2019 ACOR Fellows Report to the Office of Sponsored Programs
January 2020

Submitted by:
Lee Carpenter - College of Health and Human Development
Philip Frum- Office for Research Protections, IRB Program
Jessica Hoffman - Graduate School, Office of Graduate Fellowships and Awards Administration
Crystal Kachik - Research Accounting
Lisa Korman - College of Engineering, Office of Engineering Research Administration
Maryellen O'Brien - College of Agricultural Sciences, Office of Grants and Contracts
Kelley Struble - Office of Sponsored Programs
Tonia Shealer - College of Medicine, Cellular & Molecular Physiology

Executive Summary

During the 2019 fall semester, the seven members of the 2019 ACOR Fellows class visited eight campus offices/units and met on two occasions to debrief John Hanold and Robin Riglin, Office of Sponsored Programs. The eight offices/units were Research Accounting, Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP), Office of Risk Management, Office of Research Protections, College of Health & Human Development Research Office, Office of Technology Management, Office of Research Information Systems, and College of Engineering Office of Research Administration.

At its final meeting, after discussing each of these visits, the fellows advanced several recommendations. These have been grouped into three main categories:

- Communications and education/professional development;
- Changes and improvements to the ACOR Fellows program; and
- Strategic utilization of past and current ACOR Fellows in future Penn State research administration (RA) planning and program development.

The fellows' overall goals in offering these recommendations are to assist the Office of Sponsored Programs in its: (1) continuing efforts to identify and address RA known and future efficiencies in Penn State research administration, (2) continued discussion of RA needs and methods of addressing them, and (3) enhancement of the ACOR Fellows' experience.

Before offering details on each of these areas below, the 2019 ACOR Fellows affirm their agreement with statements and recommendations in the 2018 ACOR Fellows executive summary. The substance of several of those findings and recommendations is reflected in the following, albeit communicated differently.

I. Communications and Education/Professional Development

The Office of Sponsored Programs' desire to remain robust and innovation-focused presents an array of challenges with regard to research administration communications and the RA workforce. These include:

- Identifying and implementing research administration best practices within the reality of current resources;
- Sharing this information with college and research units;
- Encouraging research-focused offices and units to innovate, as time and resources allow, in the interest of both customer service and opportunities for RA professional development (many research administrators are problem solvers, after all); and
- Centralizing/sharing and communicating about RA resources in a manner that best serves all relevant stakeholders.

Communications

There is universal agreement that information on best practices, funder requirements, training opportunities, and related RA resources must be shared, and shared widely, but how? And perhaps more to the point, how most effectively? Are web pages listing resources serving to educate principal investigators and research administrators alike about pre- and post-award processes and providing other necessary information? Based on the fellows' discussions, the answer about information-sharing effectiveness would be either "not completely" or "no".

Recommendations

- Charge an RA task force to seek information and devise recommendations on information dissemination best practices that are proving effective both locally and across the Big Ten, AND that could work within the Penn State context.
- Consider periodic updates to the ACOR listserv, after ACOR meetings, highlighting important information and other information of interest to members of the Penn State RA and research community
- Consider innovative ways to share funder, RA, and research practices information—inboxes fill up constantly, so is there a more effective way to share information (e.g., Microsoft or Google Groups; internal listservs—perhaps another question for the communications task force?)
- Consider methods of RA information-sharing with project staff and co-investigators about funder and University post-award processes—often, principal investigators share reporting and accounting responsibilities with a project coordinator or co-investigator, who despite their best efforts may find themselves unaware of important regulations or internal practices.
- Consider an internal toolbox that includes many of these elements.

- Consider sharing examples of innovations currently occurring in colleges/units that are having a demonstrably positive effect on pre- and post-award effectiveness—these are often mentioned at the awards ceremony at ACOR retreats, e.g., but are these shareable/are solutions to other offices' challenges being developed that could be shared and/or adapted?

Education/Professional Development

The 2019 ACOR Fellows had several spirited discussions about the need for more, and varied, standardized professional development opportunities for research administrators, veteran and fledgling principal investigators, and project staff who participate in financial and other reporting for funded projects.

Recommendations

- Devote energies to the development of standardized educational and professional development opportunities at Penn State
    - Hire an additional educator in ORP's Education and Quality Management program. This position would focus on training and educational resources for research administrators and other personnel involved in the research enterprise.
        - Lead an education focus group with representation from core areas including OSP, Research Accounting, FOs, college research offices, departmental staff, and administrative units (Graduate School, Office of Post Doctoral Affairs, Limited Submissions Office at OSVPR, etc.), etc. to identify existing resources, ongoing needs, and educational gaps
        - Develop materials for training programs
    - Create and implement a higher-level floater position
        - Review the feasibility of replacing someone on extended leave in a more timely manner due to prior experience.
        - Ensure that floaters have pre- and post-award experience.
        - Consider the higher-level floater position as a way to avoid turnover and reduce the likelihood of this person seeking other positions.

    [*If resources will only allow one position, we recommend combining the two positions to create one position.]*

    - Create a centralized RA resource directory—this would involve distributing a survey via the ACOR listserv (and connect via college and central offices in case someone misses listserv announcements) to identify additional trainers to build a skilled pool of subject matter experts beyond those who always present. This is particularly important over the next few years given the expected turnover in long-term Penn State RA staff.

II. Changes and Improvements to the ACOR Fellows Program

The 2019 ACOR Fellows found visits with offices enlightening and educational, but recommend several improvements to the visit process and the overall Fellows experience.

Recommendations

- Encourage each unit to take a more instructional view of the fellows' session, including
  - providing preparatory/background materials (one-sheeter; relevant website URLs; relevant forms; examples of office processes and functions; relevant policies (e.g., RAG22, RAG80 pre-OSP visit) in advance of each training session to help fellows prepare and eliminate the need for rote informational sessions, **including** a list of acronyms that will be used in that unit's presentation, and also put these into the fellows folder for future consultation/review;
  - soliciting questions and topics in advance of each session from Fellows to allow for a more in-depth interaction between the units and Fellows;
- Consider opportunities for 1:1 time between unit staff and fellows—many commented positively on this opportunity at OSP and believe that this experience could be replicated with other units to further fellows' education; and
- Consider rotating/changing the offices that present to the ACOR Fellows each year.

The new learning venues that should be considered include the following:

- CFR with Invent Penn State
- Property Inventory
- Purchasing
- Graduate School
- OSVPR
- Financial Officers - perhaps with the college visits
- Postdoctoral Affairs Office
- SIMBA Implementation team
- Pre-award Working Group/Post-Award Working Group/Small-unit Working Group

The fellows recommend other changes to the program:

- Select units to visit that are, when possible, not the fellows' home units.
- Spend more time at the first meeting facilitating discussions among the fellows of current job responsibilities and each fellow's hopes for their engagement in the fellow semester.
- Rotate visits among large and smaller college research offices to prevent larger colleges from being overburdened by these visits; select dissimilar units to pair together.
  - Idea: Research Deans or Research Office Directors could be asked to volunteer for an ACOR Fellows visit and provide outcome goals from that visit; the fellows would then provide a short assessment report to their office.

- Recommend more structure to each visit, including the following:
    - Walk through the space at each office for a chance to meet staff (please do not skip this—most offices had it on the agenda but skipped it, and fellows wanted to meet staff members with whom they frequently interact.)
    - Introductions
    - Short introduction to the office (with most materials sent in advance, this should be a true overview, 45 minutes max)
    - Hot topics or what keeps you up at night*
    - Case study and/or hands-on walk-through or process
    - Shadowing office members
    *Prompt for all of the units—spend at least an hour on the "hot topics" in your area of expertise or the question, "What keeps you up at night?"

On a related note: When the fellows were asked to request an OSP staff member to shadow, most were very excited to shadow someone, but did not have a preference for whom or did not respond. Unfortunately, then, having not been connected with anyone, the shadowing experience was not as rich as it could have been and did not result in the learning experience sought by the fellows. In the future, the fellows recommend the opportunity to engage in shadowing at every unit, with assignment by unit. Fellows would value rote assignment and the opportunity to connect 1:1.

III. Strategic Utilization of Past and Current ACOR Fellows in Future Penn State Research Administration (RA) Planning and Discussions

During each visit, prior ACOR Fellows identified themselves. During discussions for this final report, this year's class of fellows came to this recommendation—we encourage the Office of Sponsored Programs to consider ways to utilize the experiences and insights of ACOR Fellows. Collectively and according to function, there are several ways to garner fellows' insights and deploy their strengths:

- Planning for and offering education and professional development opportunities
    - TED talks and training videos by "master" research administrators at Penn State (before they retire and their wisdom and experience are lost to upcoming RAs)
- Planning for and implementing communications strategies
- Assisting the Office of Sponsored Programs, as well as their respective units and oversight units, in strategic planning on short- and long-term bases
- Assisting in the development and implementation of formal mentoring programs
- Discussing ways to innovate/identifying examples of unit innovations that could have university-wide impacts (e.g., College of Engineering ticketing and record-keeping systems for pre- and post-award)

2019 ACOR Fellows Report to the Office of Sponsored Programs
January 2020

Other Comments from the 2019 ACOR Fellows

After each visit, the fellows discussed experiences and observations. At its final meeting, fellows created a list of comments and suggestions for each unit based on those observations as well as questions asked and answered at each location. Listed below are unit-specific suggestions—the fellows encourage the Office of Sponsored Programs to review them and decide which should be sent on for further consideration and/or action.

- **Research Accounting:**
  - Consider the following:
    - Identify office with unilateral policy-based authority to close accounts for long inactive restricted accounts in extraordinary circumstances (where the unit is not responsive or able to take action).
    - Develop an electronic method for tracking/prompting Fixed Price & Financial Reporting requirements/deadlines.
    - Adapt the Industrial Invoicing System or provide functionality from SIMBA to directly email invoices. Since this functionality is being lost in SIMBA, we hope that it will be a high priority in the next stages of SIMBA functionality.
    - Evaluate current responsibilities in invoicing Industry Membership Payments and explore centralizing that function to a more centralized office (e.g. Finance, Corporate Controller, Research Administration)
      - Currently, it is the responsibility of the College Research Administration offices to invoice industry membership payments (e.g. I/UCRCs that are part of an NSF grant). This results in checks being sent to many different departments across campus and results in delays in depositing, as well as the risk of loss.
      - In addition, the departments must set up multiple vendor accounts and addresses for Penn State. This process delays budgeting the membership fees to the principal investigator's account needed to begin research, as well as frustrating the vendors (for example, some vendor systems will only allow a select number of addresses on file for one organization). Also, the vendors are asking for multiple W-9s(one for each address), which creates more of an administrative burden for Penn State.
      - Departments do not have invoice templates or an invoice numbering system required by many vendors (i.e., they will not accept a "request for payment"). If the cash receipt function could be centralized for industry accounts (OSP negotiates these agreements) and a standard invoice template provided during time of negotiation, this support documentation could be provided to the sponsor and included when they send the payment (check or wire) to a central location, streamlining the process while ensuring that appropriate internal controls are in place.

- **Office of Sponsored Programs**
  - Train outside units that are under the Subcontract and Proposal Submission teams.
  - Provide departmental assignments of negotiators/proposal team to college offices and smaller units.
  - Organize meet-and-greets with supported units when negotiators/proposal team staff change to ensure they are able to collaboratively work together.
  - Improve communications between OSP staff, faculty, RA and administrative units served by the Sub and Proposal Team by defining roles and expectations.
  - Use the ACOR listserv to share information about the Pre-Award Working Group, Post-Award Working Group, and Small Unit Group organized by the College of Communications/Elaine Files, and encourage broader representation on these groups, and sharing of information on/from them (not all relevant personnel know about them).

- **Risk Management**
  1. Add standard invoicing language to negotiating contracts at the agreement stage.
     a. Also POS and other contracts
  2. If not available, publish a matrix of agreement types and the office that is responsible for negotiation and execution of said agreements. If available, distribute widely via ACOR listserv, CADs, and to the fellows.

- **Office for Research Protections**
  - Create additional educational opportunities for new principal investigators and their research staff shortly after their arrival at the University, such as new faculty luncheons.
  - Consider expanding opportunities for information-sharing at department or lab meetings, in addition to the ORP's annual training sessions—doing so would increase the exposure of staff, post docs, and research coordinators to RA policies and practices.

- **College of Health & Human Development Research Administration**
  - Consider why this office performs more than research administration duties, including financial duties.
  - Hire more staff.

- **Office of Technology Management**
  - Ascertain whether OTM has the tools it needs to track anomalies. Does Research Accounting have tools that OTM could use?
  - Consider providing contract tracking—it appears that University contract tracking is a need that is not being met.
  - Look into OTM's method of tracking deferred payments/amendments for records/auditor—does it have one?

- **Office of Research Information Systems**
  - Commend ORIS for its presentation and the great examples of how it works through change management and project management. Fellows found the session valuable and interesting.
  - Based on a conversation at the presentation, the Graduate School, in collaboration with the Liberal Arts Research Office, would like to meet with ORIS to consider the idea of expedited IAFs for student fellows, perhaps similar to an expedited process being developed for RSOs.

- **Office of Engineering Research Administration (OERA)**
  - The Engineering Research Office operates efficiently and effectively. Its processes and databases could benefit the University as a whole. Its director mentioned implementing a proposal system to be used with SIMS that all units could utilize which could be extremely beneficial. The databases that were shown to us during our visit would be extremely beneficial for all colleges for running reports, tracking proposals, etc.

    At the Hershey campus, REDCap is used by ORA (Office of Research Affairs) to track departmental workloads, but not as fully as possible. It's more of a "heads up", with little information. The process in Engineering seems to be a complete process that captures the necessary information needed to properly track proposals. The OERA director mentioned that they have communicated with ORIS to implement systems so that processes can be streamlined and perhaps allow continuity across the University.