

Research Administrators and Informal Politics:

“US and THEM”

By Teri Langton and Andrew Gray



Informal politics involves social and personal interactions between individuals. It creates alliances and advances individual goals and ideas. Informal politics create interactions between individuals in everyday life situations.

Conducting research and the administration of the research can sometimes end up creating informal politics and put research administrators and Principal Investigators (PIs) on a collision course. Sometimes these situations start lively conversations and can lead to an “us and them” attitude between a central office, the PI, and

departmental administration. This “us and them” approach can have a polarizing effect on working relationships. Contrasting positions can foster incorrect assumptions and turn into trigger points that only increase tensions within the university community.

PIs are unique individuals with distinctive personalities. Sometimes those personalities create a reputation of being difficult with which to work. However, no matter the reputation, their passion is evident the minute they start to talk about the science. PIs have amazing visions for their science and it is inspiring to hear a PI talk to a program

officer about the scope of work and how it has progressed, particularly when it is clear their initial vision is becoming a reality. Often times the same PIs who are excited and animated when explaining the evolution of their science have a hard time navigating the financial management of the award. This can be especially true if funding for the visions came from different sponsors. The PI may have great success working with various cohorts and yet is unable to work well with the central office or departmental administration. Informal politics enters the mix with each group trying to do their jobs while attaining the same goal.

The research administrator is complying with the terms and conditions of the sponsored project, and also helping PIs with budgets, compliance issues, submitting federal financial reports, and receiving reimbursements. The PI just wants to conduct the science, which sometimes doesn't fit into the existing time frame or terms and conditions of the award. It is crucial to remember where expertise lies: research administration has the financial expertise in administrative aspects of the award and the PI has expertise in the science and research.

These inherent differences in viewpoints can make it hard for research administrators to do their jobs. Research is not always performed in a manner a research administrator would deem systematic. There can often be a struggle between the PI and the research administrator over the specific expenditures of a sponsored project. Differentiating expenditures and a PI's time and effort across several projects that have the same scope of work and similar outcomes is often frustrating and time consuming for both the scientist and the research administrator.

The PI may not see projects as separate awards, but as a conglomerate of research to reach a desired goal of a single overarching project. The funding agency may or may not agree. That is why separate modifications or different grants are issued, even though the work may be continuous.

Sponsors also have their own informal political agendas affected by current trends that cause further consternation for the PI and central administration. Funding for certain areas of science such as climate change may be more prevalent than funding for other areas of science. In situations like this, the research administrator should be adequately versed to help the PI find additional funding opportunities within the preferred area of study. The sponsor may also implement changes in the scope of work or the time frame of the award. The PI maybe frustrated with the discrepancies in what is required while pursuing their research. The research administrator should be able to bridge the gap between the sponsor's priorities and a PI's research needs.

Bridging this gap is not often easy. It requires incorporating knowledge of federal, state, and local regulations, knowledge of generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP), plus a grasp of the issues that guide the agency's informal politics and priorities.

Research administration usually consists of grey areas, whereas GAAP doesn't. The grey areas within research administration can cause little

speed bumps that quickly turn into huge roadblocks. The simple question of "is this expenditure allowable?" usually goes from a straight forward "yes or no" to "it depends" or "maybe". Justification for the "maybe" or "it depends" can lead to a whole new set of questions. Changing the "it depends" back to a "yes or no" is often stressful and time-consuming. Diplomacy must be used to create a consistent and applicable audit trail to ensure the expenditures can be billed to the sponsor. If a "yes" cannot be reasonably reached while ensuring compliance, then it's important to explain why the expenditure is a "no" and remove the expenditure to unrestricted funding. This may increase differences of informal politics within the university, but it assures compliance with GAAP.

It is also the research administrator's job to help create the audit trail. Wearing an auditor's hat is a helpful way to approach this. A good rule of thumb: Ask questions. If the answer isn't clear, then ask more questions. The department or the PI should be able to explain why the charge is allowable and applicable on the sponsored project. From there, the research administrator's job is to clarify and obtain adequate documentation.

The research administrator needs to connect dots within the audit trail that would be obvious to the researcher but not so much to an auditor (or anyone else for that matter). For example, a sponsored project may have budget for travel to Antarctica to study ice worms, but the PI is planning a trip to Florida to study manatees. Extracting clarification from the PI and documenting it in the audit trail is the job of the research administrator. The research administrator must document the correlation and justification between the two and if there is a logical reason to change the trip to Florida, then it would likely be an allowable charge on the award.

Another example: The project allows the institution to purchase a computer for a graduate student working on the project, but the computer is purchased in the last week of the award. There must be documentation that shows the direct benefit to the sponsored project of purchasing a computer in the last week of the award. Knowing the political climate of the department, coupled with institutional knowledge and the goals of the sponsor, will help to navigate through these ambiguous areas.

Often times when a research administrator is asked what they do conversation tends to slow down. Something akin to "What's that?" "Oh, that's nice" or "How interesting" generally follows and then the conversation moves on. Yet the knowledge

and depth that is required to be an effective research administrator is staggering. A research administrator is expected to know federal, state, and local government regulations. Subsequently, those regulations have to be fit into the terms and conditions of a sponsored project and then further interpreted by institutional guidelines and PIs. "Interesting" doesn't even begin to cover what a research administrator does.

This is especially true in the political climate in which many universities currently find themselves. At our institution, funding has been cut by \$20 million (about 5%) for this fiscal year and more cuts are expected in the next fiscal year. Declining budgets means informal politics are increasing. There is more competition for both federal and non-federal dollars and increased competition at the pre- and post-award levels. Does the administrative burden of managing sponsored projects decline just because the budgets do? Just the opposite! The burden has increased.

Research is all about sharing information to benefit the general public and is a living, breathing body of knowledge. Informal politics plays a huge part in sharing this knowledge. There has to be room for discussion so that all sides can reach common ground. Understanding each side's expertise, priorities, and also common goals is instrumental in bringing about success in each and every project. Doing so makes for a savvy research administrator and will help to eliminate an "us and them" attitude. ■



Teri Langton, is the Senior Grant and Contract Finance Manager of the Office of Grants and Contracts Administration for the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Teri is a graduate of the University of Dubuque and has her MBA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Teri's duties include policy development and implementation, oversight of financial compliance of sponsored projects activities. She also serves as the sponsor audit liaison. She can be reached at tjlangton@alaska.edu



Andrew Gray is the Associate Director of the Office of Grants and Contracts Administration for the University of Alaska Fairbanks. His responsibilities include pre- and post-award management for the office and oversight of UAF's electronic research administration system. He is actively involved in both NCURA Region VI and at the national level as a presenter. Andrew can be reached at amgray@alaska.edu