Providing Administrative Research Training for Everyone! It's a PART-E! Taking the "They Don't Know What They Don't Know" Out of the Equation

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Abstract: *Faculty new to an institution typically go through an orientation process during which they are presented with the information and resources available to aid in successful navigation of their new environment. An orientation often will include in-person presentations, online training modules, and other paper/digital resources in an attempt to cover the broad range of activities and responsibilities that fall within a faculty member's job description. One such orientation topic crucial to faculty at a research institution is research administration. While awareness and understanding of the research administration resources available to them can ease faculty's administrative burden and make the process more positive, research onboarding, particularly at a large research institution like the University of Michigan, may not be standard across the university or even within schools/units. Considering the impact familiarizing faculty with research* *administration can potentially have on faculty satisfaction, implementing additional training focused on research administration could be beneficial for individual departments. In this case study, the authors detail a research administration onboarding program designed for faculty in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Michigan. This program goes beyond the orientation introduction to offer the tools and knowledge necessary for a seamless transition into the research enterprise.*

Keywords: *onboarding, faculty, training, research administration*

Background

Literature suggests an inherent divide between professional staff and academic researchers (Wimsatt, Trice, & Langley, 2009; Szekeres, 2011). Research administration uniquely exists in both worlds, supporting the research enterprise and technical science through an administrative lens. As such, bridging the gap between research and administration for faculty is crucial, particularly given the importance of research administration in submitting competitive proposals, securing and appropriately managing funding, and complying with policy at multiple governing levels (Lintz, 2008). While research on faculty training/onboarding specific to research administration is lacking, various studies indicate faculty are overwhelmed by the administrative burden of research and are looking for more support in the grant submission process (Wimsatt et al., 2009; Cole, 2007). Additionally, faculty can feel restricted and laden by the many policies surrounding research at every level (Cole, 2007). At an institution like the University of Michigan, existing resources and support is likely not the issue, as a robust, extensive research administration infrastructure is in place at many large research institutions. In order to bridge the research administration gap for faculty, programs like the one detailed in this article could be the solution to alleviating any perceived burden by helping faculty better navigate the resources and support available to them and better understand the need for compliance in research.

Introduction

In 2011, the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Michigan centralized pre-award grant administration activities. Before centralization, the department had 15 divisions with 26 administrative assistants providing grant services, among their many other job responsibilities. By creating a dedicated research office, the department aimed to reduce the number of staff involved in grant administration and increase the level of expertise. With centralization complete, the Pediatric Research Office (PRO) now exists to provide faculty with specialized grant administration support.

The newly established PRO, looking for a way to advertise research processes and services available to faculty, started offering "Research Administration Onboarding" sessions in 2015. In 2017, the PRO expanded the sessions beyond faculty to include anyone interested in the research administrative process and renamed the sessions "Providing Administrative Research Training for Everyone (PART-E)." PART-E sessions are scheduled from 12 PM – 1 PM with lunch served to facilitate attendance. This report reviews the information imparted to faculty within PART-E. We view this information as essential knowledge in research administration for all faculty. PART-E sessions are offered twice a year with the purpose of providing new/junior faculty and other stakeholders with; 1) information needed to navigate the university's research environment, and 2) up-to-date information about research administration processes. Though the basics of research administration remain consistent, we encourage individuals to attend the one-hour PART-E session as frequently as time allows to obtain access to the most relevant updates from sponsors, the university, and other governances impacting research administration.

Pre-Award

Each session begins with introducing faculty to their designated research support staff. For the pre-award portion, the Primary Research Administrators (PRA) explain the pre-award process, available tools, timelines, systems, and roles and responsibilities. The topics covered in relation to pre-award activities are shown in Table 1. We endeavor to present the process in a manner in which faculty feel protected rather than burdened by the various required levels of internal review and approval. One example we use to support this sense of protection is the fact that some sponsors include publication restrictions within their agreements. During the internal review process, the university legal team will negotiate with sponsors to have such language revised to ensure our faculty's publishing rights are protected. Additionally, external funds are awarded to the institution rather than an individual. Our institution has specific terms for accepting external funding. Sponsor terms are reviewed and sometimes negotiated to ensure legal compliance. Throughout the presentation, we emphasize there are few individuals who are authorized to sign on behalf of the institution. As a result, faculty should never sign any agreement and send it directly to a sponsor. We communicate our mission to alleviate administrative burden associated with grant submissions allowing faculty to focus their time and energy on the science.

Table 1. Pre-Award Activities

Preliminary Activity	Application Development	Submission	Post-Submission Support
• Provide checklist and timeline • Provide Qualtrics survey to collect required information • Develop project budget • Interpret guidelines • Advise on required elements • Collaborate with other departments and institutions to develop subaccounts	• Communicate with sponsor • Collect and format documents • Populate sponsor application • Route for internal approvals	• Compile final PDF • Send PDF to PI for review of technical elements • Review final PDF for administrative compliance • Finalize and submit application	• Assist with progress reports • Prepare MTAs, DUAs, NDAs • Provide compliance reminders/Assist with publication compliance • Maintain Biosketches and Other Support Pages • Compile Just-in-Time documentation • Disseminate funding opportunities • Provide a series of "brown-bag" educational sessions

Post-Award

During the post-award portion of PART-E, the Post-Award Accountants (PAA) provide a high-level overview of the post-award processes and services offered. The topics covered in relation to post-award activities are shown in Table 2. Our goals are to give faculty a better understanding of the PAA's role in easing any post-award burden and to encourage frequent communication between the PI and his/her PAA. We highlight common areas of misperception and offer some best practices for post-award management. We urge faculty to work regularly with their PAA in order to better understand their finances and ask faculty to contact the PAAs for any of their post-award needs.

Table 2. Post-Award Activities

Receiving Funding	Managing the Award	Close-Out
• Review each award notice for specific terms and conditions • Establish accounts and ensure budgets are allocated appropriately • Provide account information to enable spending • Add personnel effort to projects • Set up subcontracts	• Monthly account reconciliation • Individual project and overall portfolio analysis • Process effort changes • Complete annual financial reports • Provide forecasting/burn rates to aid in financial management	• Complete final financial reports • Remove effort from projects • Review and transfer any trailing charges • Inactivate projects

Unfunded Agreements

Unfunded agreements, including non-disclosure (NDA), material transfer (MTA), and data use (DUA), require institutional review and approval, although faculty commonly believe they can sign these agreements. During this portion of the session, we inform faculty of the reasons why these agreements must be reviewed and negotiated by legal experts for the protection of both the sponsor and the university. One example provided is the University of Michigan's status as a public institution which abides by the Open Access (OA) policy. Therefore, information held within the university can be made publically available. When a sponsor requests a signed confidentiality agreement before sharing information, legal experts include language in the agreement to protect the confidential information from falling prey to the OA policy. Even though funding is not involved in these agreements, they are legal contracts and require the same level of review and approval as funded agreements. Most importantly at the session, rather than faculty remembering all the steps involved in these types of agreement, we want faculty to know the PRO must be involved when establishing these agreements.

Compliance & Reporting

National and institutional policies and systems exist for regulating and certifying compliance involved with research and extramural funding. We explain to faculty these regulations exist to protect everyone participating in the research program. Compliance regarding Financial Conflict of Interest certification, for example, is in place to help ensure unbiased research and reporting, protecting faculty against potential legal prosecution. Lack of compliance with reporting requirements, on the other hand, can jeopardize not only a single Principal Investigator's funding but funding for an entire institution. Often, faculty do not understand the importance of staying current with certifications and compliance issues. In order to bring this awareness, we emphasize the consequences, from legal ramifications to loss of funding, and offer the PRO as a primary resource, as well as, other institutional resources to help faculty remain compliant.

Take-Homes

We understand attendees will likely remember few, if any, details from the PART-E session. However, there are three main points stressed at the end of each session we do want attendees to always remember:

1. Never sign anything, unless directed by the department, college, or central office. If an individual signs and submits documentation directly, they make themselves personally liable and nullify institutional protections.
2. Compliance is key to funding.
3. Always contact the departmental office.

When the formal presentation is complete, sessions typically end with attendees staying to meet their PRA and/or PAA in person or to ask specific questions, often prompted by the presentation.

Lessons Learned

Research administrators are charged with relieving faculty of the administrative burden of research. We found in early iterations of the program that the presentation was heavy in the details of our work. This resulted not only in attendees losing interest and attention, but we realized sharing our work in such detail was transferring some of the administrative burden back on the faculty. Faculty generally are not interested in our time or workload (Cole, 2007), so when presenting this information to faculty, it is important to find the "sweet spot" of awareness without burdensome detail. Keeping the presentation broader has led to fewer "glazed-over" stares during the session.

The format of the presentation was initially formal. Attendees sat around a conference table, and the speaker stood behind a podium. During this set up, faculty seemed less engaged and less likely to contribute or ask questions. We decided to change the format to a more informal presentation, in which research office staff distribute themselves around the table and sit amongst the attendees, presenting from their seat. This combats the feeling of being lectured, and we have found attendees to be more engaged and likely to ask questions.

Originally intended to educate new faculty, we found the session was also helpful as a refresher for established faculty. As such, advertising as onboarding was a deterrent for experienced faculty to attend. We adjusted the name of the program to PART-E to broaden our attendees and more accurately describe the session. Although all the information presented will not be new to established faculty, we try to bring new updates and topics to each session and provide a refresher on our services to appeal to all faculty. Since rebranding, we have seen a positive impact with the number of attendees for PART-E sessions increasing by 40%.

Conclusion

Before starting PART-E sessions, the total grant submissions in fiscal year 2014 was 265. By the end of fiscal year 2017 with PART-E sessions in place for two years, the department submissions increased to 311, which is a 17% increase compared to the overall Medical School increase of 8%. While this does not necessarily indicate PART-E is responsible for the increase in submissions, it certainly supports the continued need for education and training surrounding research administration. We know the program has impact by the many inquiries the PRO receives following a session. After each presentation, the PRO receives a numerous emails and phone calls from faculty asking questions, looping the PRO into transactions already in process, and notifying PRAs of upcoming submissions. On many occasions, the inquiries to our office initiated by PART-E have protected the faculty, the PRO, and the university from time-consuming, difficult, and potentially non-compliant situations.

With the majority of research administration work completed online and over email, in-person interactions with faculty are rare. PART-E sessions allow us to meet new faculty right away and meet faculty face-to-face, some of whom we have worked with for a year and have never met in person. Connecting a name to a face, for both the PRO and faculty, has increased the number and quality of our interactions. Building stronger relationships and partnerships based on mutual trust and respect will allow us to "enhance customer service ability, facilitate enforcement of policies and procedures, and help us accomplish tasks" (Luongo & Moody, 2015, p. 9).

The results of PART-E have been invaluable for our department; however, we have found the issue of onboarding faculty expands outside our department. The topic of training/onboarding faculty at the University of Michigan is becoming a key area of focus on many university-wide committees. As a result of presenting the PART-E program at multiple internal and local conferences to share our experience and learn from what others are doing, PART-E has become a model and starting point in an initiative to streamline faculty research administration training and onboarding at the university and is a topic of interest for research administrators outside the University of Michigan, as evidenced by attendee comments from the SRA Michigan Chapter Meeting in 2017 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Attendee Comments from SRA Michigan Chapter Meeting 2017 Presentation

"Presentation was relevant and something that I can take back and apply to my job."
"Excellent topic! The peds presentation is so very much more than information for new faculty only. It's a good way to present a consistent message to research faculty over a large organization (particularly when staff turnover is high. Helps to keep expectations for both direcdtions [directions] clear)."
"This is really an amazing topic. This could be presented around the university to engage other departments to onboard not only with a senior faculty member; but engage with their research team to build those relationships. Thank you! Never, never sign anything [anything] (to faculty) is my favorite part."

We strive to provide the most productive and beneficial program we can to improve the research administration process for faculty, and we will continue to adapt the program as needs change and the department evolves. The PRO looks forward to developing departmental training opportunities for faculty to compliment the broad overview of PART-E. As our office grows, we hope to expand the positive impact past this program by focusing on our mission, because, after all, we are here to support the faculty, and of course, to PART-E.

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