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Office of Research and
Sponsored Programs

A Note Concerning Distributed Research Administration

In the past 5 years, UMass Boston has experienced extraordinary growth in research and sponsored programs. In 2004-05, UMass Boston received 280 awards for a total \$35.6 million—a new record of success. Comparing five-year averages shows the amount awarded increased a remarkable 70% between fiscal year 2001 and fiscal year 2005. The reasons for this growth are many, including the commitment of the chancellor and provost to strengthen the research enterprise, the recruitment of faculty members who understand the necessity to secure extramural support for their research and creative activities, the establishment and expansion of interdisciplinary research institutes and centers, and the development of strategic partnerships with other campuses of the UMass system, with other public and private educational institutions, with agencies of state and local governments, with hospitals and medical centers, and with business and industry.

The university's research mission was made a centerpiece of the *UMass Boston 2008 Strategic Plan: Retention, Research, Reputation*. The goal of increasing awards for sponsored programs to \$50 million by fiscal year 2007-08 not only will transform UMass Boston into a leading urban research university, but also will help to make Boston a more livable and economically prosperous community for its diverse residents. We will realize this goal in large measure by pursuing significant extramural support from federal agencies for multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional research programs and from corporate sponsored research collaborations that correspond with and advance the university's strategic research priorities. This, in turn, will require that we identify needs and allocate resources to strengthen the research administration infrastructure of the university. The purpose of this *Note* is to describe an addition to the way in which sponsored program services are provided at UMass Boston; namely, a distributed research administration model for assisting principal investigators (PIs) to seek, secure, and manage sponsored programs that support research and creative activities.

What is distributed research administration?

Research administration has been an integral part of the research infrastructure of American universities for more than 60 years. UMass Boston, similar to other research intensive universities, has chosen to implement a *centralized research administration* model. The vice provost for research in the Division of Academic Affairs has principal responsibility for advancing the university's research mission. The vice provost oversees the development and implementation of policies and procedures relating to research, technology transfer, regulatory compliance, economic development, and inter-campus research collaborations. The director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP) reports to the vice provost and is responsible for administering university-wide sponsored program services. Both the vice provost and director work in close collaboration with administrators in the various offices of the

Division of Administration and Finance (e.g., controller, bursar, human resources, budget, procurement, facilities, environmental health and safety) and in the Division of Institutional Advancement¹.

ORSP provides a full range of sponsored program services to PIs campus-wide. It is the authorized university agency for submitting proposals and for negotiating, accepting, and establishing grant awards. It assists PIs to know and comply with institutional policies and procedures, funding source guidelines, and federal laws and regulations concerning sponsored programs. ORSP supports the activities of the university's various regulatory compliance bodies (e.g., IRB, IACUC, biosafety and radiation safety committees), acts as the liaison with the staff of the Office of Commercial Ventures and Intellectual Property in the president's office, and serves as the central university resource for responsible conduct of research. The management of information and the provision of training related to sponsored programs also fall within the portfolio of ORSP responsibilities.

In most research extensive universities, a *decentralized research administration* model is typical in which professional staff members in departmental offices are given responsibility and authority for sponsored program services to support the PIs within the department. The primary focus of the departmental office is on departmental research priorities and obligations. The central university office in this model establishes the strategic research plan for the university, manages central university resources to achieve institutional research goals, and provides oversight for compliance functions. In addition, the central office manages the flow of information, organizes training activities for PIs, performs marketing functions, directs technology transfer, and oversees relationships with sponsors, legislators, and key stakeholders.

In recent years, a hybrid model known as *distributed research administration* has evolved in which sponsored program services are centralized with regard to policy and authority but decentralized with regard to practice and responsibility. The intended outcomes are to provide more flexible, responsive, and proactive support for PIs, increasing understanding and reducing the administrative burdens of seeking, securing, and managing extramural funds. Although a number of distributed research administration systems have been implemented at various universities with considerable success, there is no single, optimal organizational model. What works is in large part dependent upon the institution's leadership and the quality of communication among its central office and departments. The distributed research administration system proposed in this *Note* is an attempt to match the best characteristics from various systems with UMass Boston's current research environment and organizational capacity.

What is the definition of "department"?

To begin, it is important to define the term *department*. As used in this *Note*, a department is any unit in the financial organization tree at UMass Boston below the level of central university sponsored program services. This includes not only colleges and academic departments, but also academic support units (e.g., Academic Support Services; Corporate, Continuing and

¹ Please see *A Note Concerning Grants and Gifts* for a discussion of the collaborative work of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the Office of Institutional Advancement in the processes of identification, solicitation, acceptance, and administration of funds from extramural sources.

Distance Education) and the research institutes and centers (e.g., Institute for Community Inclusion, Gerontology Institute).

Why is distributed research administration needed?

A concern often expressed by PIs is that the processes of seeking, securing, and managing extramural support for research and creative activities are complex and time-consuming. They articulate a desire for personalized grant writing services and the challenges of working with various offices of the university on grant-related business processes. PIs prefer engaging in research and creative activities rather than mastering the intricacies of the sponsored programs regulatory environment. Although desirable, it is not feasible for the university to require PIs to complete a sponsored program services training program. However, it is feasible for the university to offer proactive guidance and individualized assistance to PIs, and to offer these sponsored program services as close as possible to the department level.

Some departments with large academic programs will have the discretionary resources to hire an individual to manage departmental business functions. A significant number of units do not have the resources to support such a business manager and rely instead upon the individual who provides these services at the next higher level, such as the assistant dean in the college. Although department business managers and assistant deans are charged with the overall responsibility of managing financial and personnel matters, having these individuals handle the additional tasks required for the management of sponsored programs may not always be the best idea. Some departments have a large number of complex sponsored programs which might overwhelm the business manager. The business manager is a generalist and typically does not have the specialized skills necessary for the management of sponsored programs, leading to an increased burden on the central office and an increased risk of compliance problems for the university. In addition, given the challenges of running an active department, the business manager's first priority may not be to providing assistance to PIs with their extramural grants.

A better way for the university to provide high quality sponsored program services to PIs at the department level is for professional staff members to be hired, trained, and supported by the central sponsored programs office but placed in selected departments throughout the university. The term of art in the profession of research administration to refer to these positions is *departmental research administrator* (DRA).

What are the duties and responsibilities of a departmental research administrator?

The DRA serves in two related roles. On the one hand, the DRA provides specialized services in support of the unique research goals of their assigned department and its PIs. On the other hand, the DRA is an ORSP professional staff member who ensures compliance with all university policies and procedures, sponsor requirements, and federal and state laws and regulations. The DRA is the single-point-of-contact for the PIs in the department, serving as a liaison to internal administrative units and the external sponsors on all matters relating to sponsored programs.

It is important to note that, in all cases, the PI is responsible for locating and securing the extramural support for his or her research and creative activities. Moreover, the sponsor and the university specifically hold the PI accountable for managing the sponsored program, both

programmatically and financially. The DRA's job is to *assist* the PI in meeting these responsibilities.

Although the exact duties and responsibilities of a DRA will vary depending upon the department to which the individual is assigned, it is possible to enumerate potential tasks in each of four functional areas.

- **Preaward sponsored program services.** Assisting PIs to identify potential extramural funding sources, obtain guidelines and forms, interpret sponsor guidelines and university policies, prepare the project proposal and budget, develop the project workflow and timeline, complete forms and assurance documents, process requests for cost sharing, ensure proposals meet sponsor format and submission requirements, and circulate proposals to obtain internal approvals prior to routing the proposal to ORSP for final university approval and transmission to the sponsor.
- **Postaward sponsored program services.** Assisting PIs to monitor project expenditures, obtain necessary financial reports, procure goods and services, review award documents and negotiate revisions to sponsored program applications and proposals, prepare subrecipient agreements and monitor performance, maintain and report time and effort commitments, oversee cost sharing commitments, provide information for rebudgeting, prepare and submit programmatic reports, and closeout the project.
- **Research compliance.** Assisting PIs to know and comply with university policies and procedures, sponsor requirements, and the relevant laws and regulations in such areas as research with human subjects, care and protection of animals, management of intellectual property, conflict of interest, and responsible conduct of research; assisting PIs with the timely completion and processing of appropriate forms for the review of research protocols, as well as compliance progress and final reports.
- **Research communication and training.** Assisting PIs in their communication with ORSP and other administrative offices of the university, informing ORSP of departmental needs for information, coordinating public relations activities, providing specialized departmental training activities related to sponsored programs, and participating in departmental initiatives to improve university business processes related to the conduct of sponsored programs; assisting PIs to develop, publish, and update research profiles and biosketches using electronic databases (e.g., Community of Science).

How would this distributed sponsored program services system be managed?

The proposed distributed research administration system will be implemented experimentally at UMass Boston over the next four years, beginning with the hiring and assignment of two DRAs in fiscal year 2005-06 and two additional DRAs in fiscal year 2006-07.

The position description will make it clear that the DRA is a member of the professional staff of ORSP who is hired and supervised by the director of ORSP in collaboration with the department head. The ORSP director is responsible for assisting the DRA to understand the university's strategic research plan as a context for achieving the department's research goals and priorities. The department head is responsible for assisting the DRA to understand departmental research goals and priorities and to focus sponsored program services to the needs of the department's PIs.

The DRA position is not a substitution for or a replacement of the department business manager position. That is, the DRA will *not* serve the department in the role of the department business manager and will *not* be supervised by or accountable to the department business manager. In addition, the position description will make it clear that the DRA may *not* be delegated signature authority for the management of a sponsored program; this remains the responsibility of the PI. In cases where a department business manager or a college assistant dean is delegated signature authority for sponsored programs, the DRA will assist both the PI and the surrogate (business manager or assistant dean) to fulfill their sponsored program responsibilities.

The initial appointment of the DRA will be for 2 years. A comprehensive review at the end of the first and each subsequent year will provide the option either to end the appointment at the end of the next year or to add another year to the appointment. The ORSP director will develop annual goals and performance expectations in collaboration with the department head. Specific measurable criteria of success in achieving these goals will be stated taking into account the management responsibilities for the unique portfolio of sponsored programs in the department. A primary goal in all cases will be a significant increase in sponsored programs that support the research and creative activities of the department's PIs. Measurable criteria for this goal will be stated in terms of annual sponsored program expenditures, the number of active sponsored program accounts, and the average sponsored program expenditures per 1.0 FTE department PI. In addition to quantitative evaluation, qualitative evaluation of the DRA will include information from department members, ORSP colleagues, and staff members in the relevant administrative offices throughout the university on the success of the DRA in achieving the sponsored program goals of the department and of the university.

ORSP will pay 60% of the salary and benefits for each DRA, with the department paying the remaining 40%. ORSP will provide information management systems (e.g., desktop or laptop PC, Blackberry) and support the continuing education of the DRA by paying fees and travel costs for attending appropriate workshops, conferences, and professional meetings. The department will provide an appropriate office and furniture, telephone, FAX, access to the network, office supplies, and local travel support.

The DRA can call upon the personnel and resources of each ORSP team – preaward, postaward, compliance, communications and training – at any time. The ORSP director will arrange periodic meetings of all DRAs with the entire ORSP staff to discuss challenges and develop solutions. In addition, the ORSP director will arrange periodic meetings of the DRAs with representatives of the various offices in the Division of Administration and Finance and the Office of Institutional Advancement to ensure the steady flow of information and assistance.

Criteria for possible assignment of a DRA position will be the magnitude and complexity of the sponsored research activity of the department. Although these criteria for assignment may be modified in future years, for the experimental implementation, a department will be eligible for the assignment of a DRA position if it meets one of more of the following criteria:

- Sponsored program expenditures each year for the preceding 3 fiscal years of \$1,000,000;
- A total of 25 unique active sponsored program accounts each year for the preceding 3 years; and

- An average of \$100,000 of sponsored program expenditures per 1.0 FTE department PI each year for the preceding 3 years.

Several similar departments may wish to share the services of a single DRA position by sharing the salary and the support costs. For example, the McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies and the College of Public and Community Service might find this arrangement beneficial until the volume and magnitude of sponsored program awards reaches a level to support a separate DRA position in each college. Similarly, several academic departments within a college might wish to share the services of a single DRA position; for example, the physics, computer science, and mathematics departments in the College of Science and Mathematics. In the case of a shared DRA position, a carefully considered MOU will be necessary to specify the allocation of support, the performance expectations and division of effort, and the method of evaluation.

What are the benefits of distributed research administration?

DRAs can assist PIs at each stage of the sponsored programs lifecycle, from the identification of need and potential sponsors, through the development of a proposal, to the implementation and management of the sponsored program award, to closeout and audit. Because DRAs are located close to the PIs, they should have a better understanding of the research and creative activities and goals of the department. Over time they will be seen as an integral part of the department they serve, strengthening the partnership between the department and ORSP. By focusing on a more narrow range of sponsors and program types, the DRA can become a specialist for sponsored programs in the department's domain, providing individualized proposal development assistance and increasing the likelihood of obtaining extramural support for projects. They can strengthen the research climate in the department by implementing proactive project management processes that prevent problems, lessen the administrative burden on PIs, and assure sponsors of rigorous stewardship of funds and full compliance with regulatory requirements. Moreover, the DRA can assist the university and department leadership to implement a sponsored program mentoring process for new PIs to assist them to secure the support they need to meet the research expectations of their appointments.

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