Alleviating Administrative Burden: A Novel Approach for Institutions and Investigators

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Author’s Note

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Abstract

Research faculty and staff are increasingly burdened by administrative responsibilities at research-intensive institutions across the country. Tasks such as writing grant proposals, financial management and reporting, effort reporting, and personnel management are prohibiting researchers from producing more impactful science.

In 2012, the National Research Council (NRC) released a report highlighting ten recommendations for the future of U.S. research institutions. One of the recommendations was to “reduce or eliminate regulations that increase administrative costs, impede research productivity, and deflect creative energy without substantially improving the research environment.” A number of governmental and non-governmental task forces have met about these issues, and tried to ease their administrative burden, but little progress has been reported toward resolving them. While most institutions can confidently say that their sponsored program offices are aware of these investigator-related concerns, not nearly as many can say that they regularly review areas for introducing efficiency.

This paper proposes a new way of thinking about some of these issues, and offers a series of guidelines for leaders that might free up the valuable time of our nation’s academic researchers.

Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been a variety of reports suggesting that administrative requirements are an increasing burden for both academic researchers and the institutions that support them. A 2012 report by the National Research Council’s (NRC) Committee on Research Universities found that “the problem of excessive regulatory burdens is itself an issue that puts a drag on the efficiency of all university research… [potentially costing] billions of dollars over the next decade” (Research Universities and the Future of America, 2012). The report recommends that federal agencies work to “reduce or eliminate regulations that increase administrative costs, impede research productivity, and deflect creative energy without
substantially improving the research environment.” It also recommends that agencies review and synthesize the regulations and reporting requirements they impose on research entities with the aim of eliminating those that are redundant, ineffective, burdensome, or inappropriately applied to institutions. Other key reports include the findings of two Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP) Faculty Workload surveys administered in 2005 and 2012 that concluded approximately 42 percent of awardees’ federal research time was devoted to administrative efforts. On average, 23 percent of respondents’ time was spent writing proposals and progress reports and nearly 20 percent was spent on other administrative requirements (Federal Demonstration Partnership, 2012). The FDP is a cooperative initiative among 10 federal agencies and 119 institutional recipients of federal funds, charged with the goal of reducing the administrative burdens associated with research grants and contracts.

**Faculty Administrative Workload**

- Post-Award Administration: 6%
- Pre-Award Administration: 13%
- Report Preparation: 8%
- Proposal Preparation: 15%
- Active Research: 58%

*Source: 2012 FDP Faculty Workload Study*

**Governmental Response**

Since the release of these reports, much has been done by the federal government to address the administrative burden placed on our nation’s research institutions. Congress, in response to the NRC report, has held multiple hearings on the topic and in October of 2012 requested that the Government Accountability Office conduct a review of the current regulations and reporting requirements imposed on research universities. The Obama Administration has also issued several Executive Orders (EOs) on the topic, including “Improving Regulation and Regulatory Review” (EO 13563) and “Identifying and Reducing Regulatory Burdens” (EO 13610). These orders seek to “reduce the significant burdens and costs associated with federal regulations while recognizing their indispensable role in protecting public health, welfare, safety, and our environment” (Exec. Order No. 13610, 2012). As a result of these reports and many others, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) released a number of changes and reforms relating to the administration of research grants. In December 2013, OMB released its Uniform Grants Guidance, or Part 200—Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, with the goal of synthesizing the often contradictory and overlapping regulations previously in effect under eight separate circulars.
NSB Task Force on Administrative Burden

The National Science Board (NSB), the National Science Foundation’s (NSF) policy and advisory board, recently appointed a task force on administrative burden, which took voluminous testimony from numerous groups representing Principal Investigators (PI), research universities, and non-governmental organizations. The most frequently reported areas associated with high administrative workload included financial management, the grant proposal process, progress and other outcome reporting, human subjects research and institutional review boards, time and effort reporting, research involving animals, institutional animal care and use committees, and personnel management. Other areas frequently addressed were subcontracts, financial conflict-of-interest, training, and laboratory safety and security (National Science Foundation, 2014).

The task force released its final report to Congress, universities, and the broader scientific community on March 10th, 2014. The report contained the findings of the Task Force and described a number of policy actions aimed at modifying and streamlining inefficient requirements while retaining necessary oversight of federally funded research. High-level recommendations included:

1. **Focus on the Science**
   Investigators' administrative workload could be reduced significantly if requirements that are not critical to a proposal’s merit review were postponed until the proposal has been positively reviewed and is being considered for funding. Administrative work could be reduced further if progress reports were streamlined and focused solely on performance outcomes. The Board strongly encourages the NSF Director and other federal agencies funding scientific research to focus the peer-review process and post-award oversight on merit and achievement.

2. **Eliminate or Modify Ineffective Regulations**
   In a number of areas, investigators and institutions have identified regulations that are ineffective or inappropriately applied to research time and again in surveys and reports. Effective action should be taken to eliminate or modify these requirements to avoid further waste of federal research dollars and to accelerate the pace of scientific discovery and innovation.

3. **Harmonize and Streamline Requirements**
   Despite efforts on the part of OMB, federal agencies and groups such as the Research Business Models Working Group (RBM) and FDP, a substantial lack of consistency and standardization remains within and among agencies in all aspects of grant management (i.e. regulations, policies, guidelines, and reporting requirements, terms and conditions, oversight, forms and formatting, electronic research administrative systems, and training). This lack of consistency comes at a high cost to investigators and institutions and must be addressed.

4. **Increase University Efficiency and Effectiveness**
University resources and the ability of institutions to manage federal grants and comply with regulations vary widely, and this variance has real implications for investigators. Dissemination of effective practices and models can create efficiencies that reduce PIs' administrative workload (Reducing Investigators' Administrative Workload for Federally Funded Research, 2014).

**How Leaders are Responding**

It is important to note that many of the issues raised by the NSB and other non-governmental bodies are well-known to research institutions. While most institutions can confidently say that their sponsored program offices are aware of these investigator related concerns, not nearly as many can say that they regularly review processes and procedures to identify ways for introducing efficiencies. Even the best policies and procedures require periodic arms-length evaluations. The questions asked should include whether a particular area is being well executed (e.g. time from proposal acceptance to submission, award set-up turnaround time, etc.), how it might be improved, what type of data is needed to guide evaluation, and whether the goals might be better met in other ways.

Although the NSB’s recommendations provide a loose framework for alleviating administrative burden, much of its guidance is focused on the government’s role in the process. There is a dire need for institutions to take a serious look at their actions related to investigator support and fortunately there are numerous steps that can be taken to reduce the administrative workload. If understood and executed correctly, these actions can have a major impact on your institution’s ability to efficiently manage the research enterprise and, in turn, provide better support to the investigator community.

**Take a Hard Look**

The increasingly complex regulatory environment has required institutions to address the rules and regulations that govern the operation of research. Thankfully, there are more than a few areas that have an immediate window for action. The following recommendations offer assistance to areas that are creating the most risk—and opportunity—for research institutions:

1. **Expand Research Efforts to be More Competitive in Attracting Funding**
   
   The past decade has seen a surge of interest and investment in large scale team science programs. Many agencies are increasingly structuring requests for proposals to favor the involvement of interdisciplinary teams. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) and NSF both have plans in place to support projects that ask for researchers in different disciplines to work together. For example, NIH Program Project/Center Grants (P-Series) fund investigators who are working on related projects that draw on shared resources.

   Institutions are also encouraged to explore industry/university cooperative endeavors. The NSF has been awarding the Industry/University Cooperative Research Centers program to institutions like Ohio State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and North Carolina State University since the early 1980s. Expanding your institution’s
footprint and faculty collaboration network allows investigators to specialize, yet also diversify their research portfolio, while becoming more attractive to funding agencies.

2. **Utilize OMB’s Uniform Guidance as a Catalyst for Change**

There are a number of opportunities included in OMB’s Uniform Guidance that may have significant impact on administrative and regulatory burdens. A failure to implement these changes may prove to be a significant missed opportunity. Highlighted opportunities include:

- An intuitive and logical presentation of payroll and compensation considerations that, if implemented, may alleviate long-standing investigator and administrative concerns associated with effort reporting.
  - Use this as an opportunity to revamp your aging effort certification process or simply revisit small opportunities for improvement based on enterprise-wide feedback.
- Federal agencies are now required to post funding opportunities at least 60-days prior to submission deadlines, which may provide investigators additional time to formulate more impactful science. Working with your central office to draft a proposal development timeline, particularly for junior investigators, often results in more successful and compliant submissions.
- Uniform Guidance permits research-related activities conducted by administrative and clerical staff to be charged to federal awards.* This may help your institution:
  - Provide standardized, faculty-centric research administration support across the institution.
  - Increase administrative support generally across all levels.

*Note that these activities must be accounted for (and approved in advance) in the grant proposal budget

3. **Complete an Assessment of Your Institution’s Research Technology Resources**

Archaic research administration systems often create fractured and siloed business practices. An over-reliance on physical files and highly manual business processes typically leads to individualized shadow and tracking efforts.

Implementing a successful research technology infrastructure can be a daunting task. However, regularly reviewing the technology resources available to your institutions (whether it be a pre-award, compliance, or effort reporting system) can pay dividends in terms of faculty support and efficiency. Business process and approval driven systems give not only your investigators, but also your research administrators, the tools to rise to the occasion and successfully support the grant-making process.

4. **Forget the Long Held Assumption that the Research Enterprise will Constantly Expand**

There is a severe imbalance between the dollars available for research and the still growing scientific community in the U.S. This imbalance has created a hypercompetitive atmosphere in which scientific productivity is reduced and jobs are threatened. Since approximately 2003, when the doubling of the NIH budget ended, the demands for
research dollars grew much faster than the supply. Further slowdowns in federal research funding, caused by the Great Recession of 2008 and by the budget sequestration that followed in 2013, have significantly worsened the problem.

Today, most universities fund their research faculty’s salary through sponsored projects—many often at 75 percent or more. Institutions frequently view these research funded personnel favorably because they are able to recoup indirect costs as a result of their appointment. Soft money incentives also encourage grantee institutions to grow without making significant investments in their own faculty. As a result, there is now a vast surplus of investigators competing not only for research dollars, but also their own salary. One field of thought is to do away with positions that are funded entirely by research in an effort to make sure each faculty member is a solid and substantial investment for the institution. This method, many contend, is the only way to ensure universities do not create too many unneeded faculty positions and overstaffed departmental and administrative roles.

5. **Conduct Regular Portfolio Reviews with a Goal of Increasing Faculty Support**

Conducting regular portfolio reviews, with an emphasis on faculty arrivals/departures, ebbs and flows in funding cycles, proposal submission volume, and requisite staff knowledge is a great way to boost faculty and local support.

6. **Develop a Training Plan for Specialized Staff in Specific Processes Such as Grant Proposals and Financial Reporting, and Provide Trained Backup Staff in Case of Absence or Turnover**

Conduct an internal gap analysis – take a look at the jobs and roles you have in your office and consider what it really takes to succeed within that role. Once identified, determine the skills needed for the role from the skills that they currently have. And finally, what is the difference between the two? Once major weaknesses are identified, work on prioritizing your training plan so that you can address these gaps within your office.

Cross-training is one of the most valuable assets for any research administrator. Training should be conducted in a variety of ways – across offices and skill bases (e.g., pre-award administrator training an award set-up specialist on proposal submission) so that if a member of your office is absent, another staff member can effectively fill the void.

These transformative measures cannot alone reduce your institution’s administrative burden, however, if followed and executed carefully, they can have a lasting impact on your research support model.

**Lasting Impact**

Academic researchers in the U.S. face peril and promise. Rising pressures, partially due to increased federal oversight, are driving universities and colleges to transform the way they conduct research so that they can remain in business. The array of pressing challenges requires academic leaders and individual researchers to act with strategic clarity and vision in order to seize the opportunities that lie ahead. A handful of institutions around the nation are
demonstrating creative and innovative solutions that leaders can draw on to shore up their institution’s research infrastructure in the immediate future. Widespread engagement with these changes is necessary, beginning with conversations at the institutional level, followed by strong advocacy for change with the funding agencies and larger governmental bodies. Your actions will drive the future of the American research enterprise.

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References:


