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**Face Time and Physical Proximity: Critical Elements for Improved Grant Management**

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**Abstract**

In recent years many nonprofit institutions, including those of higher education, have transitioned their administrative functions to a shared services model. A shared services model reorganizes formerly decentralized support functions into a centrally managed operation consisting of individuals who specialize in specific functions. This paper reviews several considerations for deciding whether centrally funded research administration functions belong in this type of centrally located service center, or whether these functions, instead, belong in physical proximity to investigators. Research administration functions include tasks related to the preparation of the proposal package and grant management. A centrally located model delivers enhanced efficiencies, but it runs the risk of counter-intuitively increasing costs if departments respond by creating new positions that provide grant services local to them. The benefits of geographic proximity may include increased informal communications that improve quality of proposals and lead to more proactive monitoring of awarded grants. In conclusion, locally positioned, centrally funded grant support services hold potential for providing both efficiency and improved support to investigators at nonprofit institutions.

**Introduction**

Currently many institutions, with universities leading the charge, have transitioned, or are considering transitioning, research support to a shared services model. Efforts to restructure through centralizing service functions are not unique to research support and often also encompass other areas, such as human resources, accounting and budget, and information technology (Cluver & Stevens, 2014). Transition to shared services involves reorganization of decentralized departmental support to centrally managed operation, made up of individuals who specialize in specific functions.

Of particular interest to grant professionals is the structure of services that support research. Below some of the benefits and drawbacks of spatial proximity of grant support personnel and investigators are considered.

### **Considerations of Cost**

Transitioning to centralized and professionalized grant support workforce in an organization is an effective strategy for increasing support to researchers and reducing risk of institutional noncompliance. Centralization of service is achieved by creating central supervision and/or by housing personnel in one central location. Professionalization involves utilizing employees devoted full time to specific functions and trained in the profession. As compared to a non-centrally supervised and non-professionalized workforce, this model has high potential to deliver more consistent service. It enhances employee work-life balance via backstopping during the time off or during busy deadlines. It is also an effective strategy for improving talent management and increases the ability of a central supervisory unit to provide professional development resources, like institutionally sponsored trainings.

Institutions often pursue centralization of a grant support workforce in an effort to achieve increased efficiency and through these increases, realize cost savings. While the hope to achieve cost savings is often one of the main motivating factors of such efforts, it is not clear if the type of expected savings, indeed, result from such transitions. Whether a new centralized model requires hiring new staff or moving existing staff to a centralized service center, implementation of this type may not reduce costs in the short term. Costs associated with a shift to a centralized service center approach could include salary increases (to normalize salaries across a pool of internal candidates), space outfitting and infrastructure costs, and trainings costs. In a decentralized approach, some of these costs are shared across departments, while others would not be incurred. That said, operational efficiencies would likely result over the long term due to the economies of scale (Sandfort & Dykstal, 2007, p. 10). Additionally, a more agile workforce that is managed via clear metrics holds potential for increased savings by, allowing for increased research expenditures, reducing costs due to error, and fostering more stable and effective personnel.

If researchers at a given institution do not accept the loss of departmentally located staff to a service center, there is also a potential increased organizational cost due to the creation of local administrative positions to perform grant management tasks. These positions—duplicating those that are assigned to centrally managed research support operation—lead to increased personnel cost and decreased efficiency. Such duplication of effort may occur if research support staff are removed too far from a department which has in the past had local level support. Similarly, when researchers perceive that the responsiveness of centrally located service is inadequate to support their needs, they may opt to hire dedicated personnel to assemble their grant application packages or track grant expenditures.

There is a potential solution to maximize efficiency while minimizing the higher cost drawback of redundant, simultaneous centralized and decentralized grant administration staff. Grant professionals can be professionally managed and mentored by a central supervisory manager, yet be physically housed in academic colleges and departments. Frequent meetings of decentralized grant professionals can also lead to improved communications across academic

silos, facilitating collaboration between researchers. Such a scheme has been described for the University of Missouri flagship campus (Licklider, 2012). This solution offers the benefits of centralization without the drawbacks of an impersonal service center approach.

### **Physical Proximity and Collaboration**

There is little research on the effects of proximity between research administrators and researchers. There is however a body of work on the effects of proximity in other fields. In research on collaborative networks, physical proximity is consistently noted as an important factor. Haylor (2012) noted that “[h]istorically, close proximity has been known to promote collaboration, and physical distance separating partners [has been known] to reduce its incidence” (p. 9). In particular, Haylor discusses whether “contemporary enabling factors,” such as the Internet, digital communication, social networking, and other digital tools “may be effective distance spanning tools.” Even in an era with widespread use of digital collaboration tools, it appears that physical proximity encourages collaboration, because it tends to generate more informal communication (Haylor, 2012, p. 3.) Huang (2014) borrows the term *propinquity* from social psychology to describe physical nearness that leads to increased social relationship. Huang describes the potential for physical proximity to turn into social proximity and then into productivity, which assists in building collaboration networks. In a removed service center environment, this potential between staff and the faculty they serve is lost.

Propinquity is an important factor in building productive relationships between grant personnel and researchers. Interacting with researchers electronically or by phone maintains formal communication, but face-time is necessary for building the informal connections that also build trust and strengthen collaborations. Additionally, the need to schedule an appointment, or having to travel to a different location to see a grant support person, becomes an extra administrative burden to investigators that limits overall communication and contact. Without physical proximity researchers, many of whom have limited availability, may not communicate their proposal needs early enough, causing inefficient last minute work during the preparation of grant applications and more frequent failure to adhere to the institutional lead-time. Lastly, researchers often cannot formally articulate various project needs using terms that are regulations-compliant and clear, thus decreasing the ability of research administrators to be proactive. Frequent unscheduled informal conversations about the needs of the project assist administrators in addressing upcoming issues in a timely manner.

Physical presence of grant administrators at locations where investigators work and conduct their research improves the administrators’ understanding of the research needs and circumstances specific to a department. Additionally, a physically proximate administrator is better able to ensure financial compliance due to a more complete picture of work being done at the department level. This closeness to the subject matter has the potential to minimize impactful issues such as retroactive transfers of unallowable costs off the grant. Coupled with the benefit of strengthened collaborations resulting from informal interactions, there is a strong argument for keeping day-to-day proposal and grant administrative functions local to investigators.

## Conclusion

Whether to place grant support functions in a centrally located service center or in physical proximity to the investigators is a decision that must be made by any institution transitioning its grant support to the shared model. Many potential efficiencies and cost savings might occur through a centralized grant support workforce. These include increased efficiencies in compliance and training and increased ability to move staff to areas of need. There are also benefits to having locally-situated staff, able to work directly with investigators and develop meaningful and productive relationships with them. The approach that combines central reporting and management of grant professionals with housing them in physical proximity to investigators may hold the most potential for improved and efficient grant management operation.

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