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CU I&E Submission: PreAward Core [1]

Description

The brainchild of a few Directors of Finance and Administration in search of solutions to their grant application nightmares, the PreAward Core is a shared service model created to serve the grant and contract submission needs of participating departments. Neither a centralized office nor a localized department, the Core combines the personalized service of department-level support with the expertise and efficiencies of a group of specialists focused solely on pre award.

The Problem

The research grant environment has changed. Known as the 3Cs of pre award, the world of grant submissions is more competitive, complex, and continuous than ever before. Thus the need has emerged for pre award administrators to become specialized experts able to adapt to an ever changing environment.

In addition, because so much time, effort, and expertise is devoted to the submission of grant applications, departments have become overburdened with grant submissions, which sometimes leads to post award duties being neglected due to urgent deadlines.

Compounding this issue is an overdependence on department-level pre award specialists always needing to be available for grant submissions. Thus, when specialists are not available, this makes departments vulnerable to losing access to critical expertise at key times. In fact, the PreAward Core grew out of a nightmare situation where a specialist resigned just before an important grant submission deadline.

The Solution

In June 2014, with pilot support from the School of Medicine Dean's Office and initial commitment from four departments, the PreAward Core was established with the simple goal of sharing services to create a better pre award experience. Initially three basic science departments and one clinical department decided to share the expertise of a few pre award specialists with the goal of providing the following:

1) Coverage to departments to reduce overdependence on just one specialist.
2) Minimize detrimental effects of employee turnover and create a means for current personnel to effectively share knowledge with new personnel.
3) Decouple pre award from post award to maximize efficiencies and allow for greater depth of knowledge for both specialties.
4) Provide ongoing professional development opportunities to help make specialists become actual specialists in all aspects of pre award.
5) Hone procedures and standardize pre award processes to improve the customer experience for principal investigators (i.e., the customers) and make it simpler for another grant specialist to complete an application in the case of an unexpected absence.

How does this impact the University?

Overview

Now, 18 months after its inception, the Core has expanded to five departments, with plans for a new department (Surgery) to join in July 2016. A hiring search is currently underway to hire a fourth specialist in late spring 2016. The four original PreAward Core departments include three basic science departments, Cell and Developmental Biology, Immunology and Microbiology, and Physiology and Biophysics, and one clinical department, Otolaryngology. The newest department, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation joined the Core in January 2016.

The impact on the University has been impressive. This shared service model has demonstrated its effectiveness, efficiency, and commitment to professional development, and its willingness to grow.

2A. A Well-trained, Highly Experienced PreAward Core is Efficient and Effective

By the Numbers

Three Grants Specialists bring almost 30 years of grants and contracts expertise to the PreAward Core. Collectively, this makes for a highly experienced team with over 455 submissions since inception of the Core. And the Core is not just an “NIH Shop;” rather, the Core has submitted to over 88 unique sponsors including numerous small and large foundations and professional organizations, state and federal agencies, and private sector clinical trial sponsors.

Impressive Submission Numbers are a Result of Work-Load Balance: Workload has been triaged based on deadlines, grant complexity, and the experience of each specialist. This load balancing made it possible for the PreAward Core to meet the needs of 100 active principal investigators and postdoctoral fellows, and 34 graduate students who submitted 352 grants, 23 contracts, and 80 progress reports. Note that most of the data reflects submissions of the original four departments of the Core. The fifth department joined in January 2016. Also of note is that the Core was understaffed, yet still managed this output - just two specialists served the Core for the first 11 months. A third specialist joined the Core in May 2015.

2B. The Implementation of the PreAward Core has resulted in Significant Efficiencies and Process Improvements

The focus on pre award activities makes it easier to standardize business practices and improve efficiencies. The Core has created protocols for filing systems and naming structures on its shared server, has developed routing and final checklists for investigators and staff, and created email templates and other documents for communicating with principal investigators and fellows during grant planning meetings and throughout the grant submission process.

Focus on Refinement to Improve the Customer Experience. After busy grant cycles the PreAward grant specialists meet to go over their procedures and improve them. Everything is reviewed for clarity and to determine whether anything needs to be changed to make the experience more comprehensible for the applicants and the specialists. In addition, as new sponsor guidelines and policies are implemented, all practices and materials are reviewed and updated to ensure that they are still accurate and applicable. Reports are also generated on the types of applications submitted to better anticipate funding mechanism volume for

future grant cycles.

Standardized Practices are Scalable. Because the procedures of the PreAward Core are standardized, this makes expansion and replication manageable. For example, when the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation joined the Core in January 2016, everything was already in place for adding the new department into the fold. Specialists started out by learning who the new principal investigators would be, set up meetings to introduce themselves, and began sharing their processes one-on-one with each applicant. With plans for the Department of Surgery to join the Core in July, these practices will be valuable for training a new specialist to serve this large new department.

Professional Development Leads to Well-Trained, Satisfied Specialists Able to Provide Knowledgeable Service. All grant specialists in the PreAward Core take part in ongoing professional development, including participation at professional meetings such as the National Council of University Research Administrators or SRA International. Specialists keep up to date on changes to sponsor guidelines and work with one another to create consistent messaging to share with principal investigators about such changes. In some instances specialists take on the role of becoming the Core expert on certain issues or become the team lead for specific sponsors or funding mechanisms. They then are responsible for thoroughly training the other specialists in this area of expertise. For example, one specialist is currently the expert on Department of Defense grants and is developing training materials and procedure documents and checklists for teaching the other specialists how to submit these types of applications.

Separating PreAward from Post-Award Makes Both Sides of the Grant Equation Work Better. Because pre award activities have been separated from post award activities, post award no longer takes a back seat due to ongoing deadlines and an increased volume of grant applications. Department administrators repeatedly comment on this positive effect of separating out the two roles, and post award staff appreciate not having to be diverted from their primary focus.

Specific accomplishments include:

• Info Ed Electronic Routing - The PreAward Core migrated all departments to electronic routing via Info Ed, the system-to-system grants management software used by the University, for all items in July 2014. This was 6 months ahead of the mandate by the Office of Grants and Contracts.
• Standardized Budget Templates – Created a standard budget template which improves accuracy, provides a standard for Principal Investigators (PIs) to review and creates efficiency.
• Standardized Checklists for Core Members and PIs – The Core created and implemented the use of standardized checklists for Core Members and created similar checklists for PIs to use. Checklists have been developed for and are in use for 25 frequently used sponsors.
• Standardized Meeting Guide for Students Submitting Fellowship Grants – Members of the Core meet with graduate students and post docs applying for fellowship grants. Standardized checklists, forms and instructions are given at this time.
• Standardized Email Notifications – Members of the Core use standardized email notifications reminding PIs of upcoming grant and routing deadlines, giving instructions for approving Info Ed routings, instructions in processing progress reports via eRA Commons and in assigning Delegate access.
• A PreAward Core Dedicated Server Drive – In order to create efficiency, a dedicated drive was created using standardized filing patterns and naming conventions for grants. Core members are required to strictly adhere to these standards. This creates efficiency, accuracy

and provides clear audit trails for future use.
• Documented Processes – Processes have been designed and documented for grant processing, progress reports, just-in-time procedures, electronic filing, and naming conventions for electronic files.
• Reporting - Periodic reports are generated to provide data to DFAs and Chairs on the volume and status of applications in the cue.
• NIH Guide Notices – Members of the Core are trained to carefully scrutinize weekly notices from NIH for issues and items that may be pertinent to PIs to ensure that applicants adhere to new requirements and aware of relevant funding opportunities.

2C. Results – Principal Investigators, Department Chairs, and Directors of Finance and Administration are Highly Satisfied with the PreAward Core

Feedback regarding how the implementation of the Core has enhanced performance has been universally positive and is best summarized by the Chair of one of the departments served by the PreAward Core:

"The grant specialist's ownership of the submission process allowed me to devote my efforts to the writing of the research plan. The Specialist gets the big picture – That success is not just the submission of grants, but rather it's getting grants funded. The Specialist sees that allowing PIs the maximum time for what they need to do is a priority."

In March of 2016, a survey was distributed to 95 faculty members and 35 graduate students who had used the services of the PreAward Core during the prior 18 months. With a 29% response rate, the Pre award Core received highly impressive marks in responsiveness and overall quality. In these categories, 92% of respondents rated the PreAward Core with the highest possible score allowed. In addition to the very high marks in this survey, the PreAward Core received overwhelming positive feedback in the comments section of this survey. A sample of the comments are listed below.

"The creation of the grant core has been nothing short of genius. My specialist is so easy to work with and she never lets us down on dates or knowledge. All cores should work like this one."

"… PreAward has been fantastic. They remind us when our renewals are due well in advance, do all the budget calculations, and fill out much of the paperwork for us. The specialist was particularly helpful to my graduate student in getting her ready to submit her F31. This type of support makes grant writing so much less onerous."

"If the grant specialist didn't know the answer, she always worked to find it out. This is a great resource to have!"

"Fantastic team and service! I value the specialist's work extremely highly. She is a pleasure to work with and always achieves high quality work while maintaining great poise during stressful deadlines."

"Your help is greatly appreciated! Keep up the good work!"

“Excellent support. Keep it up.”

“I have nothing but good things to say about my grant specialist. She is professional and competent and always makes the very stressful job of submitting grants painless.”

“I'm really happy with this crew. They are doing great.”

“Keep this core forever.”

Results Moving Towards Cost Savings. In addition to highly satisfied Principal Investigators and Chairs, the DFAs served by the Core predict that over the next two years the improved efficiencies and economies of scale will move the Core from a “break even” status to a position of money savings for Core members. As specialists continue to be trained and improve upon their procedures, it will become faster and easier for specialists to achieve key tasks. In addition, DFAs are impressed that these efficiencies, workload balancing, and cross coverage allow the Core to operate with cost savings compared to each department hiring its own specialist.

Implementation Status

When one grant specialist resigned in the spring of 2014, it resulted in a domino effect that changed how four initial departments would handle pre award activities in the future. The Directors of Finance and Administration for the Departments of Cell and Developmental Biology, Immunology and Microbiology, Physiology and Biophysics, and Otolaryngology met with the Deans Office in the School of Medicine to discuss the concept of the PreAward Core. The idea was well received as a pilot project with plans for three grant specialists, including one manager/specialist to serve the needs of the initial four departments.

A PreAward Manager was hired to lead the activities for the Core. During her tenure, she set up procedures, oversaw staff, and contributed a significant portion of the specialist tasks directly. The manager also developed a training program for specialists and established reporting procedures to inform participating departments about metrics related to grant and contract submissions. Due to a family move, the manager was no longer able to fill the position of manager, but has stayed on as a principal specialist.

A PreAward Core director was hired in September 2016 and continues in this role today. The director has refined pre award practices and has worked with the Directors of Finance and Administration to expand the Core to include Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation this past January, with plans for the Department of Surgery to join in July 2016. A search is currently underway to hire a new specialist.

Submitter's Information

Submitter's Name: Myra Keeble?
Submitter's Email: myra.keeble@ucdenver.edu [2]?
Additional Team Members: Myra Keeble, Kristine Jenkins, Rob Stiner, Steve Osswald, Kate Beatty, Thomas Shallow

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