effort spent by each office in developing their own practices.

Recommendations:

- The Penn State Research Administration community could significantly benefit from some of these systems currently being utilized by the various Units. The ACOR Fellows recommend, based on our findings, that the Office of the Senior Vice President for Research review and evaluate the various systems that individual Units and Colleges have either created or utilized to determine which systems could potentially be implemented University-wide (including the ones described above). Once this review has been completed, leadership should consider whether ORIS could centrally implement and maintain the systems if presented with the proper resources.
- The ACOR Fellows recommend the Office of the Senior Vice President for Research strive to maintain and distribute high-level guidance and foster collaboration with respect to the following:
 - **Standard On-boarding Procedures:** Standardized on-boarding procedures should be utilized for all faculty involved in research, Research Administrators, and the research community. These procedures should include unit-specific processes (such as OSP, ORP, OTM, etc.) to ensure all faculty and Research Administrators are presented with the same knowledge when they begin their employment.
 - **Detailed Guidance:** Provide detailed, standard operating procedures. This includes standardized guidance on the approval process for foreign nationals and managing cost share.
 - **Collaboration with College of Medicine:** Encourage more outreach and interaction amongst the College of Medicine and the rest of the University community. Based on our experience with the College of Medicine, it may be beneficial to encourage more ACOR outreach and interaction with other Commonwealth Campuses. Examples of such interaction could include lunch and learns, conferences, etc.
 - **Research Administration Staff Working Groups:** Create standard working groups targeted to support specific job roles, geographically separated Commonwealth campuses, and/or Units/Colleges without a centralized research administration office. If such working groups already exist, increase visibility of the existence of such groups, encourage increased participation, and support the dissemination of information from the meetings. Suggestions include open call for participants to include diverse perspectives, publish meeting minutes, and regular deliverables in the form of recommendations and/or implementation of recommendations. The working groups could also be a great place to vet suggestions from the general research administration community.
 - **ACOR Catalog of Frequently Used Sites:** Publish a listing of all the systems utilized across the research administration community, including who currently holds such accounts and the procedures for approving or adding a new account in each system.

SECTION 3: RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Penn State's Job Compensation and Classification structure lacks standardization which permits Colleges and units to assign responsibilities inconsistently to various job grades and levels. Additionally, almost every hosting office we visited with had multiple unfilled positions and, thus, was not at full staffing capacity. Lastly, it was encouraging to observe that most hosting units have maintained business as usual while working from home despite the challenges created by the ongoing pandemic.

Recommendations:

- The Compensation Modernization Initiative is very much needed to restructure and improve Penn State's Job Compensation and Classification structure and talent pool. Job retention and satisfaction can be improved by placing staff on a consistent professional path or track that allows them to grow and realize their potential as specialized experts in their respective fields. The initiative could identify if controls need to be put in place to prevent job creep and potential opportunities for cross-training and/or job rotation.
- Penn State leadership needs to improve processes to fill vacancies with qualified individuals, while allowing flexibility around qualifications to hire the most desired candidates. Human Resources processes should be reevaluated and streamlined where possible to fit the rapid revolving job market. Transparency of salary bands will better communicate expectations with job candidates.
- The University should allow for flexibility among units following return-to-campus directives. Units and Colleges should be able to leverage their Covid successes moving forward. Pain points observed by specific units have been addressed during the pandemic with the move to Office365 and other online collaborative tools.

SECTION 4: ENHANCEMENTS TO THE ACOR FELLOWS PROGRAM

We appreciated the opportunity to be participants of the first fully virtual ACOR Fellows Program. We noted our experiences to share for consideration for future virtual programs:

- The ACOR Fellows Program should provide a hybrid attendance model moving forward to allow for employees and offices at all University locations to participate while still accommodating face-to-face interactions.
- The "visit" time should be increased to three- or four-hours total for each session, with breaks provided. Some offices might benefit from scheduling two sessions instead of one, such as Office of Research Protections and the Office of Sponsored Programs.

- Ask each hosting unit to provide any prepared slides or materials in advance of the session to further facilitate discussion and interaction.
- Hosting units should consider editing the number of topics presented to only those most relevant to Fellows. This will allow for additional time to be focused on more open discussion, interaction, and collaboration between the hosting units and the Fellows.
- At the start of the program, the Fellows should be encouraged to debrief following each session.
- Consider including the SIMBA Team and/or SIMBA Taskforce to host Fellows in the future.