Discussion of RMS/OE (Susanne Hildebrand-Zanki, Marge O’Halloran)

Following last month’s discussion around RMS issues and means for improving the working relationship between RMS and investigators in the Department of Medicine, Susanne Hildebrand-Zanki and Marge O’Halloran presented the findings of the 2013 Research Services Satisfaction Survey.

The Office of Sponsored Research asked Dr. Claire Brindis and colleagues of the Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies to conduct a joint Operation Excellence (OE) survey to evaluate the Human Resources (HR) and Research Management Services (RMS) service centers. Dr. Brindis’ group was chosen because of its expertise in data analysis as well as its first-hand understanding of the pre-award process. They were responsible for distributing the survey, and performed the evaluation of results. They put together a two-page document of the key results of the survey. Marge O’Halloran and Susanne Hildebrand-Zanki evaluated the high-level recommendations that came out of the survey, to address issues specific to RMS and the work that is in progress (second handout).

Review of First Handout – It was clear that overall satisfaction with RMS is low. Excluding respondents who marked “don’t know/does not apply,” nearly half of the respondents said that their pre-award services were somewhat worse or much worse with RMS and, similarly, nearly half said that they spent more time on proposal preparation/submission than before RMS. There was variation among the teams, which was significantly correlated with satisfaction, independent of all other factors. Under “Overall Satisfaction,” Postdocs, followed by the non-faculty Academics were most satisfied. The lowest ratings were reported by Faculty who have been at UCSF the longest, and who have submitted the most proposals.

Review of second Handout – Overall Recommendations – These are the recommendations that Dr. Brindis’ group pulled out of all the comments that were submitted by stakeholders from the open-ended questions.

Stakeholders involved in this process (OSR Staff answered open-ended questions, but did not rate):

- OSR Staff
- Faculty
- Departmental Staff

All three groups agreed on the following recommendations: 1) Hire more staff; 2) Reduce workload and provide better workflow management; 3) Improve training; 4) Emphasize personalized service, meet face-to-face, build relationships; 5) Improve responsiveness of staff, regard faculty as customers; 6) Standardize roles of RMS, with consistency across teams (albeit with some tailoring for individual needs) 7) Improve IT, alerts, templates, reference materials.

Comments from the Council

Bill Seaman – The survey shows that there is substantial room for improvement in the process. Some teams are working better with the faculty/staff than others, suggesting that part of the problem may lie in differences between individuals, but there are also systems issues, including a need to define what is required, what needs to be standardized, and who’s responsible for what. There is an overall feeling that the two partners are more distant than they should be.

Susanne Hildebrand-Zanki -- In order for this model to work, OE will have to come up with a way for the RSC/PI relationship to work. Two issues that hinder this relationship are:
• RSC Backup Coverage – When the primary RSCs’ workload is heavy, an RSC who has been cross-trained covers for the primary RSC. When this occurs, the PI doesn’t feel as supported as they do with the RSC they have a working relationship with.

• Turnover – Re-building a relationship with a new RSC is a challenge for some PI’s, as they often don’t have the time to get the RSC up to speed on their research, funding, and their unique requirements.

The primary goal is to establish the PI/RSC relationship, then improve systems. This will be a challenge because there are factors that are uncontrollable, such as, workload, people leaving for non-work reasons, new hires, etc.

John Fahy – What was the initial motivation for OE? Was it to even out the standard of service (some research units had good support, while others did not) or have a cost-cutting exercise? If the latter, PI’s were frustrated because it claimed to be cost-cutting while offering a better service, which is hard to accomplish.

Susanne Hildebrand-Zanki – The cost factor is having a huge impact on the organization. The OE was formed with the intention to improve service for everyone. The OE workgroup heard there had ben a lack of training for pre-award for years, unresponsiveness of Contracts and Grants, long turn around times for awards and subcontracts, and a mixed level of quality in the departments in terms of the proposals that came through for review, which led the OE workgroup to believe there was enormous room for improvement. After examining all of these issues, the decision was to come up with one model, which was to separate pre-and post award.

There was a training component, and support teams were implemented for the new pre-award model, and an environment was cultivated where people who work together and do similar things, could learn from each other.

The idea to improve service for everyone has been challenging. For instance, there is a 17% increase in the number of proposals, but no willingness to pay for more staff. OE believes when they get the PI/RSC relationship established, the level of service will improve.

This year, the goal is for every RSC to meet with the PI for whom they prepare a proposal. It works better when the PIs invite RSCs into their world, versus little communication and proposal planning.

Art Weiss - Video Conferencing is an efficient way to accomplish meeting with PI’s. This reduces back-and-forth emails and misconceptions.

Christine Razler – How can the RSCs be monitored better? Managers seem to be removed from the work of their staff or do not seem to work out issues with their staff. How is the communication being disseminated from the managers to the RSCs? (e.g. priorities, what the managers want the RSCs to do, work hard to build relationships with each PI, give PI’s what they need in order to do the work, using video conferencing, etc.), and then monitor their progress.

John Fahy – It would help if the faculty knew the architecture of the system, as many of them were not aware that RSCs had team managers. They could copy their managers if something significant was being submitted, coordinate the PI meetings with the managers and RSCs, establish a constant two-way survey between the PI and RSC, and provide those data back to the department managers.

Maye Chrisman – Openness to two-way feedback would be helpful as it opens the communication on both sides. Both the PI/staff and RSCs feel overworked and are not able to see the bigger picture. Having this feedback would be useful if people are open; if they are not, it will create a bigger divide.

Standardization is key, as variability makes it harder for one RSC to fill in for another, and it makes it a challenge for the RSC to have to negotiate tasks with each PI, which is an inefficient practice.

There is a service level agreement in place for roles and responsibilities. Everyone should know what this is, implement it, and improve on it. This is how to measure/evaluate if you’re doing a good job or not. If everyone buys into the current standard, we have a common foundation, in which we can build on to improve.

By the end of March, OE will have finalized the award set-up team, and starting in April, OE will look at Processes Standardization, with input from the stakeholders and faculty. An allocation of tasks will be reviewed during this process (e.g. who will create/update other support and bio sketches).
Marge O-Halloran and Susanne Hildebrand-Zanki will focus on piloting ideas for Teams E & F, because they support DOM and have been discussed in the Research Council and Think Tank meetings.

Mark Anderson – Measurement of Satisfaction – what are the ultimate outcomes in terms of success rates and the data of how well we were doing before the implementation of OE, and after? Are we adversely affecting our success rate?

In response to Mark’s question - UCSF’s success rate has held steady. Also, per Talmadge, UCSF DOM funding has increased.

Are the appropriate RSCs matched with the appropriate faculty, according to their level of knowledge?

Some PI’s who rely on their post-award people to manage their RSCs can make the process difficult, depending on the relationship between the pre-and post award persons. People seem reluctant to say this is a problem. When the DA’s are aware of this, they try to alleviate the situation. This is a challenge for post-award as they feel they need to be responsible for various pre-award tasks, which interferes with their post-award duties.

Re-cap suggestions (Bill Seaman):
- Make MOVI work
- Two-way ratings
- Expectations of customer service communicated and actively monitored
- Standardization of expectations

Future Meeting: Tuesday, March 11, 2014, 8:00 - 9:00 am, Parnassus Room S-226