IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Navigating Communication and Collaboration Internally

By Kathryn King, Katie Wood, Robyn Remotigue, and Paul Below

Communication is vital in research administration. We know that we need to have strong lines of communication with our faculty, our central offices, our sponsors, and our external collaborators. What often gets left out of the communication discussion is communication with our internal collaborators. The coordination of faculty effort on an award that resides in another department is often overlooked. The University of North Texas Health Science Center has two centralized departments to provide department level proposals and award management support to faculty. The Faculty Research Support Team and the Office of Research services were established using a shared services model to provide research administration expertise. While this is a great service to have, it is vital that these two departments communicate successfully with each other so both teams can effectively help their respective faculty manage their awards, especially the effort commitments on proposals and awards.

When working on either a proposal submission or administering an award, it is easy to assume one person is taking the helm of the project, but really it takes a village. When HSC was awarded a large statewide COVID consortium grant that included faculty members across many different departments, it created a challenge for those of us who were trying to ensure the project could get up and running smoothly. Several challenges presented themselves, such as:

- Who was going to oversee the project?
- How would pending expenditures be approved?
- How would our campus manage the subawards?

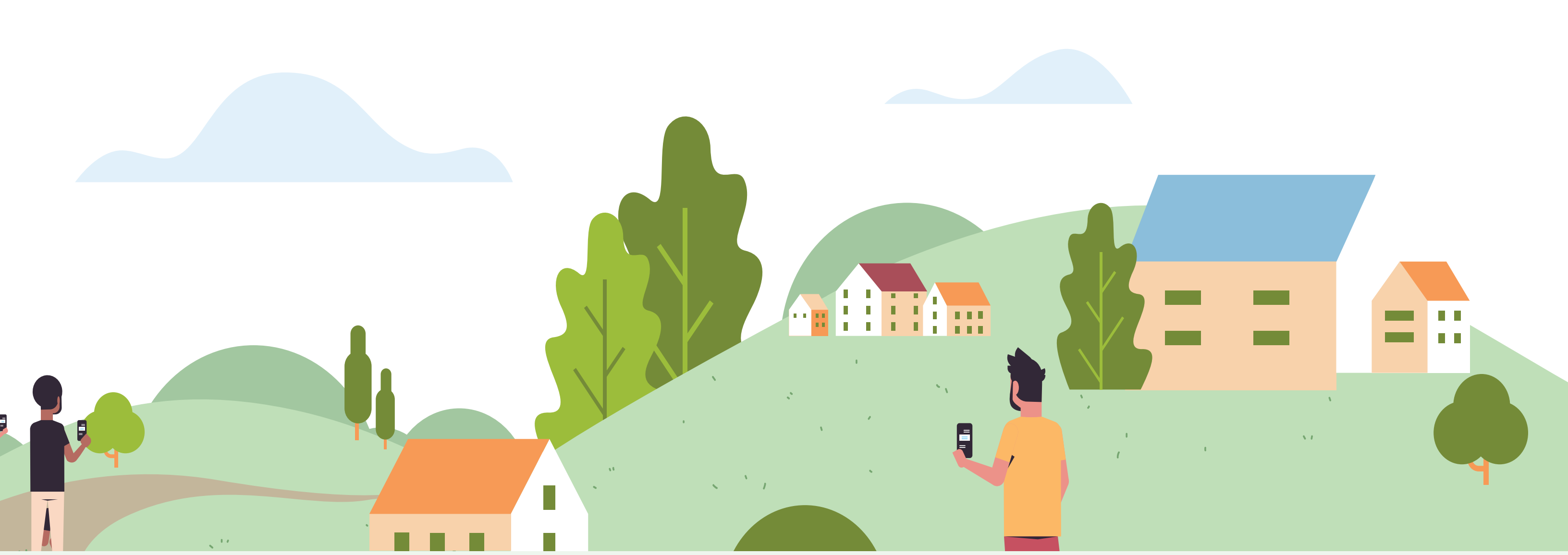
A meeting was necessary to clearly delineate who would oversee what and how communication would work when departments had questions or concerns for the other one. Taking the time to sit down and establish an action plan allowed us to efficiently determine the roles and responsibilities for the administration side of the grant. It also laid the groundwork for similar collaborative efforts between the pre-award side of the departments.

The Office of Research Services (ORS) in the School of Public Health (SPH) was founded in 2014 in response to faculty members requesting assistance with their grants and contracts. Faculty members wanted assistance putting their proposals together. They did not want assistance with the scientific portion, but more with required components and budget preparation. Additionally, funded SPH faculty did not always understand the principal investigator's responsibility in managing projects and they needed assistance with financial monitoring.

Similarly, the Faculty Research Support Team (FRST) was created because faculty members wanted assistance with developing proposals and overseeing the finances of their projects. Additionally, FRST was born out of a need for improved compliance on the campus, as faculty non-adherence to effort and financial policies was potentially putting the institution at risk.

Despite their similarities there are many differences between these teams. FRST is a true centralized departmental administrative office. Pre- and post-award staff members are assigned to a department to help develop or administer the grant but are not housed in the department itself. Rather, the team is located centrally on campus, ensuring accessibility to the faculty members they serve. Additionally, except for the School of Public Health and another institute, FRST serves the entire campus. Meanwhile ORS has a more "classic" set-up, with the departmental administrators housed within the school they work for. ORS team members can walk down the hall to the faculty which they serve, whereas FRST team members may need to set up a schedule or walk across campus to locate their faculty members. ORS also oversees a smaller subsection of the faculty population so they can easily administer changes to their workflow with minimal pushback. FRST has to appease different faculty, chairs, and deans in order to ensure that there is "buy in" from everyone. Finally, each department has a different style of interacting with their faculty. These differences further complicate items like administrating large multi-component projects because internal collaborators have different styles and methodologies of managing their projects, despite having similar roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the need to communicate and collaborate with our internal partners became even greater as HSC saw an increase of multi-component projects on campus, including the large statewide COVID consortium project that was received.

Respecting PI questions and requests is of significant importance. It is



our goal to respond to them in a timely manner. If we do not have the answer immediately, we let them know we are working to find the answer. PIs are overseeing research projects and a lot of their time is also spent teaching classes and working with students. When we request their time or a clarification, we use the "two-days-to-a-week," rule based on level of urgency. Also, when PIs request something of you, ask for a timeline so you can better manage your tasks.

Common practices often followed in administration include the following:

- If an email chain grows past three exchanges and nothing seems to be getting accomplished, pick up the phone.
- When coordinating busy schedules such as those of faculty, see about scheduling a quick chat in advance and stick to this time.
- Set agendas and expectations before meetings. Also, take a moment after a call to decide if additional meetings are really needed or if follow-up can be handled by email.
- In this time of digital age and ease of hopping on a call, be considerate of who is invited. Respect others' time. Does this person need to be here or can they be caught up later in a team meeting or with an email? Also, is anyone missing from a call?

Find what works best for you and set yourself and others up for successful working communications.

There are multiple ways to increase communication and coordination amongst departments. A joint MS Teams account can be used to create dialogue between teams, share files, and potentially work jointly on tasks. Joint meetings on a regular basis with a set agenda not only help teams communicate, but also help them develop strong professional relationships. Allowing the other department access to project management systems and automated system emails can facilitate exchange of information regarding faculty effort on the other department's projects.

After any meeting or discussion, **review your action items**. Verbally say actions and specify who will be tackling what. At this time, you can also determine who needs to be involved going forward. For example, does the topic at hand need to be escalated or deescalated? Will there need to be approvals? When approvals and signatures are needed, it is best to go ahead and let those in the approval chains know the purpose and timeline of what they are signing.

Follow up on conversations with an email, especially when new topics are discussed, and problems are solved or realized. It is important for us to own items from start to finish–research administration starts and ends with us!

Take the time to get to know your PIs. Just as you get to know your other colleagues across departments, it is important to have a positive working relationship with your research faculty. Ask them about their research interests, how their projects are coming along, who they are collaborating with across your campus or other institutions, and what their preferred methods of communication are. In time you will learn how much they are willing to share, how detailed they expect you to be, how closely are they watching the administrative side of their project activities (and where you may want to dive deeper to confirm understanding), and who they are most comfortable receiving important allowability determinations from.

It truly takes a village to get an idea to a proposal, to award, and finally to close-out. Communicating with our peers across departments helps all of us, including the faculty, to successfully navigate through the various institutional and sponsor processes. Open communication also reduces the burden of compliance monitoring. It is vital for successful interdisciplinary projects to ensure regulations are being followed and commitments to sponsors are being met. When departments collaborate, the collaboration helps achieve the overall institutional goals of maintaining compliance. N

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