

**Western Carolina University  
Administrative Program Review  
Office of Research Administration  
March 2 – 4, 2014**

**Introduction**

As a part of WCU's on-going self-assessment of all University units, the Director of Assessment, Office of Institutional Planning & Effectiveness, coordinated a review of the Office of Research Administration (ORA), which is responsible for sponsored programs preaward and non-financial postaward activities at WCU. ORA's mission is to provide high-quality service in the development and administration of sponsored research activities and to protect the fiscal and legal integrity of the institution. This is congruent with the overall mission and strategic plan of Western Carolina University, and the University of North Carolina system as a whole.

The review team for the Office of Research Administration (ORA) was comprised of one internal and two external reviewers, with the on-site portion March 2 – 4, 2014 (1.5 days). Interviews were held with the Provost; Dean, Graduate School & Research, Chief Research Officer; Office of Research Administration staff; postaward accountant and University Controller; and representative faculty and staff, including members of the Sponsored Research Council. An exit interview with the Provost, Chief Research Officer, Director of ORA, and Director of Assessment concluded the visit. ORA clients interviewed by the review team expressed a unanimous recognition of positive recent changes within the ORA in regards to improved client service and user friendliness.

The University's strategic plan calls for doubling sponsored research activities, increasing proposals by 50%, and a 25% increase in awards over the next few years. This appears to be reasonable in light of the current low volume of sponsored programs that has declined over the past three years. Achieving this goal of doubling research activities in the next few years will require the commitment of University leadership and the entire research community. ORA and the colleges, schools, and departments will need to develop strong partnerships and a supportive culture to establish the foundation that will grow research activities.

In the review team's meeting with the Provost, she described WCU as a "teaching first institution." At such institutions, research and scholarly activity may be encouraged but not always expected; faculty have heavy teaching loads and find it difficult to find the time to pursue external funding. Under these conditions, it is important to make the grant process from start to finish as PI-friendly as possible. Being PI-friendly means providing a high level of support to faculty as they search for appropriate funding opportunities, prepare and submit their proposals, comply with sponsor reporting and compliance terms, and spend the grant/contract funds. If PIs feel that the grant process at WCU is painless and trouble-free, they may be more disposed to engage in grant-seeking. If any part of the process is not trouble-free and PI-friendly, this can decrease faculty willingness to seek external funding. Indeed, this response to a negative experience was repeated in several of our interview sessions.

At WCU postaward financial activities are the responsibility of the Controller's Office, part of the business side of the University, whereas preaward and ORA report to the Provost in Academic Affairs. Although the review team's mandate did not include a discussion of postaward financial processes, the team concluded that the administrative program review of ORA would not be complete without such a discussion. WCU and ORA will only be able to create a PI-friendly environment by considering the full grant cycle, from preaward through postaward.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

1. For WCU to build the research and external funding enterprise on campus, it will be critical to review the Tenure, Promotion, and Reappointment process to ensure inclusion of unambiguous statements so faculty understand the value and/or expectations of external funding activity.
2. The Strategic Plan makes growing the research enterprise a high priority. In order to do this, WCU will need to grow a culture that supports and expects sponsored research activity from faculty across a broad spectrum of disciplines. Recovered F&A and other University funding sources will need to be strategically invested as the culture changes to one that supports faculty seeking and managing external funding. Many benefits arise from sponsored programs but conducting research does not come cheaply to a university.
3. The Director of the Office of Research Administration (ORA) should work closely with the Chief Research Officer and Business Affairs to define roles and responsibilities for each member of the Sponsored Research Community. This would include the ORA staff, the Postaward Accountant, the ORA Director, and the Chief Research Officer. This process should include an assessment of current tasks and organizational structure and consider modifications where necessary to improve efficiency, client relations, and accountability.
4. When defining roles and responsibilities, the Director should focus on developing internal relations and managing the day to day operations of the office. This will free up the Chief Research Officer to serve as an advocate for ORA at the senior leadership level, as well as to build relationships with federal and state partners to strengthen WCU research at a strategic level.
5. There needs to be better integration between preaward and postaward so that faculty don't see the grant process as two separate steps, preaward and then postaward. There are several ways of doing this, including combining preaward and postaward under the Chief Research Officer, moving the postaward accountant's office to the preaward office suite (while maintaining the current hierarchical structure), and having both groups work together on preparing budgets.
6. ORA might consider realigning the utilization of the Sponsored Research Council for higher level review, input and communication. For example, have ORA write policy, and then vet it through the Council for acceptance. The Council members then serve as advocates to the greater University community.

7. ORA should assess which metrics are meaningful for them to meet their goals of improving service to the research community and doubling the grant activity in the coming years, and then design a plan to monitor key elements to determine success. Consultation with the sponsored programs offices of peer institutions may provide a guide to commonly monitored data. Conversations with sister UNC schools of similar size (as well with UNC General Administration sponsored programs staff) will also provide guidance. A list of suggested institutions is attached.
8. WCU should assess the resources necessary for the Sponsored Programs enterprise to achieve the strategic growth goals. In today's ever changing environment of increased regulatory oversight and more competition for fewer funds, it is critical that resources be available for professional development, adequate staff salaries, and other resources. WCU should assess its funding for the campus-wide support of research at the University and, as necessary, implement a plan for continued expansion of resources to ensure the sustainability of infrastructure and support ongoing growth in sponsored research.
9. WCU should ensure that the post-award accounting staff has continued professional development. WCU should provide adequate professional development resources for the Post-award Accountant to ensure her ability to understand the changing landscape of financial obligations of sponsored research. Non-compliance with requirements can be costly to the University, both in findings and lost opportunities to expand the research component.
10. WCU should immediately analyze the workload and responsibilities assigned to the postaward accountant to determine the additional resources needed to support a compliant response to postaward requirements and to provide service to faculty in managing their projects. The responsibilities of this position appear high.
11. WCU should analyze their use of reports and collection of data to ensure reports are being well utilized for efficient and accurate reports and data to the campus and sponsors.

## Recommendations with Explanation

**1. Recommendation:** *For WCU to build the research and external funding enterprise on campus, it will be critical to review the Tenure, Promotion, and Reappointment (TPR) process to ensure inclusion of unambiguous statements so faculty understand the value and/or expectations of external funding activity.*

Western Carolina University has had significant, recent changes in leadership. With a new Provost, Dean of the Graduate School & Research, relatively new Chancellor, and newly confirmed ORA Director, as well as the 2020 Vision, research is taking on a larger role at the University. An on-going impediment to growing the research on campus is the lack of clear recognition and value for sponsored programs activity reflected in tenure and promotion decisions. A few departments value proposal-writing, but many recognize only awards, while still others care only about publications as the primary measure of success. Conversations with faculty highlighted the lack of integration of research and external funding efforts into the TPR process at Western Carolina University. As WCU works to increase their external funding, it is critical that the expectation of participating in sponsored research be integrated into the broader University culture. While the TPR process does not yet recognize sponsored research across all disciplines, there is growing enthusiasm from the faculty (especially senior faculty) to obtain external funding to support their scholarly activities. If the University is to build a culture and practice of increased sponsored research activity, proposal and award efforts will need to be integrated into TPR decisions. Some faculty with whom the review team spoke mentioned that they were reluctant to exert the effort to obtain research funds until after they received tenure for fear of committing energy and time attempting to obtain funding, but not succeeding and having no TPR “credit.” Instead, they leaned toward publications while doing small research projects with little funding until tenured, and then began later in their careers to seek grant funding.

**2. Recommendation:** *The Strategic Plan makes growing the research enterprise a high priority. In order to do this, WCU will need to grow a culture that supports and expects sponsored research activity from faculty across a broad spectrum of disciplines. The use of recovered F&A and other University funding sources will need to be strategically invested as the culture changes to one that supports faculty seeking and managing external funding. Many benefits arise from sponsored programs but conducting research does not come cheaply to a University.*

It is beyond the scope of this review to assess specific programs, current or planned, to increase sponsored research activity. A few generalizations and reflections, however, can be made. Time and funds are always limited, so it is important that any initiative/activity to grow sponsored research is done with much thought, clearly defined goals, and assessment plan. Sponsored research is a campus-wide endeavor. Little increase in sponsored research activity will occur if all attention, expectations, and resources are focused on the ORA. Departments and colleges must prioritize sponsored research and recruit and invest their resources with a goal of increasing sponsored research activity. ORA certainly has a role to play but proposal activity must come from faculty. Below are some comments and observations based on our review.

Last year the STARS (Special Teams Advancing Research Support) summer program was offered. As a collaborative effort of the Office of Research Administration and Coulter Faculty Commons, STARS blends faculty development and mentoring. The review team received mostly positive comments about the success of this program, though all noted it needs refinement. The intended outcome of STARS was for each participant to submit a proposal to an external funding agency, which most participants did. One participant credited her experience to overcoming the fear of preparing a proposal and inspiring her to submit more in the future. Successes of the program must be balanced against the time commitment of ORA staff in the program. ORA's First Fridays program is a series of monthly faculty presentations during the academic year that promotes the exchange of ideas and interdisciplinary academic research. Recognition for proposal writing efforts is provided at the Grant Writers Reception. These efforts are a good start in establishing a base of interested and motivated faculty seeking external funding. Clear goals and an assessment plan need to be developed.

Based on our interviews and experience, we suggest these possibilities to increase sponsored research:

- Develop an early career (possibly 0 – 3 years) grant program for research activities across the disciplines that can catalyze external grant opportunities. For example, F&A could be used as seed funding, or to support faculty with funds for travel or student support at the college level. The Kimmel School has a strong program of encouraging faculty to engage graduate students through a matching of PI funds to support a semester or year's employment. Other colleges/departments should explore this model.
- There was much appreciation for the funds made available by WCU's relatively new indirect distribution model. ORA could be a lead on collecting and sharing the numerous innovative uses of those funds at the College/Department/PI level. Using funds to provide departmental and college support personnel who are cross trained and understand the research interests of their faculty could be beneficial. This can provide a more customized resource for faculty to find much of the funding sources at the discipline specific level. It could also provide ORA additional resources so they could focus more on supporting inexperienced faculty in developing their research agenda.
- The review team noted in a couple of interview sessions that mid-career faculty may have high potential for increasing sponsored research activity. WCU could consider an automatic research grant award triggered by promotion to associate or full professor.
- Across most interview groups, there was great interest in funding and personal support for sponsored research at the college/department level and not only at the university level. There was strong sentiment that local knowledge of people and disciplines would result in an effective use of funds and staffing.
- Critical to the culture and expectations surrounding sponsored research is academic administration, from the department heads on up. Across several interview sessions and levels of positions, faculty reported that not all deans and department heads valued sponsored research nor shared responsibility to increase activity. In one case, a newer faculty member was discouraged from pursuing grants by their department head.

**3. Recommendation:** *The Director of the Office of Research Administration (ORA) should work closely with the Chief Research Officer and Business Affairs to define roles and responsibilities for each member of the Sponsored Research Community. This would include the*

*ORA staff, the Postaward Accountant, the ORA Director, and the Chief Research Officer. This process should include an assessment of current tasks and organizational structure and consider modifications where necessary to improve efficiency, customer relations, and accountability.*

ORA currently has a staff of 3.25, which includes the Director of Sponsored Research Administration/Compliance Officer, Grants Services Coordinator, Research Administrator/eRA Manager, and a .25 FTE Faculty Services Coordinator from Coulter Faculty Commons. The unit is led by the Dean of the Graduate School & Research, who also serves as Chief Research Officer (CRO). Postaward services (a one person operation) resides in Business Services. The review team received several comments that this part of the research enterprise is not working effectively. If the University is committed to growing research, it is imperative that both the proposal/non-financial and financial management facets must be adequately staffed and educated.

Due to staff vacancies and the introduction of multiple new personnel, roles and responsibilities have become clouded. There are written definitions of the responsibilities of each ORA staff member; however, in attempting to change the perception of ORA to a more user-friendly organization, the lines have become blurred. "Service first" is an excellent motto but that does not mean everyone is involved in all the tasks. Once the new Compliance Officer is in place, the Director should take that as an excellent opportunity to analyze ORA staff roles and clearly define expectations. Items she may want to consider could include:

- Reassigning tasks to better fit the expertise of each staff member;
- Consolidating some tasks to a single person;
- Assessing what tasks are currently being performed but may not be adding value;
- Assuring there is redundancy sufficient to cover vacations, illnesses, and staff leaving;
- Analyzing tasks that are currently manual processes to determine if technology might streamline and improve monitoring;
- The role the postaward position should play in after the award activities;
- Defining roles and responsibilities for each position, including what services will be offered to the campus.

4. **Recommendation:** *When defining roles and responsibilities, the Director should focus on developing internal relations and managing the day to day operations of the office. This will free up the Chief Research Officer to serve as an advocate for ORA at the senior leadership level, as well as build relationships with federal and state partners to strengthen WCU research at a strategic level.*

ORA is now a service oriented unit. This is one of the major reasons for the new "attitude" toward both the office and sponsored research in general. However, in the rush to improve their reputation, all staff are trying to do everything for everyone, leading to confusion and a lack of focus to accomplish necessary tasks. An organization can be service oriented and staff can still have roles within the organization. While there are defined roles for each staff member, the reality is more that everyone gets involved in everything. This creates an environment of chaos. Each proposal or report seems to be an "all hands onboard" event. Without clear roles, the staff are unable to focus on their assigned responsibilities and this results in many critical tasks being

delayed or left undone. Filling the vacant compliance officer position should allow ORA some relief and reduce the always urgent environment.

With the Director now permanent, one of her first initiatives should be to define the roles of her staff and define expectations. Currently, there does not appear to be clarity in focus on goals and roles. The Director should focus on developing internal relations to facilitate partnering with colleges and departments as a high priority. This will free the Dean to remove herself from the routine operations so she can facilitate collaboration with other organizations to build internal and external relations. Working with Federal and State partners can strengthen the strategic success of WCU research. Working with the Dean and Sponsored Programs Council to identify priorities and focus, a stronger long range plan will emerge to set the stage for continued growth.

5. **Recommendation:** *There needs to be better integration between preaward and postaward so that faculty don't see the grant process as two separate steps, preaward and then postaward. There are several ways of doing this, including combining preaward and postaward under the Chief Research Officer, moving the postaward accountant's office to the preaward office suite (while maintaining the current hierarchical structure), and having both groups work together on preparing budgets.*

Being PI-friendly means providing a high level of support to faculty as they search for appropriate funding opportunities, prepare and submit their proposals, comply with sponsor reporting and compliance terms, and spend the grant/contract funds. If PIs feel that the grant process at WCU is painless and trouble-free, they may be more disposed to engage in grant-seeking. If any part of the process is not trouble-free and PI-friendly, this could impact faculty willingness to seek external funding. Several faculty reported just this—they stopped pursuing some grants because of their dissatisfaction with processes and attitudes in ORA (pre-current leadership).

There are many variations of organizational structure within the professional norms of Research Administration/Sponsored Research. The separation of fiscal accounting from other sponsored research activities is often encountered, but with this structure there must be on-going communication between the two units to successfully support the faculty and their research endeavors. Increasingly, in smaller institutions, pre- and postaward functions are combined in one Sponsored Research/Programs/Research Administration Office. A “one stop shop” for the campus blurs the line between preaward and after the award activities, providing a seamless transition for faculty. Staff roles can be separated into the different functions or can also be cradle to grave, i.e. one research administrator handling all functions for one project. Financial responsibilities that normally remain in Business Affairs are:

- cash drawdowns and receipts;
- aging and receivables;
- actual fund creation in the university's financial system (e.g. Banner, PeopleSoft);
- sometimes invoicing and financial reporting.

We met with a number of faculty and staff and there was unanimous affirmation from those we interviewed that there has been a significant turn-around in ORA and that the ORA staff are now helpful – "We're here to help you" – instead of bureaucratic – "This report is due." Others said,

"I love everything they're doing," and "The attitude has completely changed." This positive attitude reflects well on ORA and all the efforts they have made in changing the culture of grant-seeking at WCU.

The picture is not so rosy for the postaward financial side of the house, however. One faculty member wondered "Why do they toss us over the wall?" in reference to the transition from pre-award to postaward. Other comments we heard include, "There is no nice smooth continuous process from pre- to postaward – nothing has changed in postaward," and "Post grant administration has been confusing and frustrating... the postaward process is unclear and not transparent."

This negative impression of postaward threatens to unravel all the goodwill that ORA has built up over the last couple of years and could deter PIs from seeking funding. Those who have faced the frustrating postaward process may be disinclined to seek further funding and word will get out that the grant process is cumbersome, further dissuading other faculty from engaging in grant-seeking. Consequently, all the good work that ORA has been doing will be for naught if no one wants to get a grant because it is too difficult to spend the funds.

A combined office would mean that the Chief Research Officer is responsible for all research administration at WCU and the PI-friendly environment would be extended to postaward. Such a move might not be possible and is not the only way to increase pre-and postaward integration. Co-location, regular interaction, and joint budget work would also increase integration between preaward and postaward and help the two offices work as one unit in the eyes of faculty. Regardless of campus organization charts, now or in the future, the Chief Research Officer should be the lead in strengthening the research enterprise at Western Carolina.

**6. Recommendation:** *ORA might consider realigning the utilization of the Sponsored Programs Council for higher level review, input and communication. For example, have ORA write policy, then vet it through the Council for acceptance. The Council members then serve as advocates to the greater University community.*

The key priorities of ORA are to build and stabilize a strong infrastructure to support grant activity, transform the culture and identity of sponsored research and ORA on campus, and increase faculty/staff engagement with sponsored research resulting in the significant increase in proposals and awards. According to WCU's self-study, the unit has been perceived as ineffective and non-supportive. While the unit struggles with this historical reputation, it is in the midst of a positive transformation in personnel, mission, and operations. A positive step in the right direction is the formation of the Sponsored Programs Advisory Council. Faculty from throughout research active areas have been recruited to provide input to the Dean and ORA on many issues. Many universities have found having an advocacy group of faculty is an excellent way to communicate changes, requirements and new policies. With faculty representation in these decisions, the message is better accepted by faculty due to their colleagues having a role in those decisions.

WCU's ORA has formed a Sponsored Programs Council that is currently focused on writing policies that are outdated or missing. A better use might be to utilize the group as advocates for sponsored programs. Instead of having the Council draft policies, ORA could draft the policies and have them reviewed by the Council. This would be helpful for faculty buy-in, and would also enable Council members to use their time and effort on larger projects and be a conduit for communication with faculty campus wide. Participation of the Dean/CRO and Director of ORA in Council meetings is critical, but other ORA staff do not need to attend the meetings unless the agenda includes topics for which they are responsible.

**7. Recommendation:** *ORA should assess which metrics are meaningful for them to meet their goals of improving service to the research community and doubling the grant activity in the coming years, then design a program to monitor key elements to determine success. Consultation with the sponsored programs offices of peer institutions may provide a guide to commonly monitored data. Conversations with sister UNC schools of similar size (as well with UNC GA sponsored programs staff) will also provide guidance. A list of suggested institutions is attached.*

Monitoring activities is a necessary activity for a sponsored programs organization. Defining and measuring success is more difficult. To do this successfully, an office must determine what constitutes a successful activity and how that achievement can be measured in a finite manner. It is critical that data collection and assessment should be based on the definition of success and how it is measured. ORA tracks many data points but needs to take a step back and determine what data can add value to their assessments, rather than gathering data without knowing there is value added in that data point. Determining what is important and what is inconsequential is a necessary step to grow the research enterprise. An organization must delve into their strategic plan to define what outcomes are desired.

Outcomes and measurements that are commonly desired for a sponsored research office might include:

- Increasing the overall number of proposals;
- Increasing the number of faculty involved in submitting proposals (PIs and co-PI's);
- Including graduate students on proposals;
- Raising the average dollar amount of a proposal;
- Improving the success rate of faculty in receiving awards;
- Tracking the number of first time faculty submitting proposals;
- Monitoring the sources of funds;
- Tracking departments involved in sponsored research;
- Conducting satisfaction surveys;
- Tracking the amount of grant funds supporting graduate and undergraduate students.

**8. Recommendation:** *WCU should assess the resources necessary for the Sponsored Programs enterprise to achieve the strategic growth goals. In today's ever changing environment of increased regulatory oversight and more competitive award environment, it is critical that resources be available for professional development, adequate staff salaries and other resources. WCU should assess its funding for the campus-wide support of research at the*

*University and, as necessary, implement a plan for continued expansion of resources to ensure the sustainability of infrastructure and support ongoing growth in sponsored research.*

The current budget for ORA is primarily from State of North Carolina funds. Funds from senior leadership are provided for a portion of staff salaries, faculty incentives and software subscriptions. Once the Compliance Officer vacancy has been filled, ORA will be fully staffed for the first time in several years. The additional staff member increases the demand for resources. It is assumed that salary funding will be permanently increased to support this position but there are incidental costs associated with every staff position – professional development, supplies and equipment, among others. Additionally, as ORA increases support to the research population, there will be a need for greater support for faculty initiatives such as travel to meet with sponsors and attend funding workshops, and seed funding. Physically, ORA is located within the Dean’s office suite which provides sufficient recently remodeled space.

9. **Recommendation:** *WCU should that the postaward accounting staff has continued professional development. WCU should provide adequate professional development resources for the Postaward Accountant to ensure her ability to understand the changing landscape of financial obligations of sponsored research. Non-compliance with requirements can be costly to the University, both in findings and lost opportunities to expand the research component.*

The ORA staff brings a wealth of education and experience to their positions. All staff members have earned a minimum of a Bachelor’s degree and two have earned Master’s degrees. The Dean holds the Ph.D. The Director and Grant Services Coordinator are members of professional development associations, with the Director holding the designation of Certified Research Administrator. Between staff vacancies and tight budgets, it has been difficult to have staff attend professional development activities on a regular basis. To the reviewers’ best knowledge, the Grants Officer does not hold a membership in any professional organization, attend the UNC SPARC conferences, or receive on-going professional training. It is important for the University to increase the postaward accountant’s professional development. She manages federal dollars and it is critical that she understand all the regulations associated with federal funding. Last year ORA paid for her to attend the NCURA national conference. NCURA (National Council of University Research Administrators) is the largest professional society of research administrators and provides up-to-date professional development for its members, including conferences and workshops. Other suggestions include: NCSRA annual conference (North Carolina Society of Research Administrators) and SPARC meetings (held twice a year, sponsored by UNC General Administration). There are other avenues for professional development; we believe that regular education and training is important for all research administrators and the postaward accountant should be recognized as a research administrator.

10. **Recommendation:** *WCU should immediately analyze the workload and responsibilities assigned to the Postaward Accountant to determine the additional resources needed to support a compliant response to post-award requirements and to provide service to faculty in managing their projects. The responsibilities of this position appear high.*

The postaward accounting is a single person function and has approximately 110 active awards. Given the University’s commitment to growing the research enterprise, it is imperative that this

function receive more resources, possibly an additional position. In the high risk area of financial management, it is critical that staff have manageable workloads and redundancy. An immediate analysis of responsibilities, activities and compliance with deadlines should be conducted to determine what additional support is needed to provide more service to the faculty and ensure compliance.

11. **Recommendation:** *WCU should analyze their use of reports and collection of data to ensure reports are being well utilized for efficient and accurate reports and data to the campus and sponsors.*

RAMSeS is utilized for proposal preparation, routing and submission. This is robust software utilized across the University of North Carolina System. Banner is the financial system, also used across the UNC system. The length of the team's visit did not permit delving into electronic resources that might support better coordination and service to the campus. It is understood that RAMSeS works well for proposal development and tracking. As part of any self-assessment, it is best practice to include a review of processes to determine what improvements can be achieved. This is particularly essential in post-award because of the complexities and regulatory requirements where a chance of error can be compounded. A thorough review and comparison of -award processes, policies, and reports will provide the opportunity to streamline and automate work to be more efficient.