

CASE STUDIES

Developing an In-House Training Program for Research Administration

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Abstract

This article describes the design and implementation of a training program that utilizes existing, commercially available computer training modules combined with in-house expertise to provide affordable training to support staff involved in grant and contract administration.

Introduction

Penn State's sponsored research program has been expanding at a tremendous rate, more than doubling since 1985. Sponsored research expenditures were \$89 million in FY85 but jumped to \$201 million by FY92 (a 125% increase). The number of proposals processed increased from 1,407 in FY85 to 2,369 in FY92 (a 68% increase). However, the research administration infrastructure has remained relatively constant for the same period. For instance, the sponsored programs office at University Park employed 10 professionals in proposal and awards processing in FY85; by FY92 only one professional staff person had been added. This static level of support is mirrored throughout most of the university and has caused significant stress on the administrative system.

This problem is not unique to Penn State. Attempting to cope with an increasing workload in a shrinking infrastructure is a major challenge for many institutions as we experience diminishing resources and corresponding cutbacks in support personnel.

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Background

Historically, sponsored programs administration at Penn State has been shared between central administration and college administration. The Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) provides central administrative support for over 4,000 faculty and their sponsored programs at the University Park campus, the Behrend College in Erie, the Capital College in Harrisburg, Continuing and Distance Education, and the Commonwealth Education System (17 campuses). The Hershey Medical Center, which houses the university's medical school, has its own grants office that processes proposals and awards.

OSP has a staff of 11 professional research administrators and nine support personnel. OSP provides a broad range of support services to the university's colleges and intercollege research programs (IRPs), from providing funding opportunity information to proposal review and submission, to award negotiation and acceptance.

There are also nine colleges and nine IRPs that have research support offices to assist faculty in the identification of funding sources, proposal and budget preparation, and research administration. Most of these offices employ at least one professional and one support person, while some of the larger colleges may have additional support staff. Even the largest office, however, is staffed by only two professionals and four support personnel, and this office performs preaward services and a full range of postaward services as well. In most colleges and IRPs, the day-to-day postaward administration, such as initiation of personnel changes and purchasing, is done at the department or unit level. These personnel often do not have access to regional or national training programs conducted by the professional organizations and commercial firms.

At Penn State, OSP provides support primarily to the college/IRP research offices, while the college/IRP research offices primarily support and assist the faculty. This partially decentralized organizational mode that combines OSP and the college/IRP research offices is called the "Sponsored Programs Administrative Network."

Goal

Research administration is becoming an increasingly complex operation, with what seems to be an ever-increasing scope of responsibilities. With the current swing toward heightened accountability, we are also experiencing a "revolutionary" demand to control indirect costs: how does a university continue to perform a proper stewardship role without increasing staff?

At Penn State we decided to examine the potential for creating a more knowledgeable administrative and clerical staff at the departmental and unit level. We hoped that broadening the base of research administration infrastructure would alleviate some of the system stress at the central points. By instructing university staff members who are "down in the trenches"—that is, those departmental support staff who work daily with faculty researchers—in the proper procedures to be utilized in sponsored programs administration and the reasons for these procedures, we would increase the likelihood that things would be done right the first time by the individuals who have the most direct contact with the faculty.

This diffusion of responsibility could help eliminate redundancy at the various administrative levels, freeing research administrators "up the line" to concentrate their efforts on truly "value-added" activities. In addition, these newly trained staff members might also take on enhanced responsibilities (e.g., certain proposal/budget development activities with faculty) that constitute only a small level of effort for each department but accumulate to a substantial combined level of effort at the college and central administration level. An added bonus would be the creation of a cadre of well-

trained personnel who would be available and could be tapped for advancement when higher-level positions open up. Finally, it was believed that a well-trained staff, up and down the ladder, would increase the university's ability to provide proper stewardship of sponsored funds and would lessen the risk of audit exceptions.

Designing the Training Program

To meet our goal of developing a more knowledgeable staff, we considered that:

- A great wealth of research administration experience exists at Penn State in the Office of Sponsored Programs, the major college research offices, and the IRP administrative offices. The training program needed to tap that strength.
- The goal of the training program was to alleviate stress on the research administration system, not to create more, and training had to be designed so as not to demand too much time of the research administrators for preparation or presentation of training sessions.
- The training should be interactive. Participants should be encouraged to ask questions and contribute their own experiences.
- The training should be low-cost and flexible enough to meet local needs.

Thus the training program incorporated the following two components:

1. Self-paced, computer-assisted learning packets that participants would use individually to learn the basics of research administration.
2. A series of workshops with research administrators as "team teachers" to give the institutional perspective to the basics learned above. A workshop coordinator/moderator was appointed for each workshop. This individual was responsible for developing the workshop content and assembling the panel of workshop trainers whose expertise coincided with the topics covered.

Computer Training Modules

Sylvan Lake Associates, Inc., offers a "computer-assisted self-instructional course" that is primarily designed "for people who are relatively new to the profession of Research Administration, and as a review for those with more experience." The complete series contains 20 disks. (Editor's note: Sylvan Lake Associates, Inc. has recently reorganized its computer-assisted programs into four comprehensive courses, made up of the individual units listed below. Two of the courses are reviewed later in this issue.)

After a survey of the content of the disks and a detailed review of the information on a couple of the disks, Penn State approached Sylvan Lake Associates and negotiated a site license for the complete training program. The training program contains the following 16 modules:

- 1 Protection of Intellectual Property
- 2 Grantsmanship as Marketing
- 3 Agreements for Sponsored Projects I & II
- 4 Transferring Technology
- 5 Sponsored Project Administration
- 6 Funding Sources for Sponsored Projects
- 7 Budget Preparation for Sponsored Projects
- 8 Fiscal Considerations for Sponsored Projects
- 9 Indirect Cost Determination
- 10 Research Facilities Management

- 11 Managing Costs for Sponsored Projects
- 12 Regulations & Compliances for Sponsored Projects
- 13 Proposal Preparation & Review
- 14 Equipment & Supplies for Sponsored Projects
- 15 Types of Sponsored Projects
- 16 Sponsored Project Personnel

Workshops

It was determined early in the planning stages of the training program that a self-instruction program would be insufficient to fully train individuals. Research administrators must concern themselves with the policies and procedures of the local institution. A commercially available training program, for example, might address the need for an internal review process but would not give instruction on the procedures for completing a "Clearance Data Form," the Penn State review form. Thus, we felt a critical need to have some kind of personalized instruction on doing things "the Penn State way."

Secondly, the Sylvan program is computer-assisted training, with the emphasis on "assisted." In our estimation, it was never meant to offer a complete education on research administration. The training modules form a good starting point and provide valuable background information, but they simply cannot be used in a stand-alone fashion. We therefore felt that some form of live instruction was needed to answer questions raised by the computer modules and to build on the foundation the modules provided.

Thus, we developed a series of workshops that could be paired up with the computerized training program. The workshops were:

- 1 Sponsored Project Administration: The Role of the University, the Role of the Government/Sponsor, and the Partnership
- 2 Funding Sources: Finding and Cultivating Funding Opportunities
- 3 Budget Preparation: Computerization of Cost Estimations
- 4 Proposal Preparation: The Key Components and Processes
- 5 The Award Process: Receiving and Setting Up a Sponsored Project
- 6 Contract Negotiations: Common Problems and Solutions
- 7 Managing and Accounting for Sponsored Projects
- 8 Advanced Seminar on Specialized Topics (e.g., Intellectual Property and Technology Transfer, Indirect Costs, FAR Clauses).

Combining Modules With Workshops

The final step was to combine the computer-assisted training modules with the workshops, so that a full package of instruction could be used. We paired them up as follows:

Workshop	Training Modules
1	5, 12
2	6, 2
3	7, 9
4	13
5	14, 15, 16
6	3
7	8, 10, 11
8	1, 4

Training Level

Establishing the target level for the workshops was difficult. It was necessary to adjust the training level to meet the basic needs of a group with differing skills and experiences. Since our primary target was departmental support staff, keeping things at the very basic level was important. Thus, we attempted to balance the coverage given to topics to be informative (detailed) yet not lose the audience (too detailed).

Workshop Schedule

During the first year, three all-day sessions were held. These were long and exhausting for both participants and teachers. In the second year, workshops were conducted approximately once a month for eight months during the academic year. Three-hour sessions were held on a regular schedule.

Training modules for computer-assisted learning were distributed about two weeks prior to each workshop session. This allowed time for participants to review the background material thoroughly prior to attending the workshop. A printed copy of the contents of each training disk was distributed with the disks for students to use as a workbook. This allowed students the opportunity to continue study when they had no access to a computer. The workbook would serve as a reference guide in the future.

At the workshop, the panelists each gave a presentation on their particular area of expertise, including the identification of Penn State and sponsor policies and procedures. Most panelists provided handouts that participants could keep for future reference. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and to discuss concerns that the panelists could address.

Observations

In written evaluations, participants reported they had learned a great deal from the combination of the computer modules and the workshops. Student feedback was very important to improving the training program.

Experienced administrators felt a need for additional training as well. Those that attended the workshops felt they were too basic. The second year's program contained an advanced seminar for senior research administrators.

The training program had an unexpected benefit: the program enhanced communication between research administrators throughout the university, leading to the creation of an informal network for sharing information and expertise. Panelists became "mentors" to many of the participants through this networking process.

The goal of developing a low-cost and flexible in-house training program was met. It is too early to determine if the training program was successful at its primary mission, that is, strengthening the research administration infrastructure, but early indications are very positive.

Concluding Thoughts

We strongly recommend this format as a way to begin an in-house training program. It offers a means of conducting basic training in research administration with a minimal commitment of time and resources. In addition, we would recommend that institutions wishing to implement similar training programs consider the following points:

- Formalize the training program through your personnel or human resources office. This can alleviate some of the administrative burden of handling registra-

tion, arranging for facilities, printing manuals, and advertising. However, research administrators should maintain control over the instructional content.

- Charge a fee for the workshop. We have found that when charged even a nominal fee (say \$25 per session) participants take the program more seriously. Limit enrollment in the workshop to a group size that will allow for effective interaction.
- Explore "certifying" staff who complete the training program and are tested for their knowledge. This could be done through an internal process in conjunction with your personnel office. We found that participants appreciated receiving a certificate of completion that was suitable for framing.
- Explore whether it would be wise to require all employees who work in sponsored programs administration to complete the program.