



RESEARCH BRIEF

# Pre and Post Award Offices

Considerations for Structure, Staffing, and Office Responsibilities

# University Research Forum

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# 1) Executive Overview

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## Key Observations

**Only one profiled institution fully combined the offices of pre and post award administration, while the other three profiled institutions co-locate these offices but have not combined job functions. Institution C, Institution B** and Institution D have not combined their pre and post award offices due to concerns about accountability, compliance, and efficiency. Contacts at Institution B note that combining the offices would enable individuals to complete tasks on either side of the office; however, Institution B did not move forward with the combination as administrators anticipated accountability and compliance issues when one individual interacts with conflicting aspects of a research project (e.g., contracts and expenditures). At Institution D, contacts note that the level of service and volume of work assumed by their division would make it impossible to combine the pre and post award offices. For example, when one office (i.e., pre or post award) faces a deadline, their staff may not be able to complete tasks for the other side of the office.

**To ensure that they hire the most qualified staff, research administrators at profiled institutions develop job descriptions for pre and post award staff that highlight position-specific requirements, rather than sharing generic postings.** Contacts at **Institution C** note that the job descriptions used for hiring FTE and part-time staff are very specific to the position itself. For example, one job description at **Institution C** includes a job definition, examples of work performed, essential functions performed, minimum qualifications, physical requirements, and interview requirements. Contacts at **Institution B** explain that because job descriptions must align with university position classifications, their postings are similar in terms of job responsibilities, but the descriptions begin to differ in regards to specific job duties.

**Administrators in profiled pre and post award offices determine technology selection based on what will be most useful to increase and streamline office productivity and efficiency.** Contacts at **Institution A** adapted their workload tracking system to create a repository for new awards and award documents. The system increased flexibility in the office, which allowed for the repositioning of junior-level staff. In contrast, contacts at **Institution C** note that their technology platform has not led to the repositioning of staff; instead, the offices maintain two staff specialists to work closely with their homegrown database to allow the system to run as smoothly as possible and to eliminate the need to train multiple individuals.

**Contacts at Institution A and Institution B create internal career paths to decrease employee turnover.** Pre and post award offices at both **Institution B** and **Institution A** have implemented plans to increase opportunities for internal promotions for their employees; contacts at Institution A note that employee turnover is an important metric they use to assess the success of their office. Administrators employed the combination of the pre and post award offices to create more chances for staff to enhance their knowledge of sponsored programs to prepare them for more advanced roles.

## 2) Combining Pre and Post Award Offices

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### Logistics of Office Combination

#### **Only One Profiled Institution Fully Combined Pre and Post Award Administration across Job Functions**

**Institution A** is the only profiled institution that has combined pre and post award offices in the sense that the same individuals perform tasks across both pre and post award administration. The transition, which occurred in 2016, allowed the Office of Sponsored Programs to change job descriptions so that employees now perform broader tasks across the award lifecycle. Administrators made these changes to responsibilities to create clearer career paths for individuals in the Office of Sponsored Programs. Office leadership believed that combining the functions would provide individuals with more diverse responsibilities, which in turn would facilitate more internal promotions across the office.

Contacts state that no employees were laid off as a result of the combination. Office leadership broadened job descriptions to allow individuals to gain more experience across the office. A challenge that office leadership notes was that when combining the offices, employees and administrators still performed daily tasks and responsibilities while simultaneously learning to combine the services offered by the Office of Sponsored Awards.

#### **Three of Four Profiled Institutions Place their Pre and Post Award Offices in the Same Location**

Contacts at **Institution D** and **Institution C** opted to combine the physical location of all offices related to pre and post award administration. Administrators at Institution C explain that while physically moving the offices involved the challenges of relocating offices and office materials, the move has increased efficiency across the offices.

Contacts explain that physical co-location has also encouraged staff to cultivate an interest in tasks outside of their daily responsibilities. For example, one individual in the accounting office opted to receive training in pre award services and received a certification in Research Administration. This was helpful for the accounting staff, as it gave them knowledge on both sides of the office and also led to task continuity and efficiency.

## 2) Office Structure

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### Preferred Skills and Job Descriptions

#### Update Primary Duties and Requirements in Job Descriptions if Combining Pre and Post Award Offices

Contacts note that they have recently updated job descriptions to include more specific overviews of primary responsibilities and experience/educational requirements. Administrators at **Institution A** explained that updating job descriptions was a key aspect of the combination of the pre and post offices, because the descriptions were broadened to ensure staff responsibilities spanned both pre and post award functions. Contacts explain that expanding the job descriptions allowed staff to receive training in a range of related functions, which increased flexibility and capacity in the office. For example, administrators assigned similar tasks to a single employee to accomplish (e.g., data entry), regardless of whether these tasks were originally part of pre award or post award functions.

#### Profiled Administrators Seek Employees with Strong Communication and Customer Service Skills

Contacts at **Institution A** and **Institution D** highlight communication and customer service skills as desired qualities for employees in pre and post award offices. Contacts explain that because their employees often interact with faculty, it is important for them to adhere to office and faculty expectations of efficient service. Other desirable employee qualities include: analytical or critical thinking skills, appropriate project prioritization, technical knowledge, time management, aptitude for learning, and attention to detail.

#### Features of Job Descriptions at Profiled Institutions

Institution A	Institution B	Institution C	Institution D
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>All job descriptions were updated after office combination to outline the broader duties expected of employees</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Recently went through a full revamp to create cohesion between job positions and university goals</li><li>Job descriptions are generally similar, but positions differ in duties exclusive to the job itself</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Job descriptions are specific to each position</li><li>Requirements for leadership positions are more qualitative and focus on research experience (e.g., holding a PhD)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Job descriptions were made more detailed to account for the different skillsets necessary for each position</li><li>Post award positions emphasize accounting experience</li></ul>

## If Offices Are Not Combined, Include Details about Duties and Qualifications in Job Descriptions to Hire Individuals with Specific Skillsets

Contacts at **Institution C** note that while they do not require potential employees to possess pre or post award certifications, all current staff either have these certifications or receive them after hire. Contacts state that certifications provide employees with valuable experience in research administration and allow them to better perform their jobs. Contacts at **Institution B** explain that job descriptions for staff positions who are not specialists (i.e., technicians or analysts) include duties specific to a single position, and are written in such a way that hired employees are able to receive cross-training across multiple positions. For example, office administrators train technicians in pre and post award and accounting office duties, but also assign specialists to a sector of the office so they can develop a specialization.

## Cross-Train Employees on Pre and Post Office Tasks to Create Opportunities for Internal Career Paths

Administrators at **Institution B** are currently developing broader career paths for staff who are not in leadership roles (i.e., technicians, analysts). To accomplish this, administrators cross-train individuals so they have a more expansive background in pre and post award work. For example, Institution B administrators have just begun training technicians in specializations across three departments (i.e., pre award, post award, and faculty-facing offices). Leadership hopes that cross-training will help technicians learn more and provide them with higher-level responsibilities (e.g., compiling a budget), which can provide the experience necessary to apply for internal positions.

## Staffing Levels

### Staffing in Profiled Pre and Post Award Offices Ranges from 10 to 60 Employees

Staffing levels at **Institution B** were significantly larger than all other profiled institutions, which potentially connects with the fact that Institution B's pre and post award office is a separate entity from the university. However, among profiled institutions it is impossible to assume that research expenditures have a positive correlation with staffing levels, because each office and university has different research missions.

### Research and Development Expenditures and Staffing Levels at Profiled Institutions

Institution Name	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C	Institution D
All R&D Expenditures <sup>1</sup>	\$106,000	\$94,000	\$94,000	\$99,000
Staffing Levels	~30	~60	~10	~10

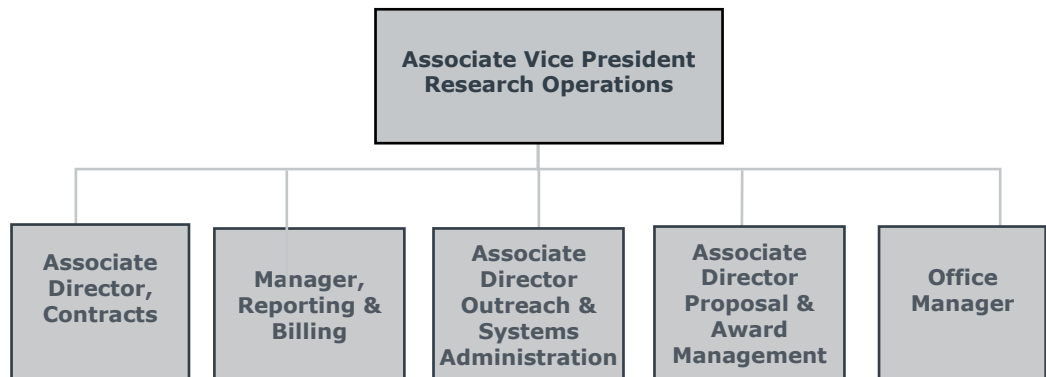
1) Rounded Higher education R&D expenditures, ranked by all R&D expenditures, by source of funds: FY 2015. [https://ncesdata.nsf.gov/herd/2015/html/HERD2015\\_DST\\_17.html](https://ncesdata.nsf.gov/herd/2015/html/HERD2015_DST_17.html)

## Reporting Structures

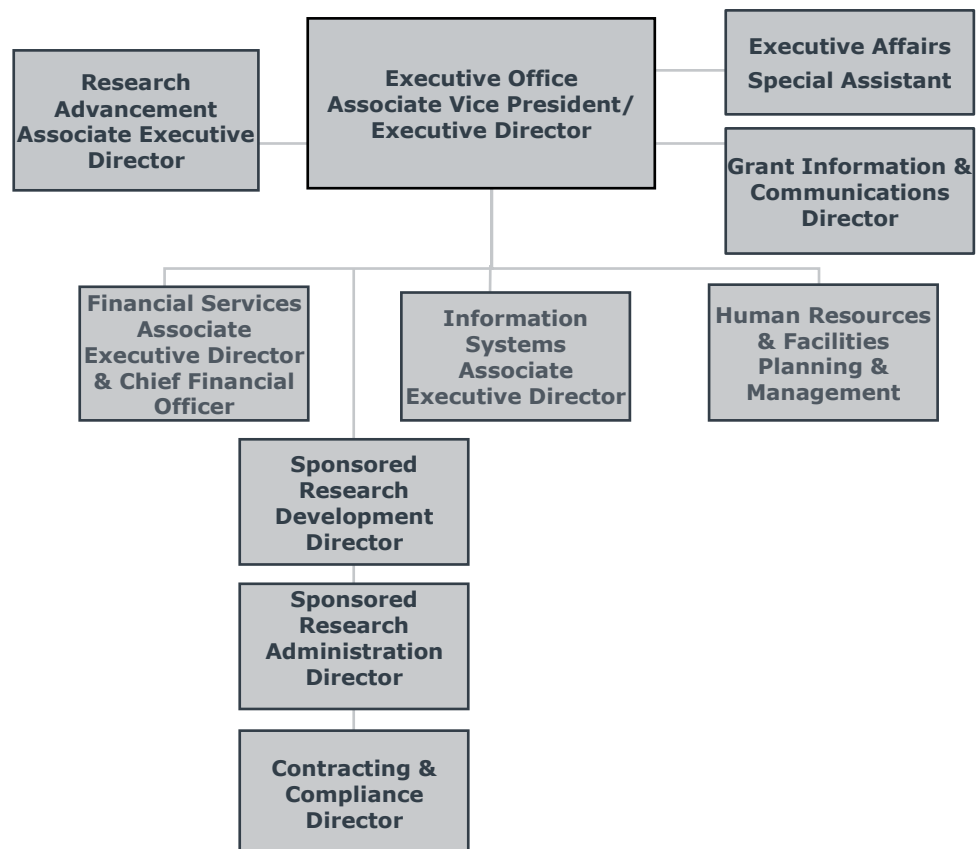
### Establish Reporting Structures that Align with Office Responsibilities and Staffing Levels

The differences in reporting structure reveal the customizable nature of pre and post award offices, and profiled institutions establish structures that work most effectively for individual offices. The organizational charts below provide examples of staffing across research administration at two profiled institutions.

#### Segment of Reporting Structure for Institution A's Office of Sponsored Research



#### Reporting Structure for Institution B's Office of Sponsored Research Development





### 3) Office Characteristics

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#### Office Responsibilities

#### Pre and Post Award Office Tasks Vary at Profiled Institutions, but Together Span the Lifecycle of Awards

**Institution A** recently reorganized their Office of Sponsored Programs to combine the pre and post award offices responsibilities. Administrators focused on connecting staff responsibilities to allow individuals to perform tasks on either the pre or post award side of the office (e.g., post award data entry positions began to help with the proposal preparation process). Additionally, administrators broadened senior-level roles to allow managers to complete responsibilities on both sides (i.e., pre and post award), including proposal submission and award acceptance.

#### Responsibilities of Pre and Post Award Offices at Profiled Institutions

Pre Award Office Responsibilities	Post Award Office Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Proposal development</li><li>• Receiving awards</li><li>• Reporting basic information to technology platform</li><li>• Assisting in developing collaborative teams</li><li>• Maintaining records</li><li>• Sponsored research development</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accepting awards</li><li>• Award negotiation</li><li>• Sub award management</li><li>• Oversight for fiscal activities</li><li>• Monitoring budget gaps</li><li>• Ensuring liability budget</li></ul>

#### Team-Based Approaches and Office Co-Location Facilitate Collaboration during the Entire Lifecycle of a Project

Contacts at **Institution D** note that staff who work in functional teams on a set of tasks in their pre and post award offices helps streamline reporting structures and maintain efficiency. Team-based collaboration aids in allocating workload among employees in equitable ways. The post award office at Institution D is divided into two technical areas, a reporting-focused segment and a daily operations segment. This division led to the creation of functional teams. Each team reports directly to a manager who encourages the teams to work together throughout the project lifecycle. Additionally, the co-location of pre and post award offices means that these post award teams collaborate frequently with pre award staff to create a “cradle to grave” effect.

#### Appoint Team Leads to Provide Technical Support to Pre and Post Award Staff

The pre-award office at **Institution B** has two four-member teams led by senior specialists. These specialists provide technical support and consulting on issues related to proposal development. Contacts note that the team leads have been valuable in coordinating cross-team work distribution when the workload is heavier on either the pre or post award side of the office. Institution B’s team-based approach has been especially useful after experiencing staff attrition. The team leads have

taken on day-to-day responsibilities for their teams, while office leadership focuses on training and recruitment of new staff. Contacts note that the team leads have also made specialists feel more supported in their roles as their questions are answered more quickly and efficiently.

### ▶ **A Technical Reporting Function Allows Offices to Quickly Gather Information on Project and Expenditures**

Contacts at **Institution D** recommend developing a technical reporting function (e.g., staff who can generate office reports when needed) inside the post award offices. This function allows the office to gather necessary financial reporting on any project and its expenditures in a timely manner. Contacts note that this position requires an in-depth, granular understanding of their PeopleSoft system so that staff can generate reports quickly and accurately for faculty or office administrators.

## Assessment

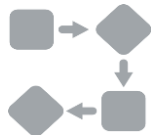
### **Administrators Use Surveys and Anecdotal Feedback to Assess the Success of Pre and Post Award Offices**

Assessment assumes several different forms at profiled institutions, but all contacts consider assessment an important component of pre and post award offices. Some institutions view assessment solely through tracking metrics for each office (i.e., meeting office deadlines, workload fluidity, efficiency of submissions), while others have more specific assessment standards. However, profiled institutions employ assessment data for internal use and to measure office performance, rather than to inform staffing or revenue distribution.

### **Pre and Post Award Office Assessment Strategies at Profiled Institutions**



**Survey feedback:** At **Institution C**, every individual who interacts with the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs receives a survey that assesses their experience with the office. Pre-award employees and the Director of Research Development collect and analyze the data. Pre and post award offices then use the data to make changes in office procedures.



**Employee workload:** Office success at **Institution B** is measured by the workload of employees and the fluidity that tasks are completed by staff. This allows the office to determine the best ways to assign work and keep the offices running smoothly.



**Metrics:** Contacts at **Institution A** examine quantitative metrics (e.g., number of proposals submitted, proposal turnaround time, turnover rate) and qualitative measures (e.g., anecdotes from those who have worked with the office, faculty complaints or praise). Administrators assess these metrics collectively to determine appropriate measures to address challenges in the offices.



**Anecdotal feedback:** Offices at **Institution D** examine faculty feedback to foster offices that focus on faculty satisfaction. Contacts note that the office does not use surveys to measure success, rather it relies on faculty feedback to identify and address issues.

### Technology Platforms Help Promote Workflow Efficiency and Fluidity throughout the Award Lifecycle

Contacts at all profiled institutions highlight the importance of technology in managing the inter-office responsibilities of tracking and maintaining award processes. Contacts at **Institution B** mostly use their technology platforms for routing and obtaining proposals through the system. Additionally, contacts note utilization differences in technology between the pre and post award offices. For example, contacts at **Institution D** explain that the post award office uses their PeopleSoft system more often than the pre award office. Contacts at **Institution A** note that their workload tracking system was originally used on the post award side of the office, but over time their tracking system was incorporated into both pre and post award office duties (e.g., data entry). This has allowed the office to reduce redundancies in data entry, and completing routine tasks over time has led to flexibility in the office and allowed for repurposing and consolidation of positions.

### Contacts Recommend Technology Evaluation to Assist in Selecting Databases

Contacts at **Institution B** underwent an internal review process to choose a new technology platform. Research administrators worked alongside the IT and Management teams to review several different vendors that provide system-to-system proposal submission. The initial review occurred in 2007, and led Institution B to select InfoEd as their Electronic Research Administration (ERA) system because they felt it would be the most robust system long-term. Contacts note that they use the system to submit as many proposals as possible in an electronic format and for electronic routing.

Recently, administration in Institution B's Office of Sponsored Programs assisted the compliance office in another review of ERA systems to find an electronic solution for their human subjects IRB review. The Sponsored Programs office participated in all of the demos and also helped the compliance office to select InfoEd for this purpose. Contacts note that they are better able to achieve compliance goals due to increased continuity now that both offices employ the same ERA system.

For more information on Electronic Research Administration systems and technology review options, EAB's white paper [Electronic Research Administration Systems](#) provides best practices when navigating the ERA system vendor landscape and determining the best fit system for your institution's needs.

## 4) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenge

Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What are the primary responsibilities of the pre and post award offices at contact institutions?
  - What processes did contacts use to establish the responsibilities for both the pre and post award offices?
- What challenges, if any, did contacts encounter when moving pre and post award administration under the office of research?
  - When did contact institutions decide to move the pre and post award offices under the office of research?
- How many staff members work in pre and post award administration at contact institutions?
  - What staffing levels do contacts believe are ideal for each of these offices?
- What is the current reporting structure for pre and post award offices?
  - Are contacts satisfied with the current reporting structure? Why or why not?
- What technologies or databases do contacts employ for pre and post award administration?
  - Are contacts satisfied with these technologies/databases? Why or why not?
- To what extent do institutions employ team-based approaches to sponsored programs administration?
  - What other models exist for sponsored programs administration beyond the traditional division of pre and post award?
- What job descriptions do contact institutions use to detail positions in pre and post award administration?
- What skills or qualities do contacts believe are most valuable in staff who work in pre and post award administration?
- How do contacts assess the success of sponsored programs' functions?
  - How do contacts improve services that fall below a certain threshold?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries ([eab.com](http://eab.com))
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

## Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators in sponsored programs offices at large public research institutions with annual research expenditures around \$90 million.

### A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/ Total)	Carnegie Classification	All R&D Expenditures
<b>Institution A</b>	Mid-Atlantic	22,300/33,700	Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity	\$106,000
<b>Institution B</b>	Pacific West	28,400/33,500	Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity	\$94,000
<b>Institution C</b>	South	18,100/22,500	Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity	\$94,000
<b>Institution D</b>	South	14,300/23,100	Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity	\$99,000