Learning Your ABCs

Adaptability
Balance
Culture

By Peggy S. Lowry

Developing and maintaining your research administration operation is not unlike a child learning their ABCs. In both there are some “basics” that must be mastered and put in place. Then, there is the need to make continual adjustments to achieve the right outcome, a constant striving for stability amongst numerous expectations and new concepts, and a growing awareness for putting the pieces into a larger context.

And sometimes, just when you think that you have mastered your ABCs, you find others are speaking a new language and the cycle of learning and change begins again.

The cycle of change is inevitable and managing and incorporating change into our operations is an ongoing activity. Our challenge in research administration is how to step back from the day-to-day operation and objectively assess where change is needed.

There are numerous assessment techniques of processes or programs that can assist operations in identifying where change is needed. Techniques can be clustered around: self-assessment, constituent assessment of services, audits, and external assessments. Each cluster has multiple approaches and each contains some advantages and disadvantages.

This article will focus on some of the observations made from the reviews of sponsored program offices conducted during the last three years through the NCURA Peer Review Program, which falls
Adaptability

The first broad characteristic evidenced through the NCURA peer reviews centers on adaptability. The effective sponsored program operation adjusts and changes in response to the rapidly occurring shifts that have surfaced in the last several decades. The dramatic increase in complexity of relationships, external oversight, and technology requires operations to be flexible in terms of maintaining operations while incorporating new requirements, regulations, and technology.

However, as seen in the majority of the NCURA peer reviews, flexibility and adaptability have been severely hampered by the lack of institutional resources provided to research administration operations. Although research administrators have broadly recognized the increasing inability of resources to sustain operational needs and the accelerating high-pressure environment resulting in part from stressed infrastructure, it is an interesting phenomena to identify staffing and other resource investments to be so far behind many other institutional operational arenas. This result may reflect the historical adaptability and creativity of research administrators to manage and audit high risk areas to the point that resource needs do not have the same appearance of urgency as the needs of other institutional missions.

A few indicators identified through the review of operations that illustrate the inability to effectively support sponsored program administration include:

- Not filling open positions, even when proposal and award volumes remain strong or have been increasing

Many of the peer reviews suggest that growth in funding and the resulting increased research needs creates an imbalance between specialized institutional functions. Often, institutions struggle to balance fragmentation in two significant areas: a) adding specialization of sponsored programs expertise that is increasingly needed and inherent with a growing research enterprise and b) working across organizational silos within the organization. Adding or building specialization within the sponsored program operation results in more “moving parts” that require coordination and greater attention to communication. Business silos that are independently effective, now need to address the time-sensitive demands that come with research funding and become more nimble in moving through their review and approval processes (such as hiring personnel for externally funded projects).

A few indicators identified through the peer review of operations that illustrate fragmentation include:

- Faculty complaints over delays in business functions, such as hiring personnel or purchasing goods or equipment on grants or contracts
- Faculty complaints over delays in processing research-related agreements
- Disconnects in research administration process between department or college and central staff, evidenced through complaints and confusion voiced by everybody
- Lack of mechanisms for sponsored program operations to “hear” the faculty “voice” and use that as an indicator of changing or emerging needs
- Scarcity or no communication between offices or people, even when located in close proximity

Balance

The second broad characteristic identified through the peer review process relates to balance. Effective operations are able to maintain their focus on facilitating research in an environment of shifting funding, sponsor requirements, and institutional priorities. Increases in research funding, especially rapid growth, tends to highlight the need for coordination of many specialized areas within the institution. Two are highlighted below:

a) As proposal volume and research funding increases at institutions, many operations begin to evolve into areas of specialization for staff. Beyond the traditional pre- and post-award specialization, operations begin to focus staff in specific areas such as funding information support, proposal development, contracting, export controls or to expand their partnerships with college-level staff support. Often the needs of the faculty and priorities for the institution determine some direction, such as a priority for increasing funding may drive a need for more specialization in funding information support. Or faculty needs in contracting may suggest more attention and expertise in contracting and negotiation skills.

b) As research funding increases, often a parallel need arises to better integrate the many business and functional silos within the organization or operation to be more responsive to researchers needs. Management of the additional requirements associated with external funding, and in particular Federal funding, often requires engagement of many institutional offices. These offices may be unaccustomed to dealing with such administrative requirements or the unique needs of managing “research.” Some examples include human resources, purchasing, or travel.
• meetings of office or operations leadership at the top, but no commensurate meetings of operational staffs

The peer review process allows the external “expert” the opportunity to illustrate areas of imbalance and to help the institution or the program identify where fragmentation needs attention.

**Culture**

The third broad characteristic found in effective operations is understanding the multiple cultures within which sponsored programs operate. Every institution has a number of cultures, each with a unique set of expectations, needs, and priorities. Three key stakeholder cultures include the faculty, the senior institutional leadership, and the sponsored programs administration.

**Faculty Culture:** The faculty drives research successes. They balance their investment in writing proposals and conducting their research activities with teaching, student advising, laboratory management, publication, service commitments to the institution, professional engagements, and other activities as they are called upon by the institution or their profession. The faculty responds to the priorities set by their academic leadership. Faculty work as best they can within the sponsored program policies and procedures; although their entrepreneurial outlook often predisposes them to be creative when interpreting and following policy.

**Senior Institutional Leadership Culture:** The senior institutional leadership establishes expectations related to research, the research agenda, and the message to the internal and external communities concerning research discovery. They balance research with academic and other institutional priorities and budget needs. They must be responsive to faculty issues brought forward. They must look broadly at institutional needs—across student, faculty, business and administrative arenas and balance needs with operating budgets and future directions.

**Sponsored Programs Administration Culture:** Sponsored program operations supports faculty in their pursuit of external funding. Their policies and procedures reflect good stewardship and accountability of sponsor support and awareness of state and federal rules and regulations. The sponsored programs staff is responsive to institutional priorities and directions established by senior leadership. They are responsive to the needs of the funding agencies. They fix problems. They meet deadlines. They enforce policy. They work in a constant pressure-driven environment.

All of these cultures intersect when the institution embraces external funding and even more so when there are institutional priorities to grow the research enterprise. Not surprisingly, as new and increased pressures have come to each of these stakeholder groups, the different cultures’ expectations, needs, and priorities are not always well understood by each other. At many institutions, the peer review process suggests that these cultures are clashing to the point that there is widespread distrust, increased risk, and at times loss of funding.

A few indicators identified through the peer review of operations that illustrate when there is disharmony between cultures include:

- faculty choosing to run awards through collaborators or affiliated entities rather than their prime institution, or stopping their efforts toward identifying new external funding altogether
- central research administrative staff not understanding, or wanting to acknowledge, the range of pressures and commitments confronting faculty
- faculty that have little understanding or interest in understanding institutional fiscal realities
- expectations that sponsored programs is the primary driver of increased funding
- assumptions that faculty and senior institutional leadership are as well connected and well versed in the details of research administration (sponsor policies and requirements) as they are in their other professional responsibilities
- central sponsored programs leadership and staff who conduct all assistance via e-mail with little recognition of the value of live, personal contact with faculty and their peers in other institutional offices

The peer review often initiates the process of bringing these different perspectives to the table. This process often engages stakeholders in a form of communication that highlights the shared goals of all stakeholder groups and acknowledges where the cultures need to be better merged.

**The Language of Effective Operations**

There are many characteristics that reflect effective sponsored program operations. The three broad characteristics highlighted in this article in some ways represent the highly pressurized environment that confronts our faculty, our institution, and our operations and the challenges to maintain effectiveness throughout the change process.

The common theme found in each of the three areas—adaptability, balance, culture—is that there is a partnership within each institution that supports and nurtures the research enterprise. The care and feeding of that partnership requires attention at both an operational and a leadership level as well as a form of communication that enables the partners to understand and contribute to addressing fractures and strengthening the shared goals between them.

As stated at the outset, the challenge in research administration is how to step back from the day-to-day operation and objectively assess where change is needed. Much like learning our ABCs, each operation needs to identify the “language” of its own environment. Incorporating a set of techniques that will help us monitor when the language is changing will allow us to shift with these changes and continue to do what research administrators do best: provide responsible service and support to our faculty, our institutions, and our sponsors.

Peggy S. Lowry serves as Program Coordinator for the NCURA Peer Review Program. She has a 38-year career in research administration, spanning research and predominantly undergraduate universities. Her responsibilities included oversight for pre-award and non-financial research compliance. Peggy has given over 200 national, regional and local presentations and workshops and served on numerous national NCURA committees and twice served on their Board of Directors.