

Organizational Changes Related to Managing Sponsored Projects Life Cycle

Status Update 2-4-2021 by Can Saygin

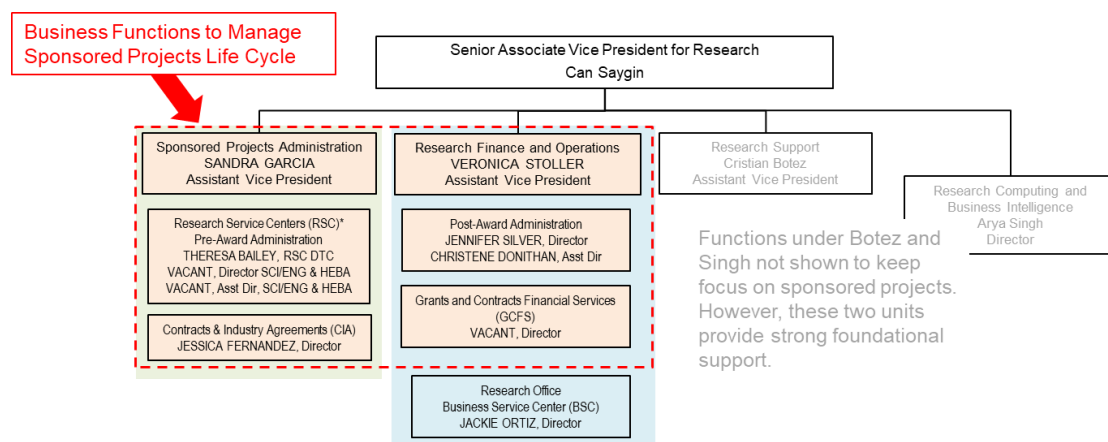
Our institution has experienced an aggressive growth of our research portfolio with a commensurate increase in research expenditure. With this rapid acceleration of UTSA's research growth, organizational changes are required to strengthen the sponsored project life cycle. There are significant changes currently underway to establish strong leadership and staff talent structures. With a focus on supporting the research enterprise for additional growth and a reduction of administrative burden, we will modify processes and procedures within the full sponsored project life cycle. The outline below highlights the high-level changes.

The Sponsored Projects Life Cycle broadly includes **four high level functions**:

1. **Pre-Award Administration**: Proposal development and submission.
2. **Post-Award Administration**: Monitoring all project milestones after an award is received and a project ID is set up; Sub-recipient monitoring and invoicing.
3. **Contracts and Industry Agreements**: Financial and non-financial agreements
4. **Grants Accounting**: Project set up, modifications, billing, accounts receivable, close outs, and financial reports.

Prior to 9/1/2020, functions 1 and 2 were under the Research Service Centers (RSC) in REDKE's Office of Sponsored Project Administration (OSPA). The new organizational structure for managing sponsored projects life cycle is shown below. We implemented these changes to (a) create efficiencies by targeting high volume operations and (b) bring financial operations of sponsored projects under one unit. RSCs will support "pre-award only" (function 1) and a new "post-award administration" (function 2) unit will operate under REDKE's Office of Research Finance and Operations (ORFO). The post-award team will work closely with the Grants and Contracts Financial Services (GCFS) (function 4) unit under ORFO.

Until we fill in all the positions in units as part of the Sponsored Projects Life Cycle, Sandra Garcia and Jennifer Silver will be the points of contact for Pre-Award Issues, and Veronica Stoller, Jennifer Silver, and Christene Donithan will be the points of contact for Post-Award Issues (including grants accounting issues.)



In Fall 2020, we initially focused on "building capability"; the new structure has been established with revised and new business processes and detailed procedures, along with operational performance metrics, to ensure effectiveness in terms of outcomes and efficiency in terms of timeliness of delivered

services. Then, we looked into “building capacity” to utilize the capability in order to respond to UTSA’s acceleration towards Research Excellence.

In Spring 2021, our operational focus is on:

1. Filling in the vacant positions to realize the designed capacity: Two RSC Directors, two Assistant RSC directors, one GCFS director, two analysts, and three post-award staff.
2. Validating and Implementing New Business Processes: Due to separation of pre-award and post-award functions, we have introduced new internal-to-REDKE processes for efficiency purposes.
3. Training related to processes and IT tools: We are working on 3-5 minute short videos for training purposes. Such library of short videos can be used to customize training packages for different stakeholders based on needs without long lead times.
4. Effective Communication: Based on the new pace we are in, primarily due to online work modality, we have to find more effective ways to communicate with our stakeholders. This has to be a two-way communication with feedback in order to achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction and avoid misunderstandings.

While we undergo recruitment of additional staff, we have hired temporary staff, reassigned roles within REDKE for temporary support, and recently worked out an agreement with an agency to hire 4 temporary grant accountants (process to recruit 4 temporary grant accountants for 4 months has already started). As REDKE stabilizes its staffing and formalizes aforementioned changes in processes and departmental structures, we will continue to strengthen a culture of support for staff, to increase retention in professions of high turnover, which is a common difficulty among academic institutions.

Building a stronger team and retaining our team members is very critical for our success as an institution heading towards Research Excellence. We cannot be a training ground for skills where good people leave due to salary gap. Therefore, we have increased the salary grade of all vacant positions we (<http://research.utsa.edu/hiring>). For example, the new salary grade for RSC Asst Directors (2 of the vacancies) has a maximum level that is currently the rate above our RSC directors. Similarly, the 2 RSC directors posting has a higher salary grade. We have to hire “leaders” for these roles with excellent technical skills, but more importantly even better “people skills” so that while we deliver services within consistent lead times, we still have the “people touch” that many of you made me aware as the magic ingredient to build trust between faculty and staff.

Again in Spring 2021, our strategic focus is on improving service delivery and overall performance of business functions to manage sponsored projects life cycle. We will see fundamental changes by enabling our teams to:

- 1) Stay Ahead of the Game: All backlog must be cleaned up and caught up related to financial and non-financial agreements, award set ups, award modifications, invoicing, financial reporting, close outs, and all milestones associated with sponsored projects.
- 2) Be Proactive: Team members at all levels of the organizational structure must stay connected internally and externally with whom they interact with as part of their role and responsibility. Team members must stay operationally aware and be knowledgeable in their field.

To achieve both goals above #1 and #2, we have to bring in new “operational awareness tools”, such as ticketing systems, reduction/elimination of Excel or Word based “forms” for signatures or workflow. The biggest inefficiency in Research Operations is in monitoring tasks, creating workflows, and internal and external follow ups, which all currently require a combination of Excel sheets, “sticky note” type reminders, and emails. We have to bring in or develop a new ticketing system that allows defining rules that use time (such as if waiting time is greater than 72 hours, then automatically email...) and/or

specific events to automatically trigger next task and send automatic emails/reminders. Such a platform can be integrated with our dashboard platform to generate user specific reports and views. While such “operational clarity” will help with maximizing the effective use of our capacity, it will most importantly connect staff and faculty along an electronically-monitored task list that allows everybody to see “status of tasks” and next steps clearly. We have to choose which “functions” to integrate with tickets and not go over board with additional bureaucracy; this has to be determined by a collaborative process.

We have to build “efficiency” in many business processes as we are required to comply with regulations. One good example is the SAHARA Reconciliation process, which involves Project IDs (for sponsored projects) and regular Cost Centers. With 17 participants from all colleges (administrative level staff: college financial leads, business service center staff, ADRs...) we have set up a “SAHARA Simulation/Training” platform (Nov 2020-ongoing) to execute “what-if” type tasks in SAHARA.

We made sure all financial transactions (100%) related to sponsored projects (All Project IDs) that are electronically routed have **REDKE Post-Award team members in the “request approval step”** to ensure:

1. PI and Project ID are a match,
2. Project ID has balance,
3. Expense is “allowed” by the Sponsor of the Project ID.

In other words, no financial transaction in a Project ID can move forward without a REDKE Post-Award team member approving it.

As the REDKE team, we have also developed (Sept-Nov 2020) and tested (Dec 2020-Jan 2021) a new process we call “**Monthly Reconciliation Assistance**” process. This is an “assistance” process enabled by customized emails to each active Project Investigator as shown below:

December 2020 Monthly Reconciliation Assistance from REDKE Post-Award Unit

ospoastaward
Thu 12/17/2020 1:55 PM
To: Jose LopezRibot
Cc: Arya Singh; Can Saygin

Dear Project Investigator Jose Lopez-Ribot:

Please see below the list of your active projects that are hyperlinked (under Project ID column) to last month's financial transactions in order to assist you with your monthly SAHARA reconciliation. Your transaction list should match the transactions in SAHARA.

All transactions from your sponsored projects have been verified and approved by your post-award administrator during the time of transaction. If you have any questions, please contact your post-award administrator.

For planning purposes, we have also included the “Available to Spend” amount after deducting encumbrances to give you a clear balance on each of your active project. You will also see the number of months left on your project, along with necessary action items.

Step 1 : Open Monthly Reconciliation Assistance email

Step 2 : Click on a project id from the table

Project ID	Award Description	Available to Spend	Months Remaining	Action Items	PostAward Administrator
1000002623	Testing the Effect of Carbon nanotubes on Candida species	\$4,800	0.5	Your post-award administrator will contact you for prepare for close-out	Linda De La Cruz
1000002637	Screening a Target-Based Repurposing Library for Activity against Fungal Pathogens and Subsequent Preclinical Development of Leading Candidates R21AI140823	\$55,844	1.5	Your post-award administrator will contact you for prepare f or close-out	Linda De La Cruz
1000002648	Screening a Target-Based Repurposing Library for Activity against Fungal Pathogens and Subsequent Preclinical Development of Leading Candidates R21AI140823	\$28,974	1.5	Your post-award administrator will contact you for prepare for close-out	Linda De La Cruz
1000003424	Translational Control of Morphology and Virulence in Candida albicans - 167858/163674	\$36,750	4.4		Linda De La Cruz
1000000767	SR01AI119554-05 (SCI-4946) Development of novel chemical series of Candida albicans biofilm inhibitors	\$38,746	5.5		Linda De La Cruz

1. Once you open the email, it provides you a link for each of your active projects and with “one click” you can see your financial transactions for that project from the past month.
2. This is not a replacement for SAHARA; this is a “reconciliation assistance process”.

3. This will be a monthly email. For example, when month of January is “financially closed” in the first week of February, each project investigator will receive a customized email (as shown above) with a link for each active project that will take the project investigator to the list of “financial transactions in the month of January” on that project.
4. With the convenience of this “one click” to see the monthly transactions, each project investigator then can use this feature side by side with SAHARA and complete the monthly reconciliation approval process in SAHARA (this is an institutional requirement).
5. We tested this process with Associate Deans for Research, members of the Research Sub-Cmmt of the Faculty Senate, and twice with 20+ active project investigators. We asked for their feedback.
6. We will launch this process across UTSA in February, starting with January 2021 financial transactions across all active sponsored projects for all active project investigators.

It was obvious based on #5 above, that we do not have the right level of financial awareness at the faculty level. This is not due to ignorance of the faculty; this is simply because faculty members, as principal investigators (PI) who are responsible for financial aspects of their awards, are not accountants. Operationally speaking, expecting PIs to be financially aware of their budget and expenditures at the PeopleSoft and Sahara levels is not practical.

While project investigators have to follow institutional regulations in approving financial transactions and monthly reconciliations for compliance purposes, this level of financial granularity is not helping PI to make operational decisions about their budgets. We have to provide PIs with a “faculty-friendly Budget template” that is used during proposal development (we already have a template but it not capable of enabling what is coming in the following sentence) and then when the proposal is awarded, the same “faculty-friendly Budget platform” (with the same level of financial granularity) becomes connected live to the Peoplesoft financial data; the Peoplesoft financial data is translated into this higher level of operational terms that PIs can easily understand and act on. This is what we have to develop “tools” that efficiently enable faculty-level financial awareness related to sponsored projects life cycle. This is a big undertaking that requires collaboration across the campus but it must be done.

Not having this level of “faculty-friendly Budget platform”, as explained above, leads to multiple layers of inefficiencies, misunderstandings, re-work and corrections, and thus loss of capacity due to all the non-value added activities. This inefficiency is currently absorbed by not only the REDKE teams but also the Business Service Centers in colleges and financial affairs teams in VPBA. As we grow proposals, awards, expenditures, and so on, we cannot “handle” this inefficiency by “throwing more people at it”. Finally, this inefficiency leads to unintentional creation of an unhealthy workplace where people start to lose their patience and enthusiasm for their work.

Thanks to our faculty, students, and staff contributing to the acceleration towards our Research Excellence destination, we have achieved outstanding research accomplishments together. More changes are on the way with feedback from you and working together patiently (*I cannot emphasize how important it is to be patient with the new changes and developments*) we will reach new heights during the next phase of UTSA’s growth towards Research Excellence.