Over a decade ago, the NCURA organization conceived of the idea that NCURA could provide a valuable service to the community of research institutions by offering peer reviews. It took years of effort and lots of hard work for NCURA to launch this service.

This article will examine the NCURA Peer Review Program and detail the experience of a review conducted at the University of Southern California (USC).

**Peer Review – Defined and Examined**

Peer reviews are commonplace in the world of academia; the funding agencies perform peer reviews to determine which proposals will be funded and which not; scientific and academic journals conduct peer reviews of articles that are to be published; and academic departments consult outside peer reviewers to assess graduate and undergraduate programs.

What exactly is a peer review and why are they performed? A peer review is an outside evaluation of work or performance by people in the same field in order to maintain or enhance the quality of the work or performance in that field. The word “peer” is often defined as a person of equal standing in the same profession who are of the same or higher ranking.

Peer reviews are based on the concept that a diverse group of people, not directly connected with the work being reviewed, will be able to make an impartial evaluation. Thus most peer reviews will utilize an independent group of reviewers in order to discourage favoritism and obtain an unbiased evaluation. Typically, the reviewers are not selected from among the close colleagues, relatives, or friends and potential reviewers are required to disclose any conflicts of interest.

So how does the NCURA Peer Review Program work and what makes it so special?

**The Peer Reviewers – Selection Process**

NCURA’s Board appointed Peer Review Selection Committee is responsible for reviewing applications for potential peer reviewers and making recommendations to the NCURA Board for appointments of new Peer Reviewers. The requirements for an application to the peer review program include a minimum of ten years experience in the field of research administration with a history of demonstrated expertise and leadership in the field. Applicants also need to provide several references for consideration. Most Peer Reviewers have significantly longer than the required ten years of experience. Applications are carefully reviewed to ensure the highest quality of reviewers possible.

Once selected, Peer Reviewers are provided with training on the NCURA Peer Review process. A Team Lead is provided for all reviews. The Lead assists the reviewers with understanding the process, answers questions and provides guidance. Feedback regarding each of the reviewers is obtained for each review from the participating institution as well as the other reviewers on the team to ensure a consistently high quality level of review.

**The NCURA Standards**

Each peer review is conducted in alignment with the NCURA Peer Review standards. Careful consideration was given in the development of these Standards. They were developed to emphasize the key areas important to a comprehensive research administration program. The Effective Management Practices for managing externally funded research programs developed by the Council for Governmental Relations (COGR) was used as a foundation for the development of the NCURA Standards. The detailed
The Institutional View

University sponsored projects administration offices across the nation face similar challenges: limited resources, negative customer service perceptions, and staff turnover. Like many institutions, USC's Department of Contracts and Grants (DCG) has long been the focus of faculty frustration with the level of customer service.

In an effort to address these concerns, DCG initiated a three-pronged review – an IT needs assessment, an internal process review and assessment, and a NCURA Peer Review. The
NCURA Peer Review has proven to effect a significant change at USC, largely due to being:

- A 360-degree evaluation of the USC research enterprise, both central and departmental, along with their interactions. A 360-degree review identifies the problematic issues throughout the complex support network of the institution, thereby providing a balanced, comprehensive assessment.

- A review conducted by experts in research administration. A team is assembled that represents expertise throughout the full spectrum of the research administration services. Expertise of this scope and depth provides the foundational knowledge and experience to quickly and effectively identify the challenges that exist within the institution via the interview process, gain an in-depth understanding of those challenges and subsequently develop appropriate recommendations.

- An assessment conducted by external reviewers. An external review provides a balanced, unbiased review and associated recommendations.

In preparation for the site visit, significant organizational information was provided to the NCURA Peer Review Team. Interviews were arranged with key personnel from central offices involved in the research administration process, as well as the faculty and administrative leadership in the major schools and departments. Group and individual meetings were arranged with central DCG staff members at each campus. All of these activities provided context for the reviewers, but more importantly, allowed USC’s research enterprise to come together and personally participate in the review. Participation in the review process facilitated the very collaboration USC needed to implement the recommendations of the Peer Review Team.

Recommendations, provided to senior leadership within 60 days of the review, substantiated many of the issues previously identified in both central and departmental areas; however, the external confirmation provided the needed support and the associated financial resources to move forward with the establishment and implementation of a prioritized action plan to address the institutional issues at every level. USC leadership took the NCURA recommendations and developed an action item matrix and associated timeline for completion, including these results:

- Change in the reporting structure of DCG, so that it now reports to the VP of Research.
- Initiation of development for a “cradle to grave” software system for research administration.
- Formation of a research administration task force, chaired by the Executive Director of DCG, to resolve coordination issues across units of the university.
- Redesign of the DCG website to focus on “how to” information for investigators.

A first order of business was to draft an institutional “roles and responsibilities” document to clearly delineate key processes and the associated responsible party for each. Through this process, USC realigned responsibilities to eliminate duplication of tasks, and to ensure that each task was performed by the unit that is best able to do the job. Senior leadership also drafted and distributed to faculty and staff a document entitled “USC’s Partnership for Sponsored Research and Other Scholarly Activities,” which has been a major step in establishing expectations of faculty and departmental units as well as demonstrating support of the central research administration activities. DCG is also in the process of initiating a new proposal review service, coupled with a “service promise” tied to investigators submitting their proposals on time.

DCG established several internal working groups to solicit feedback from DCG staff and to more directly engage them and to expand avenues of communication and collaboration.

DCG has established regular meetings with other central offices to work together on process improvement initiatives for those processes that cross departments.

The NCURA Peer Review has had a significant impact on research administration at USC. Most importantly, DCG utilized the results of the Peer Review to actively engage USC stakeholders in the change process, thereby engendering from participants a feeling of valued participation, buy-in and accountability in the outcomes. DCG has successfully facilitated the proactive and vital collaboration of central offices, such as DCG, Spon- sorred Projects Accounting and Purchasing, as well as created close working partnerships with Schools and departmental staff. We are confident that this more unified and comprehensive approach to addressing common issues will result in creating enhanced, more efficient institutional support for the research enterprise at USC.

While it is impossible to achieve perfection in any research administration organization, DCG has performed exceptionally well in the year since these changes were enacted, with more compliments than complaints, only moderate turnover, and vastly improved services.

Joyce Freedman is currently a consultant in higher education. Retired from UCSF where she was the Assistant Vice President for Research. She also served in that capacity at UC Berkeley and was the Assistant Vice President for Research at The University of Chicago. She has been a member of NCURA for over 20 years, served as chair of the western region; and elected to the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee, co-editor of the Newsletter for Biomedical topics; co-program chair for a summer conference, faculty on a national video conference and a webinar; speaker at regional and national NCURA meetings. Joyce is currently a peer reviewer for the NCURA Peer Review Program.

Randolph Hall is Vice President of Research and Professor of Industrial and Systems Engineering at the University of Southern California. He also chairs the Executive Leadership Group for Research for the Association for Academic Health Centers, and will publish the Handbook of Healthcare System Scheduling for Springer later this year.

Sara Judd is the Director for the Department of Contracts and Grants at the University of Southern California (USC), overseeing the professional staff responsible for the pre- and post-award non-financial administration activities for sponsored research, training and other activities supporting an institutional annual award volume of approximately $561M. As an active member of the Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP), Sara currently serves as Co-Chair of the Subaward Committee and is a member of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) Subcommittee. Sara is an active member of both the the National Council of Research Administrators (NCURA) and is a frequent presenter at regional and national meetings in the areas of negotiation, staff training and development, ARRA and FFATA.

Jeri Muniz is the Executive Director for the Department of Contracts and Grants at the University of Southern California. As Executive Director, she is responsible for the overall management and administration of pre- and post-award non-financial services related to extramural proposals and awards. Jeri is an active member of the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) and is currently Chair for Region VI (Western Region). Jeri is frequent presenter on such topics as subrecipient monitoring, working with industry, and strategies for successful negotiations.

Kerry Peluso is Associate Vice President for Research Administration at Emory University and has over 22 years experience in research administration. She currently serves as an NCURA Peer Reviewer.