

Successful Strategies for Increasing Faculty Grant Activity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe how a college-level research office has used a variety of services and tools to increase faculty grant activity. A dozen practices will be discussed. Results indicate that the grant dollars received in the most recent fiscal year (FY2019–2020) are almost 150% higher than in the year before these practices were initiated. Moreover, during the same time period, annual grant dollars expended have increased by more than 80%. While these and other positive findings cannot be tied to a specific tool or service, the authors discuss several practices that faculty have indicated are particularly helpful.

Keywords: faculty support, research management, grant activity, grant strategies, research funding, college office of research, university office of research

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, faculty have felt increasing pressure to obtain external funding to support their research (Waaijer et al., 2018). Grant-funded research advances individual careers (Bloch et al., 2014), helps establish universities as renowned research institutes, and enhances college-level expertise and prestige. Thus, it is not surprising that major funding agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation have recently reported an increase in the number of grant proposals received (National Institutes of Health, 2019; National Science Foundation, 2020).

The process of finding appropriate grant opportunities and preparing strong grant proposals is a difficult one. Those faculty members who seek funding are expected to locate relevant funding sources, identify collaborators, develop research plans, write convincing proposal narratives, prepare and monitor detailed grant budgets and expenditures, complete application forms, and navigate complex online application portals. Taken together, these demands place an inordinate amount of pressure on a faculty member's limited time. The modern university research administration office is designed to relieve this pressure by alleviating the administrative burden surrounding grant-funded research, thus freeing up faculty members' time and promoting their success.

In order to facilitate faculty members' efforts to obtain grant funding for their research, administrators at many colleges and universities have implemented various types of supportive products and services. For example, to bolster external funding received by women in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, Montana State University provided three 6-week grant-writing bootcamps over an 18-month period to the nearly 150 female faculty (Smith et al., 2017). The bootcamp provided faculty with resources (e.g., tools and templates for proposals) and opportunities to find collaborators. Faculty who participated in the bootcamp found it to be a positive experience that increased their sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Implementation of the grant-writing bootcamp resulted in a significant increase in the number of submitted/accepted external grants, as well as the number of awarded funding dollars.

Appalachian State University also provided direct faculty support through the implementation of a Faculty Learning Community focused on internal and external grant proposal writing across multiple years (Frantz, 2013). The Faculty Learning Community consisted of small groups of faculty members who collaborated to create competitive grant proposals. Tasks completed within the small groups included providing feedback on proposals, discussing grant application instructions, and developing budgets. A

majority of Faculty Learning Community participants were awarded internal or external funding. The results suggest that the initiative was effectively implemented twice.

Some research offices, such as those described above, are designed to serve the entire university community, while others serve faculty at the college level. Mulfinger et al. (2016) investigated trends in the development and management of large research proposals at 20 prominent Research I Universities throughout the United States. The researchers found that approximately 70% of the surveyed institutions used a decentralized college or department support system.

Whether operating at the university level or college level, the mission of most research offices is to foster research activity among faculty through key services: identifying appropriate grant opportunities, preparing strong grant proposals, and receiving and managing funding. The purpose of this paper is to describe how a college-level research office, the Office of Research in the College of Education at Florida State University, has used a variety of services and tools to increase faculty grant activity. A number of these tools and services have been described previously (Reiser et al., 2015); however, in the past five years, the range of these tools and services has expanded, and faculty grant activity in the college has substantially increased. This broader array of tools and

services will be described and the updated results will be presented.

OFFICE OF RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE: STAFF

Given the ever-increasing need for faculty to secure external funding to support their research, the difficulty some faculty experience finding external funding opportunities, and the growing competition for external funding, in 2010 the Dean of the College of Education (COE) at Florida State University decided to create a new Office of Research (OoR). The purpose of the newly formed OoR was to provide faculty with a wide array of tools and services to enhance faculty efforts to identify and obtain external funding.

While its structure had changed over time, an office of research had existed in the COE for many years. Before the 2010 establishment of the OoR, the office staff consisted of three full-time employees who provided COE faculty with an array of pre-award and post-award services. Pre-award support primarily included assistance in preparing funding agency and university proposal transmittal forms, a budget, and budget justification statements. Primary forms of post-award support included budget monitoring and assistance with purchasing, hiring, and travel requests.

While the existing staff was doing an adequate job of providing these services, the COE dean felt that a significant increase in college faculty grant activity was needed. After reviewing the staffing models used by

10 well-respected offices of research in other major colleges of education, it was decided to adopt a model that involved hiring two additional individuals: an associate dean for research who would work closely with faculty, encouraging and supporting them in seeking, planning, and applying for grant funding to support their research activities; and an office director to oversee staff operations. Thus, the new OoR staff consisted of an associate dean for research, an office director, and three full-time staff members. Over the course of the next few years, a part-time graduate assistant and a full-time senior editor, whose primary responsibility involved editing grant proposals, were added to this team.

The cost of maintaining an office staff of this size is partially covered by facilities and administrative (F&A) costs—revenue generated from increased grant activity. The F&A revenue primarily supports two staff members and a graduate assistant. However, the office director, senior editor, and another staff member are funded via auxiliary fees obtained by the COE; the associate dean for research is supported by a faculty line.

Tools and Services Employed by the Office of Research

During the 10 years that the OoR has been in place, staff members have planned and implemented a wide variety of tools and services to support faculty in seeking and obtaining research funding. Brief

descriptions of these tools and services are presented below.

Meetings with Individual Faculty Members

The associate dean for research and senior editor regularly meet with faculty individually to discuss their general research goals and specific research plans. When a new faculty member joins the COE, the associate dean and senior editor interview these faculty to get a clear picture of their research interests and expertise. Information collected during these meetings is then posted to the Faculty Research Interests and Expertise Database (described below).

In addition to meeting with new faculty, each semester the associate dean and senior editor identify and meet individually with junior and senior faculty to encourage them to pursue, and aid them in seeking, grant funding. Often these meetings are initiated by the associate dean and senior editor. They regularly review the recent grant activity of faculty members and invite those who have not recently been active to join them at a meeting to discuss grant opportunities related to the faculty member's current interests. In other cases, a faculty member who has found a grant opportunity in which they are interested will request a meeting, during which the associate dean and senior editor will help the faculty member develop their research plans and establish a strategy and timeline for crafting a grant proposal.

Personalized Grant Searches for Faculty

When COE faculty have identified and begun to develop a specific potential research project, the OoR works closely with them to find funding opportunities that align with their project. It is important to find either federal or private agencies whose funding priorities align with the principal investigator's project goals. To find appropriate funding, the senior editor and graduate research assistant ask the faculty member to describe the project goals, title, ideal timeframe for the funding, target population of study, and keywords. Using this information, they conduct a targeted, personalized search using grant opportunity databases that include Grants.gov (i.e., federal funding opportunities), *Philanthropy News Digest* (i.e., private foundation funding opportunities) and Pivot (i.e., national and international funding opportunities). Once a potential set of opportunities has been identified, the senior editor and graduate assistant further examine the funding priorities and criteria for each funding agency to confirm whether each opportunity is "a fit" for the faculty member. In this manner, the list of funding opportunities sent to a faculty member is truly personalized. Personalized grant

searches help to develop a faculty member's knowledge of the external funding landscape and, as is often the case, result in finding opportunities uniquely suited to the faculty member's research interests.

Faculty Research Interests and Expertise Database

To keep track of faculty research interests, the OoR created the Faculty Research Interests and Expertise Database (see Figure 1). One of the key features of the database is a list of 37 research areas, such as math education, learning and cognition, and educational policy, which encompass the broad research interests of the faculty. These research areas were identified through faculty surveys and interviews and are updated on an annual basis. When new faculty members are first interviewed, they are asked to identify their research areas of interest. This information is placed in the database, which then serves as a tool other faculty can use to identify potential research collaborators (Novak, Zhao, & Reiser, 2014). Perhaps more importantly, as the OoR staff locates grant opportunities, they categorize these opportunities into the appropriate research areas and, as described in the sections below, each month faculty receive a listing of the grant opportunities available in their areas of interest.

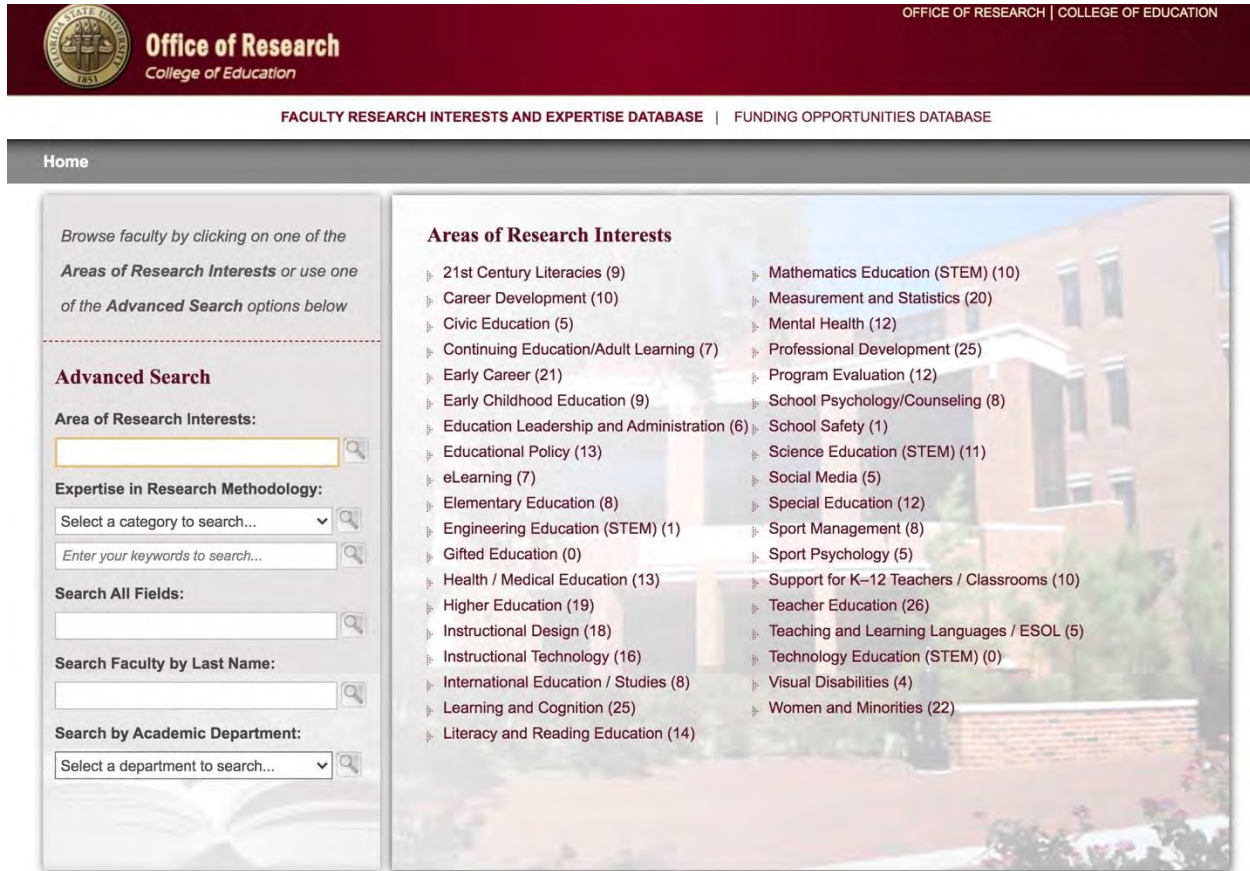


Figure 1. Faculty Research Interests and Expertise Database

Funding Opportunities Database

The Funding Opportunities Database was created to help faculty members search for funding opportunities (see Figure 2). The database includes the same 37 research areas that are included in the Faculty Research Interests and Expertise Database. Each week the OoR senior editor and/or graduate assistant peruse the grant databases mentioned above and add

relevant opportunities to the Funding Opportunities Database, categorizing them into one or more of the 37 research areas. Each entry in the Funding Opportunities Database includes a summary of the grant opportunity as well as a link to the actual grant announcement. Faculty can search for grant opportunities by research area, type of funding agency, proposal due date, and funding amount.



Figure 2. Funding Opportunities Database

Monthly Personalized Grant Opportunity Bulletin

Although faculty can access the Funding Opportunities Database at any time, OoR experience indicates that most faculty will not take the time to do so. To address this issue, each month during the fall and spring semesters, the OoR sends each faculty member a personalized grant opportunity bulletin, which lists all of the grants currently available in each of the research areas of interest to that faculty member (see Figure 3). Tabs point faculty to grants within each of the research areas, and an additional set of tabs enables them to distinguish between the grants that have been added within the past month and the grants that are still available from among those listed previously. Grants are listed by

grant title; when a faculty member clicks on the title of a grant, a single paragraph summary of the grant opportunity appears, as does a listing of the grant amount, proposal submission deadline, and a link to the entire grant announcement.

The monthly bulletin also includes links to examples of successful proposals, other resources for finding grant opportunities (e.g., Pivot), and brief descriptions of almost 200 federal agencies and private foundations that offer grants in support of educational research. A “tip of the month”, which usually is a brief description of an upcoming grant-related workshop or an internal grant opportunity, also is provided, as is a link that enables faculty to change the research areas included in their personalized bulletin.

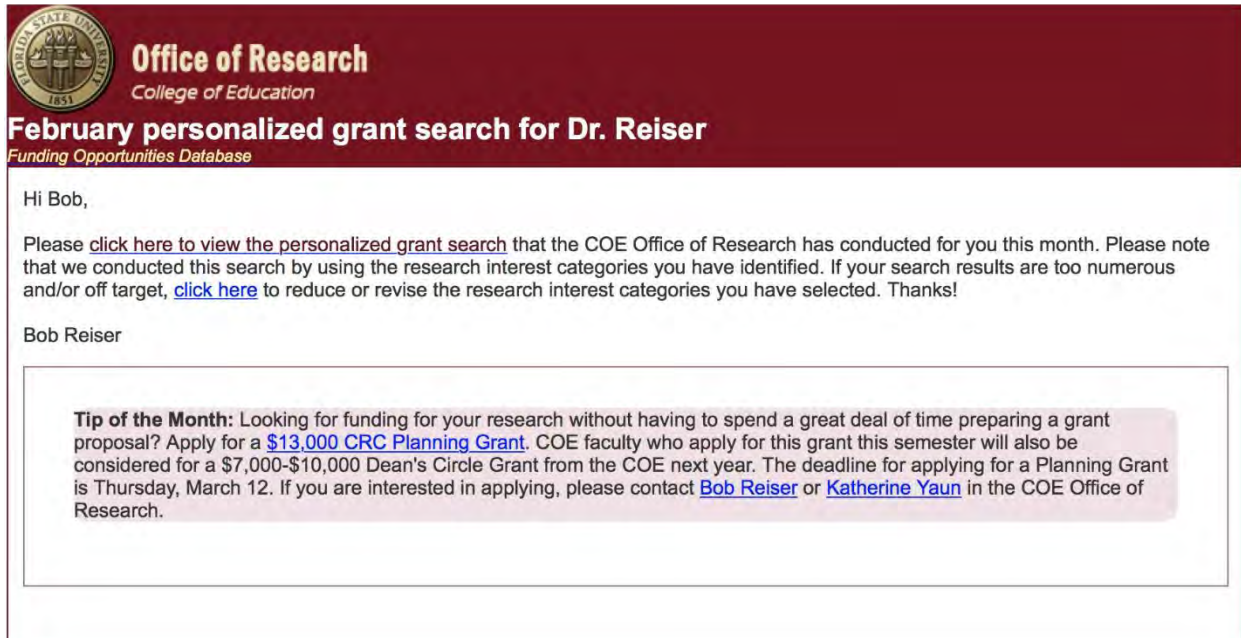


Figure 3. *Personalized Grant Bulletin*

Office of Research Website

The OoR website includes a wide array of tools and information designed to help faculty as they prepare and submit grant proposals (see Figure 4). These items include examples of successful grant proposals and tips for writing them, suggestions for finding research

participants, guidelines for serving on peer review panels, and links to the Faculty Research Interests and Expertise Database and the Funding Opportunities Database, both described above. The OoR has cultivated the website as a one-stop resource for faculty members in all stages of grant work.



COE Office of Research

The mission of the Office of Research (OoR) is to provide excellent service to College of Education faculty seeking to obtain grants and outstanding support to faculty who have received grants. Learn more about the services and staff of the OoR below. COE faculty and staff can log in to the Office of Research's SharePoint site [here](#).

Figure 4. Office of Research Website

Internal Workshops

To foster faculty professional development related to securing external funding, each semester the OoR conducts at least one grant-related workshop for COE faculty. Speakers include faculty who have had success obtaining grants, program officers from federal agencies and foundations, and staff from the university office of research development. Workshop topics have included tips on how to search for grant opportunities, obtain institutional review board approval, and prepare successful grant proposals for specific federal agencies and foundations. For example, during the spring semester of 2020, a program officer from the Spencer

Foundation described the funding opportunities sponsored by the foundation and provided faculty with tips for preparing successful proposals. During that same semester, a workshop on the NIH Early Career Development Program was presented by a previous recipient of one of those awards. All COE faculty were invited to participate in both workshops either in person or remotely via webcam. Additionally, both workshops were recorded and made available online.

Research Symposia

Since 2013, the OoR, working with research administrators from other colleges and the university-level office of research development, has planned and conducted

several multi-college research symposia. Each symposium focuses on a broad research area, such as addressing the problems faced by underserved groups or improving health outcomes for a variety of populations. During these events, faculty from several colleges deliver poster presentations and participate in roundtable discussions concerning their particular research interests within the broad research area. These symposia have often resulted in faculty forming multidisciplinary research teams that work together on future research projects.

In addition to these multi-college events, the OoR takes a lead role in organizing an annual college-wide research symposium, consisting of a series of faculty and student paper presentations and poster sessions during which faculty and students describe, usually for the first time, their recently completed research projects. During the event, faculty and students critique the work of their colleagues, thus enabling the presenters to improve their presentations before they deliver them in other settings, such as regional, national, or international research conferences. Presenters at the college symposium receive funding to support travel to present their research at these other meetings.

Lastly, the OoR has organized several research symposia designed exclusively for COE faculty. These events encourage faculty collaboration through poster presentations or elevator-pitches—quick

discussion sessions. Events like these enable faculty to learn about the research interests of many of their COE colleagues and have often resulted in the creation of new research partnerships.

University Internal Grant Programs

The university offers an array of internally funded grant programs designed to kick-start research projects and launch faculty into competing for more comprehensive external funding. For example, one award program offers assistant professors summer salary to cover research activity in the summer following their first academic year at the university, while another program gives established faculty an opportunity to apply for seed funding to conduct pilot studies that are likely to enhance their chances of receiving external funding. The OoR assists faculty interested in competing for one of these internal grant programs by offering proposal and budget development support services. The associate dean and senior editor meet with faculty to learn about their research project, discuss winning proposal strategies, and advise them about programs most suitable for their research.

College Internal Grant Program

Starting in the fall semester of 2012, the OoR implemented an internal grant program. During the first several years of this competition, COE faculty members were required to submit a brief proposal for a research project likely to attract external

funding from a specific funding agency. These proposals were reviewed by the associate dean for research and a faculty member from each department in the college. Faculty whose proposals were deemed most meritorious received seed money to help them undertake promising research projects. At the end of the internal funding period, faculty were required to submit a grant proposal to the external funding agency they had identified in their proposal.

More recently, starting in 2019, the internal grant program changed in several ways. First, rather than preparing a proposal specifically geared to the COE internal grant program, as was previously the case, faculty now prepare a brief proposal that is submitted for funding to the internal grant program that the university sponsors. A subset of the faculty whose proposals are funded by that program receive additional funding from the college. Moreover, a subset of the faculty whose proposals were not funded at the university level also receive funding from the college. In all cases, those faculty who receive college funding are subsequently required to submit an external grant proposal. The opportunity to submit a single proposal that may receive funding from the university's and/or college's internal grant competitions has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of college faculty submitting internal grant proposals.

The second change in the internal grant

program is that, rather than it being funded through dollars provided by the college, it is now supported by donations to the college. Donors who contribute to this internal grant fund are given the opportunity to serve as a voting member on the committee that selects the winners of this internal grant competition.

Pre-Award and Post-Award Services

A common theme found across offices of research administration is the assignment of roles and responsibilities for managing proposal development and, subsequently, financial awards. There are two primary organizational approaches to proposal development and award management:

- “siloes” pre-award and post-award responsibilities, with one staff member working on pre-award matters and another staff member working on post-award tasks; or
- the “cradle-to-grave” approach (as it is commonly known), in which a staff member is assigned to manage both pre-award and post-award responsibilities.

In the latter scenario, the staff member participates in proposal development, as well as the subsequent financial management and programmatic administration, if the proposal is funded. The OoR employs this cradle-to-grave approach, which facilitates customized

service for faculty researchers. This approach avoids some of the pitfalls associated with siloed personnel assignments, such as inconsistent communication and project management, which leads to faculty frustration and reduces research productivity.

Moreover, researchers who interact with OoR staff members value a trusted, single point of contact (i.e., one grant manager) for proposal development and award management. Their administrative burden also is relieved by a support staff member who manages important tasks such as personnel appointments, travel, and purchasing. College leadership has found that this level of service produces a high level of efficiency and accuracy, which allows researchers to pay more attention to research duties and less attention to grant administration.

Editorial Services

In recognition of the need to help faculty improve the written quality of their grant proposals, OoR and university leadership created and filled a senior editor position in 2013. The senior editor reviews and edits proposals, identifies funding opportunities aligned with faculty research interests, meets with individual faculty members to inform them about relevant grant opportunities, works with them to develop a plan for a strong grant proposal, and provides workshops to enhance their grant writing skills. In recent years, the

services by the senior editor have continued to expand so that they now include both content- and proofreading-level reviews of proposal drafts, project management (scheduling milestones to meet proposal deadlines), consultations on writing high-impact proposal pitches, support in defining research goals and variables, creating and updating a library of grant references detailing individual proposal requirements “at a glance,” and developing a proposal style guide.

RESULTS

To evaluate the effectiveness of OoR programs and services, the staff has been tracking a variety of grant-related data on an annual basis. An examination of these data clearly indicates that grant activity has increased significantly since 2010, the year the office started implementing some of the programs and services described in this paper. For example, as noted in Table 1, in fiscal year (FY) 2019, the most recent year for which these data are available, the amount of grant dollars received in new grants was \$6.7 million. This amount is almost 150% greater than the \$2.7 million in grant funds received during FY2010, the year immediately preceding the establishment of the OoR.

Taking into account the fact that grant dollars received may fluctuate greatly from year-to-year, an examination of the three-year running average of grant dollars received reveals that, in the year preceding

the creation of the OoR and two years immediately thereafter (FY2010–FY2012), the average yearly amount of grant dollars received was \$4.5 million. In contrast, during the most recent three-year period (FY2017–FY2019), the average yearly amount was \$8.6 million, an increase of more than 90%.

Another reliable measure of grant activity is the amount of grant dollars expended each year. As shown in Table 1, during FY2019, yearly grant expenditures were \$14.4 million, which is more than 80% greater than the \$7.9 million spent during FY2010. Finally, over the years, the total value of the grants managed by the OoR has greatly increased. As noted in Table 1, at the end of FY2012, the first year when such figures were available, the OoR was managing grants that had a total value of \$10.8 million, whereas by the end of

FY2019, the office was managing \$24.7 million, which is almost 130% more than the FY2012 total.

In addition to the data presented above, some recently collected survey data provide evidence of the perceived value of the OoR. During the spring semester of 2020, the OoR conducted a survey with the purpose of identifying ways to better support faculty members in their research endeavors. Faculty were asked to identify perceived barriers to research productivity and possible solutions. When completing the survey, several faculty members provided unsolicited praise of the support provided by the OoR. Among the features or services that faculty identified as praiseworthy were the personalized grant searches, internal workshops, post-award support provided by grant managers, and editorial services offered by the senior editor.

Table 1
Comparison of Grant Activity: FY2010/FY2012 vs. FY2019

	FY2010	FY2019	Percent Increase
Grant Dollars Received: Single Year	\$2.7 million	\$6.7 million	148%
Grant Dollars Received: Three-year Average	\$4.5 million*	\$8.6 million**	91%
Grant Dollars Expended	\$7.9 million	\$14.4 million	82%
	FY 2012	FY2019	Percent Increase
Value of Grants Managed***	\$10.8 million	\$24.7 million	129%

* Average FY2010–FY2012

** Average FY2017–FY2019

***Value at the end of the fiscal year

CONCLUSION

In recent years, faculty members have faced increasing pressure to obtain external funding for their research, and at the same time it has become more difficult to obtain such funding (National Science Foundation, 2020). In light of these facts, it has become increasingly important that offices of research provide faculty with assistance in finding and obtaining grant funding. As previous research has indicated, many prominent research universities now employ college-level offices to provide this type of support (Mulfinger et al., 2016). What sorts of tools and services can these offices provide to increase grant activity among faculty? The findings presented here indicate that the various types of support described in this article appear to have contributed to a marked growth in grant productivity.

Although the increase in grant activity cannot be tied to a specific tool or service that the OoR provides, our experience, as well as comments from our faculty, lead us to believe that at least two services have been particularly helpful. Foremost among these is the editorial assistance provided by the office. Many faculty members have indicated that they have found this help to be invaluable. Another service that we feel has been particularly helpful is the meetings we hold with individual faculty when they

are first hired. These meetings provide us with the opportunity to get a very clear picture of the research interests of the faculty and thus enable us to find grant opportunities particularly well-suited to them. Moreover, these meetings enable us to demonstrate to the faculty the extent to which we are interested in supporting them. Indeed, at the conclusion of these meetings, many faculty members have indicated how pleased they are that they are now working in a college in which there is so much interest in supporting their grant-seeking efforts. Faculty continue to express these sentiments at subsequent meetings we hold with them, either in response to their request to meet with us to discuss a grant idea, or as a result of our suggestion to contact us about a grant opportunity we think is well suited to their research.

While holding meetings with individual faculty and providing them with editorial support may be particularly important services that should be provided by offices of research, we believe that the entire panoply of tools and services described in this article have contributed to the positive results we have reported. We hope that our discussion of these items will encourage other institutions that are interested in increasing grant activity among their faculty to explore the use of similar strategies.

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