It’s 2:15 p.m. and you receive an email from a PI marked “Urgent” with the subject “Need help! Grant due at 5pm today!” Unfortunately, everyone at NCURA can probably relate to this situation. Even though your university has a policy of four business days, you are confronted with a late submission more often than you care to admit.

Metrics can be beneficial tools to evaluate a wide range of topics, including internal processes and practices, allowing comparisons to not only your own institution but across disciplines and research administration as a whole. One of the challenges with metrics is ensuring the correct data is being evaluated in relation to the question being posed. As with scientific data, metrics can be manipulated or misinterpreted to fit the situation. In the process of developing and implementing metrics it is important to understand the issue, the data, and the need.

Last year, the NCURA ERA Committee conducted a poll on submission deadline policies and the policy enforcement. The results showed the majority of respondents have a 5-9 business day policy; however 66% of respondents didn’t enforce the policy.

### What is your submission deadline policy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Days</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;=10</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Official Policy</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Is your submission policy enforced?

- Yes: 13.33%
- It depends: 20%
- No: 66.67%

**Is There a Pill for the Last Minute Submission Headache?**

By Emily Lacy and Natasa Raskovic
In this article, we’ll talk about how these poll results, reflecting experience from research administration offices across NCURA community, benefit University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) in better understanding the last minute proposal review submissions issue.

One of the benefits of metrics is that they can be used to identify and address process improvement opportunities while also measuring the impact of the implemented process. Measuring the impact shows not only the level of success of the new process, but also the level of understanding of the issue itself.

One of the identified process improvement opportunities in UAF’s central research administration office was eliminating the proposal review process bottleneck created by the surge of proposal review requests at certain periods of time. The bottleneck was created by the increasing number of proposals coming into the office in days closer to the sponsor deadline date. The number of proposals for review in this short period time was greater than the office’s capacity to review. This situation was a source of frustration for all parties involved in the process. To address the issue of the swell of proposal review requests, UAF put in place the Proposal Review Policy which stated: Units must provide OSP with a minimum of five (5) business days for proposal review and any necessary revisions before AOR approval is granted.

To measure the impact of this policy, UAF central research administration staff collected data on the number of proposals submitted to the central office by the number of days until the sponsor deadline. Data collected for FY 2016 show that only 22%, and for YTD FY 2017 21% of proposal submissions were in accordance with the Proposal Review Policy, despite the fact that the policy had been in place for many years.

This data leads to the conclusion that the proposal review policy was not successful in resolving the proposal review bottleneck issue.

At the same time, results of this metric might help identify factors that contributed to the policy failure, including the need to broaden the perspective and better understand the issue itself. One of the obvious factors is lack of mechanisms for policy enforcement. Proposals being awarded even though there was little prep-time, reinforce noncompliance of the policy.

Expanding your perspective by taking it to the broader research administration community helps gain better insight of this issue. Results of the NCURA ERA Committee poll showing that 66% of respondents did not enforce the deadline policy indicates that this issue is not a single university issue. Indeed, this is an issue for research administration as a whole. To a certain level, it is the nature of the research administration business.

While we would all revel in a world free of last minute submissions, the reality is they are part of our research administration world. As with so many aspects of research administration, a gray area will always exist. A policy put in place by management to resolve a process issue will be bent based on the circumstances, especially if the benefits outweigh the measurable cost. Metrics can provide a powerful backup to quantifiable questions, i.e. how many proposals meet the deadline, etc.

Metrics are not as useful when dealing with human factors, such as quantifying the increased stress level on staff when dealing with last minute submissions. By making a correlation between last minute submissions and staff calling in sick, new policies may provide both higher quality proposal submissions and help staff provide support and identify compliance issues.

The power of metrics is their ability to enact change. In the business process it provides tools to identify, address, and understand a wide range of issues. It helps guide decision making and determine progress and success rate. However, one should be aware of limitations of metrics rooted in the fact that not all factors are quantifiable, especially those related to human nature. Metrics help to a certain degree but they are certainly not the only tool we should use.

“The power of metrics is their ability to enact change.”

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