

NCURA “Close-Out” Report
July 2022

Introduction

In fall 2019, UNM’s Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR) engaged the National Council of University Administrators (NCURA) to conduct a peer review of the university’s research administration of sponsored programs, including the OVPR, Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP), Faculty Research Development Office (FRDO) and Office of Research Integrity and Compliance (ORIC). UNM provided a substantial set of materials for NCURA review and a team from NCURA conducted a site visit to UNM in November 2019. Subsequently, NCURA provided a report of their findings, commendations, and recommendations to UNM in late February 2020. Closures and other disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic caused delays in review and implementation of recommendations; however, the OVPR, Controller’s Office, and OSP/CGA leadership convened several working groups in 2020 to assess and, in some cases, implement the NCURA report recommendations. Independently, the relevant units used the NCURA report as guidance to develop strategies to improve UNM’s research administrative structures and processes. Although improving research administrative functions is an on-going task, this report serves as a summary of the work that has been done over the two years since the NCURA report was received.

Structure, Strategic Planning, and Streamlyne

The NCURA report noted the OSP’s dual reporting structure-- a primary reporting line to the Controller and a “dotted” reporting line to the VPR—led to stakeholder confusion about where authority lay to resolve issues. Beginning in spring 2022, the reporting line for the Office of Sponsored Projects (Pre-Award) was changed to the VPR. The Contract and Grant Accounting Office continues to report to the Controller’s Office. One director oversees both units, so their work stays well-coordinated. This revised reporting structure facilitates decision-making and operations of the research-focused pre-award staff while maintaining fiscal operations within the university’s financial administrative structure. Increased coordination and communication between OSP and OVPR has clarified acceptable levels of risk in pre-award functions, another area of concern noted in the NCURA report.

In 2022, all research administrative units that report to the OVPR, including OSP, have been engaged in strategic planning for their units, in coordination and alignment with an overall OVPR strategic plan. This process facilitates better communication and coordination between the units and ensures better alignment of unit priorities with annual budgets.

Beginning in fall 2021 and continuing into fall 2022, OVPR is working with UNM IT to implement a new electronic research administration software platform, Streamlyne. This system replaces the system used during the time of the NCURA review, Cayuse. Once fully implemented, Streamlyne will enable new integrations between proposal development, award negotiations,

and compliance units that will increase efficiencies and decrease administrative burden on researchers and research administrative staff. This will address several of the recommendations made by the NCURA site visit team related to OSP processes and procedures.

Communications

Several recommendations pointed to a need to share information about the university's research enterprise more clearly and consistently, primarily focused on audiences within the university. Each unit has worked to improve the content and format of websites, including providing information about roles and responsibilities for core offices and additional information on policies and procedures.

The Vice President for Research (VPR) has held public meetings, virtually and in person, to share information about research initiatives and accomplishments and respond to questions from members of the community. The VPR has also released monthly email updates to the campus community and has attended several department meetings to discuss research-related topics of interest to researchers and administrative staff.

Currently (July 2022), the OVPR is in the process of redesigning the OVPR website; the FRDO website will undergo a significant refresh this year as well. OVPR has a strategic communication plan; implementation will begin in FY23 and the plan will be communicated to the research council and posted on the OVPR website.

Training

The NCURA report recommended an increased attention to the training needs of research administrative staff in departments and in core university offices, as well as resources for faculty and other researchers to ensure they know and follow university policies and guidelines appropriately. OSP has developed and updated training resources for central office staff and the Research Administrators Network (RAN) monthly meetings are now planned by a committee of research administrators. The Grants Management Training, required for all PI's with active awards, has been updated (spring 2022) and completely revised to include checks for comprehension. In addition, the OVPR has created a new position for a Technical Training Specialist (summer 2022). This staff member will work with OVPR units to identify training needs, coordinate training opportunities, and develop static resources to assist investigators and research administrators.

As the new electronic research administration software platform, Streamlyne, is implemented in fall 2022, workshops and training materials will be provided for system users. The new system will be configured to provide users with information about applicable university procedures and federal guidelines and the related training resources will provide additional details.

Staff Retention

Staff retention in OSP, both pre-award and Contract & Grant Accounting, was highlighted as a critical issue in the NCURA report. Staff turnover has continued to be a challenge and the COVID-19 pandemic provided additional complexities. In 2020, the salaries of Accountant 3's, Senior Accountants and the Associate Controller were evaluated and brought up to midpoint. A review of individuals' work led to appropriate reclassifications. The request for one additional budgeted position in OSP was approved in January 2021 and career ladders were approved for some staff. In addition, staff were given an option for in-person, remote or hybrid work arrangements, following the return to campus after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted (fall 2021). OSP continues to explore different recruitment strategies, including splitting a full-time position into two part-time positions and revising job postings. OSP is also in the early stages of revamping existing career paths, working with UNM HR so individuals are aware of the potential for growth within the unit. With the new training specialist on board, OSP will also work to coordinate training and professional development with the career paths. Additionally, a few staff members are cross-training to be "floaters" to provide coverage at the both the supervisory level and the Specialist levels.

Research Processes

The NCURA report included several recommendations targeting specific processes and procedures in OSP Pre-Award and Contract and Grant Accounting Offices. Both of those units have reviewed the recommendations and implemented several actions to achieve overall goals of increasing efficiency, reducing redundancies and administrative burden, and balancing customer service with compliance. After careful consideration, the Proposal Team and Contract Team decided to keep the team-based model to remain responsive to the needs of customers and to meet deadlines. In 2022, however, the Awards Team began to explore further the option of re-organizing into a constituency model prior to the implementation of Streamlyne.

Both OSP Pre-Award and Contract and Grant Accounting gather information from stakeholders that is used for continuous improvement of their processes and procedures. Areas of improvement include revising and simplifying the Award Budget Sheet (ABS) needed for award set-up and revisions to the award set up and subaward processes, including updating the Subaward Guide. As part of implementing Streamlyne, Contract and Grant Accounting is exploring the system's capabilities to integrate with Banner, which may lead to additional procedural efficiencies. Enhanced reporting capabilities of the Streamlyne system will enable UNM to evaluate proposal success ratios. Likewise, connections with the COI and IRB Streamlyne modules will facilitate consistent compliance checks at the time of proposal submission. Lastly, with the change in reporting structure of OSP Pre-Award to OVPR, non-financial agreements (e.g., MTA, NDA) are now signed by the Associate Vice President for Research, rather than the Controller, increasing efficiency and turn-around time for these documents.

Research Policies

The working group that reviewed the NCURA recommendations related to research policies generated a list of policies in the UNM Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual and the Faculty Handbook that govern research administration. The working group sought and received input from the Faculty Senate Research Policy Committee (RPC) as review of research policies is within that group's charge. Any significant changes to policy must go through a lengthy review process, either by the Faculty Senate or with the Policy Office. OSP and CGA considered procedural changes consistent with existing policy that could improve efficiency and effectiveness. As noted above, they have revised procedures for subaward administration (Policy 2470) and have been working to revise the Effort Certification process (Policy E120).

Conclusion

The NCURA report provided important insights and suggestions that we have acted upon to improve UNM's research administration—and the work continues. Going forward, OVPR is committed to the assessment and improvement of research administration as evidenced in Goal 3 of the OVPR Strategic Plan:

Enhance customer-focused research administration that provides efficient, effective support and promotes the highest standards of safety, integrity, and compliance.

OVPR welcomes input from the UNM community; you can submit feedback and offer suggestions to vpr@unm.edu.

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