

Private Research Institution Embraces a Model to Transform Research Administration

Huron worked closely with the leadership of a private, midsize research institution to develop a streamlined model for research administration within its college of health sciences that would improve customer service and increase productivity.

Challenge

Historically, research administration within the college of health sciences at a midsize East Coast university was managed both within the central office and at the local unit level. This fragmented approach perpetuated inconsistent processes, complicating the experience for principal investigators applying for critical grants and managing research projects. With administrators distributed across the school, there were few communication channels and a lack of knowledge transfer in place to keep operations running when individual employees left.

In the spring of 2020, the dean of the college announced a goal to dramatically increase its funded awards 200% by 2025. Leadership recognized that centralizing its research administration would be critical to achieving this growth.

Approach

In early 2020, while supporting the college in an interim leadership capacity, Huron initiated a comprehensive assessment of its existing research administration operations.

Huron connected with nearly 50 stakeholders, including deans, principal investigators and support staff, to better understand their research portfolios, the tools they used to manage them and where they spent the most time day to day. Using benchmarking data and an analysis of how other schools within the university were structured, Huron outlined a series of recommendations to guide and sustain the college's research office transformation:

Creating a center of focus for research:

The assessment results indicated a need to clearly articulate a vision for the college's research administration. To effectively centralize operations, existing administrator roles would need to move out of their local team structures and reporting

“We’ve already improved the experience for our people. Given our aggressive growth goals over the next few years, this plan puts us in a position to achieve that now.”

— ASSOCIATE DEAN OF
ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCE

relationships. This would ensure greater visibility into the college's entire research portfolio, employee workloads and financial reporting.

Embracing data-driven decisions:

To take advantage of centralized administration, the college would need to become more intentional about measuring its performance. By consistently tracking metrics related to research strategy (e.g., the number of submitted proposals and funding success rates), operations (e.g., the percentage of financial reports submitted on time) and compliance, leadership could better distribute work across a limited staff. Having visibility into workload and turnaround times would give leaders a baseline to use for improving efficiency going forward.

Facilitating knowledge transfer:

Uniting administrators in a central team presented an opportunity to enhance staff training. New programs could be developed to ensure all administrators are following standard processes for compliance and pre- and post-award activities, ultimately improving the service provided to faculty and researchers.

Results

The assessment results and interim leadership support gave the college's research office a clear path to begin adapting its organizational structure, generating a **50%** year-over-year increase in grant applications. The assessment equipped leaders with actionable steps to take to fulfill the college's strategic vision and with objective data to build an internal case for change.

The research office quickly started to evolve its operating model, hiring a new executive director of research administration and additional staff to round out the team. Greater process efficiency and team alignment has improved the level of service the office provides, leading to more positive feedback and recognition from principal investigators.

The research office's ongoing transformation has elevated its presence and impact throughout the university. Leaders have the context and confidence to ask questions that they may not have in the past, setting the office up for continued improvement and enhanced service going forward.



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