To: Provost Daniel Diermeier
From: Heinrich Jaeger, David Meltzer, and Stuart Rowan,
Faculty Working Group on Administrative Service Improvement, Subgroup on Research Administration.
Date: January 15, 2019

Re: Improving Post-Award Management

Summary

The Subgroup on Research Administration was charged with addressing ongoing faculty concerns about grants management support. It was immediately evident that, while faculty are reasonably satisfied with pre-award support from University Research Administration (URA), our existing post-award grants management tools and processes cause a significant drain on both faculty and staff time, and lead to a substantial risk of losing grant funds. With the investigation of a new financial system underway, this is a critical time to consider how post-award management can be improved on multiple fronts.

The subgroup—along with Vice Provost Melina Hale and a member of URA leadership (Mike Ludwig or Jessica Lawrence)—hosted faculty and staff forums in the PSD, IME, BSD (clinical and basic), and SSD to gather input from those most affected by post-award issues. Over 100 people attended these forums and provided detailed information on specific pain points that should be addressed (see the Appendix for forum notes). Though feedback ran the gamut from long-term software needs to short-term communications and process improvements in URA, the primary takeaway was an incredible amount of dissatisfaction with the current post-award management structure. Below we identify some key common challenges that emerged from the forums, as well as recommendations for addressing them.

Key Common Challenges

1. Unsustainably-complex manual reporting and projection processes that prevent faculty from accurately monitoring their spending and that greatly reduce staff capacity for supporting other faculty research needs.

2. A lack of transparency in post-award processes and account management, leading to an inability to track critical workflows and to reduced faculty control over their research funds.

3. A sense that the centralization of many processes within URA has counterintuitively lowered the support available to faculty and their unit administrators, and created issues with communication and access that result in a need to duplicate processes unnecessarily and continuously escalate problems upward.

Recommendations

1. A financial system that prioritizes improved reporting capability and accurate, real-time, automatic data collection. To do this well, the new system will need to be

smoothly-integrated with the numerous existing systems that feed data into post-award reporting, including, but not limited to, AURA (award information), Workday (effort), Buysite (procurement), and FAS (account information).

2. With a new system, we also recommend implementing a simple, user-friendly dashboard for faculty PIs to view both summary and detailed information on their grants. This was repeatedly requested in the forums from both faculty and staff, and will be an important factor in increasing transparency and faculty ownership over how their funds are managed.

3. To increase transparency in the short term, we recommend implementing a workflow tracking process for post-award management tasks. This will allow faculty and staff to see the status of critical, deadline-based documentation, for example, and better target their outreach to the right URA contacts in the event of an issue. We noted that this was an urgent need for most units, and thus should be considered prior to the advent of a new financial system.

4. Given the series of issues raised during the forums around the centralization of post-award processes within URA, we recommend a review of change control procedures in URA and the communication strategies in place for keeping faculty and staff informed. There is widespread frustration in the units over the inability to access critical data, policy information, or support when needed, and it is clear that there must be better communication and transparency during this period of transition.

In addition to the recommendations outlined above, we strongly advise that a group of grants administrators from the local units be involved in the selection and design of the new financial system. This staff group could regularly communicate with our faculty Subgroup on Research Administration to ensure that the most pressing issues for faculty in post-award management are being addressed, and to establish clear and compelling reasons why certain needs cannot be met.

Appendix
Post-Award Forums
August – October 2018

NB: The comments included in this appendix were provided by faculty and staff during post-award forums. In some cases, the same issue was raised during several of the forums, and those comments have been condensed or combined rather than listed multiple times. When there was a specific response from URA or the Provost's Office to a comment, it was included as a sub-bullet with the word "NOTE."

Contents

Background Presentation at Each Forum

Introduction (provided to attendees with each set of notes)

- During the initial stages of the Shared Services implementation a few years ago, the Provost's Office received significant feedback from faculty and staff on additional ways the University could improve administrative services.

- A major topic of concern was award support and management, so that feedback was separated from the Shared Services project and provided to Mike Ludwig to help him think about how to improve pre-and post-award support in University Research Administration (URA).

- The provost also convened a Faculty Working Group on Administrative Service Improvements that has formed subgroups around issues presented by faculty and staff, one of which is research administration.

- The subgroup on research administration has taken on the task of talking to faculty and staff in the units to explore more specific issues in post-award support. Given the link between award management and financials, the subgroup is particularly interested in establishing the needs of faculty and staff in this area prior to the selection and adoption of a new underlying financial system to replace the current one, which is several decades old.

Changes in URA (provided to attendees with each set of notes)

- Prior to March 2018, pre- and post-award support were separated into two offices, URA and Sponsored Award Accounting (SAA), respectively. When a faculty member received a grant, this split across the grant lifecycle led to major delays and other service issues.

- In March 2018, the two offices merged with a focus on improving processes in four areas: Account Create, Billing & Collections, Sub-Award Management, and Award Closeout.

  - *Account Create*: prior to the shift, faculty were seeing 4-6 weeks of delay between getting an award and getting an account number created to spend on that award. The goal is now three days, with a redesigned process that includes fewer hand-offs.

  - *Billing & Collections*: previously, invoices were being issued but no one was following up to see if people were being paid, so there is now a process in place for that.

  - *Sub-Award Management*: an area of particular concern was the time it took to get sub-awards issued to collaborators, so URA has formed a team dedicated to sub-awards that knows the associated regulations and can do risk assessment and issue a subcontract within two weeks.

  - *Award Closeout*: a number of high-risk transactions were occurring after a project had expired, so URA implemented changes to provide better reports to local administrators up to 120 days out from the expiration of an award.

- Once new targets have been achieved for these processes, URA will begin focusing on other areas that have been identified for improvement, such as automating the payroll verification reports.

- The merger of the two offices has set up a structure that is well-positioned to take advantage of updates to the financial system. Prior to this merger, the team implementing the new system would have worked only with SAA, so this combined unit allows URA to think about the financial system in terms of the full lifecycle of a faculty research grant and the need for strong reporting capabilities.

Faculty and staff are invited to submit additional issues related to post-award management or any other administrative service to the Faculty Working Group on Administrative Service Improvements (also known as the Kill Stupid Rules committee): https://uchicagoprovostsoffice.wufoo.com/forms/z133tpqj0xm08tp/

Functional Requirements for Grants Management

Projection & Reporting

- Projection and reporting are a key common need. Projects like this tend to leave reporting to the end and then it gets dropped for budget and time, so it needs to be underscored as a priority with the decision makers on the financial system project. Projection is also a core need – faculty want to be able to log on to a system and ask questions about potential changes (e.g. adding a student to the project) and see the projected impact of those changes on their grant.

- Staff have also identified forecasting capability as one of their core needs, particularly if that capability can be applied individually to each PI's project.

- It would be helpful to know the burn rate for accounts so that a faculty member can adjust the way they are purchasing supplies or spending on other grant-related costs.

- One of the most difficult decisions that will have to be made for projections is around the methodology used. Ideally, it would be flexible enough to default to a straight line annualization but have cells be editable, and then the feed coming in with actuals will only overwrite cells that haven't been specially edited.

- It is very difficult to get information on spending. There is no single site to determine the balance of a given account on a monthly basis (i.e. as there would be for something like a bank account).

- Beyond monthly reporting, faculty need to be able to see the status of accounts in real time so that they can monitor expenses.

- Having that real-time status would help with budgeting if it showed pending expenses on an account. A new system should place an encumbrance on funds when a transaction is made, and then remove it automatically when the charge goes through.

- It would also be nice if the new system actually sent ledger reports to staff instead of an email telling them reports are ready, since it creates an extra step.

- There are sometimes offsets between when the grant money starts flowing and the start/end of the fiscal year; faculty need to have a realistic prediction of whether their accounts will have funds in them and when – sometimes it even looks like an account has a surplus that doesn't really exist because of the fiscal year changeover.

Salary & Effort

- Having projection tools will be particularly important because for many faculty grants are how their salary is being supported, and it isn't easy to get information on what grants are supporting a salary and how much effort a PI has committed.

- We currently have salary certification reports that don't really indicate effort, and the effort we commit to a person on a grant is different from what we should be charging to the ledgers. A new financial system would need to have the ability to integrate payroll with the grants management piece to create effort reports.

  - NOTE: URA's preference is to get to a point where regular payroll reporting can give faculty information on who is being paid on grants, and allow them to make a statement in their reports to a sponsor that says they've been provided with regular reporting on payroll activity and can certify that payroll charges are commensurate with the effort committed on a grant. Uniform guidance allows us to do this as long as we have the correct internal controls, but this won't be possible without robust reporting in a new system.

- Many departments only do effort reporting once per year due to the complexity, so it would be helpful to have a monthly report on effort that can be automatically generated through the new system. Relatedly, we need to be able to add people's names to budgets to help generate these reports.

- A new financial system needs to include information on what salary cap is being used and allow PIs to designate key personnel on a grant so that administrators can address issues if one of the key personnel departs the project.

System Integrations & Overall Capabilities

- The main issue is the software, since the rest of the issues in award management will not be improved for faculty unless that is addressed first. The lack of support the University provides in award management software is surprising – faculty should be

able to check their own grant accounts via a modern interface and get updated information every day or ten days. Without a software improvement, the rest of these changes are addressing only internal organizational questions and don't help faculty control how they are spending or projecting into the future.

- A "pie in the sky" version of a new software would be an award management system that can integrate with project management software to help faculty maintain control over the whole scope of their projects.

- It might be too much to ask for the new financial system to be integrated with external systems, but it should be mandatory for it to integrate with internal systems, including GEMS, Buysite, and AURA. Without these integrations, it's very difficult to tie a faculty member to their accounts, and an administrator has to go through several systems just to figure out a single report from Business Objects.

- It would be great if a new system had a way of automatically populating subaccounts based on the type of funding (e.g. NIH) and the indirect cost requirements attached to that funding.

- Ideally, this software would also cut out some of the unnecessary process steps that only exist now because administrators had to find a way to work around the cumbersome systems.

- A grant management system needs to be able to distinguish between contractors and sub-recipients on an award.

- There have been issues with JE transfers being approved on closed accounts or accounts in delete status. Charges go through and hit a guarantor account instead, but the system should block them from going through in the first place.

- The budget in FAS and AURA doesn't always match the budget that has been accepted and approved by the sponsor. There needs to be a way to have only one budget throughout the life of the award so that we don't end up with reports that don't match what was spent.

  - NOTE: if this is happening with accounts set up after March 1st, URA needs to know.

- Not all foundations or other agencies allow for rebudgeting without prior approval, so it would be nice to have something in the system that gives a user an "approval needed" warning when they try to rebudget.

  - NOTE: modern systems are capable of doing this, and can also go further by setting a budget limit and cap for rebudgeting, then blocking transactions over the amount. This needs to be part of the eventual discussion around business process configuration.

- Another budgeting issue is that AURA doesn't lock budget year by year, so if someone accidentally makes a change in years 1 or 2, it will be implemented across all years of a grant.

- The budget categories used in FAS and AURA are different, so the budget grid doesn't match. There needs to be one unified grid used. Administrators also can't set limits on budget lines in FAS.

- It would be helpful to have a way to do secondary budgets, since the systems tend to budget by subaccount and that's not how any PI or administrator tracks their funds. Most budget by project, so it would be great to be able to go into the system and add a budget that is different from the account-specific budgets the financial office needs for accounting purposes.

  - This is particularly important for departmental research grants where each faculty member has the same amount of funding (e.g. 5k) and the department doesn't track how they spend it but still needs to know how much is left. This has nothing to do with subaccounts and needs to be reported differently.

- International grants are also a problem because of the currency conversion rate. FAS will open up the amount based on the exchange rate that was in effect when the grant was awarded, but no one goes back to update the budget amounts as the rate depreciates, for example. It means that a grant can be well overspent by the end of the award.

  - NOTE: Mike Ludwig believes an improvement to this could be implemented prior to a new financial system.

Transparency

Account Transparency - Dashboards/User Interfaces

- One of the main individual needs for grants management is a dashboard that allows PIs and staff to look ahead and slice data in many different ways. It would need to give a PI a quick view of all of their accounts with a list of monthly expenses and a summary of how much is left (both in terms of amount and time). It would also need to allow them to drill down to a deeper level of detail on accounts and expenses.

  - Faculty are told they are in charge of grants but not given a mechanism to monitor them. This is a major issue particularly for carryover requests, which are routinely put in late because it takes such a long time to pull together information from all of these other places. This looks bad for the PI and for the organization as a whole, and leads to thousands of dollars of lost grant money and sometimes even lost jobs for people paid on that grant.

- Pulling together all this disparate information often also leads to major errors due to the complexity involved in compiling it.

- On the department level, staff also need to be able to view a master dashboard organized by PI and do larger-scale reporting (e.g. understanding how all the department's postdocs are paid, or viewing how much the department spends on business meals across all awards).

  - All of this information currently exists, but it is separated into multiple systems like AURA, GEMS, FAS, etc., and organizing it represents a very laborious process. The time spent on this by staff would likely equate to the cost of implementing a simpler, more coherent system.

- It would be helpful for a dashboard to annualize on a per month basis the spending on each award, particularly for awards that aren't July 1-June 30. We need to be able to project out how much we'll spend in indirect and direct costs and see which awards are going to cover it over which periods of time, and it would be useful to see this per PI.

- A grants management dashboard should incorporate workflow tracking. There are certain processes that have to take place after an award is granted that never seem to have checklists to keep them on track, and it isn't clear who has responsibility for them. PIs have had grants where they get to the end of the award period and the funder says they never returned the signed contract. Tracking these things should be happening on both the department level and in URA to make sure nothing is missed.

  - One example of this would be that clicking on an award in a dashboard should show any subawards and the invoicing rate/when invoices need to be sent out.

Process Transparency & Communications

- There is a lot of confusion around workflows, processes, and routing when award management is taking place. In particular, it's difficult and frustrating for faculty to understand where specific tasks are in the URA workflow, whether they've been lost or are backlogged, or whether they are experiencing a necessary delay. Processes need to be trackable in a new system, and there needs to be appropriate and mutually-understood expectations around communication on progress, even if there is no new activity on an account.

- Communication needs to include staff as well as the faculty PI – staff are sometimes left out of the routing of information or requests, and aren't able to support their faculty members if they aren't looped in to the communication.

- URA has done a lot of work to make central workflows more trackable, but the units don't have a local system that complements that—i.e. they can't annotate different

records or use an automated system to follow internal actions and activities the same way they can follow what's happening centrally.

- Post-award processing is a frequent workflow issue. Faculty sometimes have to wait three weeks for a signature, and receive no communications on where the process is or why it is stuck.

- Checks are sometimes sent by granting organizations but not accepted/deposited by the University, which causes concerns over maintaining relationships with foundations and whether a PI can actually begin work. Faculty need to be notified when an award is received by URA.

- There have been issues in the past with the wrong accounts being charged for expenses, and it's unclear whether or how errors like these are caught if there's no real visibility into individual accounts.

- The ball seems to be dropped fairly frequently on contract modifications and material transfer agreements. It's not clear to PIs who is in charge of these processes or what is happening when the ball is dropped, and a lot of time is wasted trying to track down updated information.

- Many departments have noticed that, while URA's revised processes are working well with new subawards, there is an ongoing issue with subaward renewals. Some departments issue subcontracts annually, and it doesn't happen automatically within URA unless an administrator contacts them about it.

- It would be great to see subaward invoices processed centrally as well, especially with electronic approval and routing. This process is complicated and murky without some central coordination.

- Unit administrators have had experiences where a PI has been spending on an award and then they'll learn from the sponsor that an invoice has never been received for the grant. Administrators are often asked not to interact with the sponsor directly on these issues, but they frequently don't get a response from URA until they escalate it up the chain.

  - NOTE: it's important to keep communication on financial matters between the sponsor and URA to ensure they aren't getting mixed messages, but any non-response from URA is an issue and escalation is the appropriate response so that URA leadership can address it. There are triggers put in place for invoicing based on billing codes, so if a bill hasn't been sent on time, something failed during the process and also needs to be addressed.

- It seems as though there may be an issue with account closing. Currently, closed accounts still show up on an administrator's list of accounts, and it can take months of emailing to get an account deleted by URA.

Information Transparency & Access

- Access to information for grant administrators hasn't kept up with the level of cross-collaboration happening, so departments can't interact within a system and co-manage collaborative awards. This is a particular problem when awards have multiple PIs and a mix of unrestricted/restricted funds where departments might have to split up one expense into multiple accounts.

- There's no redundancy in account access within a department, so if someone managing an award goes on vacation, there's no way for another person to access account information.

- The access issue comes up frequently during account creation – when accounts are set up with associate departments, everyone on the grant needs to be able to see both the main department code and sub department codes. (**NOTE: URA needs feedback on issues like this; comments can be sent to Mike Ludwig, Jessica Lawrence, or Christi Brooks).

- There needs to be a way to click through to documentation and references when you need to view relevant information for an account or get an error or warning. At the moment, grant administrators have to call a dozen people to track down information because they don't have the access to look up everything related to an award. An example of this would be clicking through to view subaward invoices in ePayments from within an award dashboard.

- There needs to be an easily accessible and updateable reference source for unallowable and allowable costs on grants from different federal entities.

- Departments need to be able to see what accounts PIs are paid from, but there's only one master payroll report per department and it is restricted based on access level. Grant administrators can't even get a few extra characters in Workday to show what departments different payroll accounts fit in.

- There's broader concern here that confidentiality and access are ongoing issues that are preventing staff from doing their jobs effectively. Everyone signed a confidentiality form when they were hired, but it seems that there's an expectation that people will use information inappropriately so access starts out at the lowest possible level.

Staff Support

Continuity in Staffing

- Continuity in staff support is an ongoing issue. In Chemistry, for example, the LBC provides strong support but faculty rarely have the same financial administrator from

year to year. When there is so much turnover, faculty lose the ability to do adequate forecasting and projection, which is especially critical in the face of things like centrally-instituted raises for postdocs, a decision that creates huge ripples for faculty research and can't be addressed without stable research support.

- There is an ongoing issue with losing the staff who have all of the information and having to adjust to new staff members who aren't familiar with faculty work.

- The general consensus is that this turnover is partially related to the problems with the systems, which hinder the ability of the staff to access the data and reports needed to do their jobs, and which make the work frustrating and inefficient.

- The LBCs are interested in real-time updates and a mobile component in a new software, and have noted that higher quality staff are needed as projects and grants become more complex. (The PSD/LBC have implemented a new career path and training options to help facilitate the latter).

- Some departments have seen a lot of turnover with their post-award contact in URA, which makes it difficult to maintain continuity across the life of an award. The unit administrators often end up training new post-award people.

    o NOTE: Much of this may have been due to the organizational changes in URA, which should now be stabilized. Training for new URA employees is now also structured based on their job role, where they first receive training in the top priorities associated with their job responsibilities and then expand to learn more about URA's work as a whole.

Staff Time and Expertise

- With staff turnover, getting access switched out in GEMS, Buysite, and ePayments accounts is a real challenge, and often takes a long time. It's also not easy to access or update information in FAS.

- There isn't enough administrative support for taking care of purchasing, especially in the departments and institutes. Many faculty need someone in their department who knows them personally and knows what they're working on, and who can work with the LBC or administrative systems on their PI's behalf to make things happen. The rules and systems are definitely an issue, but there's also a gap in many departments that should be filled by people who can support the faculty on a local level.

- Expert help is crucial, particularly for faculty with large government-funded projects (over $5 million). Regulations change and faculty need experts who can address best practices and alleviate some of the burden on the LBCs. For example, large projects must now file monthly earned value management reports, which require reports from the financial system by the 3rd of each month and come with further paperwork penalties if not submitted by the 5th of the month, neither of which are supported by the way the financial system functions.

- Faculty need knowledgeable local staff to support post-award account management, but right now those staff are doing time-consuming (and what should be unnecessary) work to pull together reporting information for account holders. They should be doing higher-level work with a better, easier tool for reporting.

- One of the challenges we've heard is that we customized many of our systems up front and created an issue for ourselves by making extensive training and specialization the norm. A new system may make retraining on all of these processes feel like a burden to staff.

  - Some of this could be alleviated by having a common dictionary of terms that overlap from the old systems to the new one. One of the difficulties with the Workday transition was that the jargon changed (e.g. a "monthly extra service payment" became a "one-time payment").

  - Could also be aided by making sure the users who figure out the tips and tricks fairly quickly are sharing that information out to others. Many of our peers have groups that get together quarterly and talk about best practices in award management, which is something we could consider under a new system.

Invoicing/Purchasing

- PIs need to be able to log in to a software system and see what has been invoiced for an award in the last few weeks. This information, as well as seeing what has *not* been invoiced, is paramount to maintaining relationships with suppliers. Currently, it's possible for PIs to view financial figures only after getting used to the financial system, which is difficult to learn.

  - NOTE: There is a project on AP Automation underway that will be phasing in this winter and will improve the invoicing process. Often the issue is that the invoice is a piece of paper lost in a stack somewhere.

- Buysite is a significant issue for faculty. The combination of non-competitive pricing and the clumsiness of the site itself makes it easier for faculty to simply go to Home Depot or buy their supplies from Amazon. Many wish Amazon would just be added to Buysite as a vendor.

- The inefficiency of the preferred vendor system discourages faculty from using it – it's often better to put costs on a GEMS card than to buy from a preferred vendor because the cost on Buysite is higher than it is through other places. Many people also have to select their items on a different site and then go back to Buysite to purchase them because the prices aren't listed on Buysite.

- o NOTE: The AP Automation project is also focused on turning on some Buysite modules that will improve vendor relationship and other vendor-related issues. The project has been exploring a list of faculty who are using Buysite themselves and faculty who have students or lab techs buying for them to understand how this can be made more efficient and better capture the value of the preferred vendor system.

- Supplies purchased through Buysite also take much longer to arrive than supplies purchased through other sites with a GEMS card. It's an enormous waste of time for faculty to use the Buysite system when they could be spending that time working on grant proposals to bring money into the University, and so faculty end up having to use their postdocs and other research staff to do administrative work.

- Visibility into the lifecycle of a PO is a real challenge; administrators have a difficult time closing out awards because it's impossible to know which POs have been completed and which are pending. Sometimes there are POs that are over a year old because they simply ended up in another department's queue.

- It would be nice if the accounting system listed pending purchase orders as well as complete ones so that you could contact vendors for invoices if you are trying to close out an award quickly.

- Faculty aren't always getting the right information upfront about how the funds can and can't be spent, so when it comes time to close out the award, it's held up by some supply issue and it impacts our relationship with the granting org (esp. true with grants from NIH).

- Faculty have frequently had issues obtaining approvals through Procurement. The process is complicated and time-consuming, and many feel it's unnecessary.

General Comments

- The University needs to be careful about the system choice for awards management – some of the big names in this area are terrible systems and have led to bad experiences for faculty (e.g. Kuali).

- Recent faculty and staff hires could provide input on systems they used at previous institutions.

Feedback on Other Issues/Systems

- (Interfolio) For review processes, faculty are expected to save their own teaching evaluations even though they should theoretically be collected digitally by the institution.

- (Workday) In Workday Recruitment, the job postings don't list the departments/units, and sometimes sending someone a link just takes them to the general page of listings. It's labor-intensive for candidates who then have to individually check each listing with the same title to make sure it's in the right department.

- (GEMS) There was a push to get everyone to book their travel through GEMS, but it asks for too much information and seems very invasive.