

**Stefanie Keto:** Welcome to SRAI's Shop Talk, a monthly podcast spotlighting the people, practices, and evolving landscape of research administration. Whether you're new to the field or a seasoned pro, each episode offers insights from expert professionals across institutions, big and small, working in pre-award and post-award compliance communication, and everything in between. I'm Stefanie Keto, based at the Office of Grants and Contracts at North Carolina State University. This season, we're exploring the theme, Navigating Change, Innovations, and Conversations and Research Administration.

On this episode of Shop Talk, I'm joined by fellow research administrators, Julie Swaringim-Griffin and Jose Alcaine, to take a look at our institutions and how those structures shape the way that we work. Whether you are curious about how other places operate, looking to potentially improve a workflow or process, or you're just curious about seeing how things work at other institutions, this episode is for you. Join us as we explore and compare how our institutions operate, including the day-to-day approaches and resources that are available to aid us in what we do.

Hello and welcome everyone, and thank you so much for joining us for today's conversation with SRAI's Shop Talk. I'm joined today by a group of research administrators who are experts in their field, bringing unique lens to how research administration actually works in their institutions. I'm excited to dig into this and where the challenges are and the insights that they've gained from navigating these workflows day to day. First off, let's just have everybody introduce themselves and tell everybody where you're from and a little bit about what you do.

**Julie Swaringim-Griffin:** I am Julie Swaringim-Griffin. I'm the Assistant Vice President for Central Sponsored Programs Administration at Oklahoma State University.

**Jose Alcaine:** Hi everyone. I am Jose Alcaine, Director of Research Services and Affiliate Faculty here at the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. Glad to be here with y'all for this episode.

**Stefanie Keto:** So the first question I have for y'all is would you be able to walk us through just a typical proposal or an award and how it moves through your institution? Who touches it? Where does it land?

**Julie Swaringim-Griffin:** Yes. So here at Oklahoma State University, we describe ourselves as decentralized. And so if we're talking about a proposal, we'll use that as the example, is we have, we call them sponsored programs offices on our institutions, but research administrators. We have these offices within each college. The colleges will prepare the proposal, the budget, budget justification, whatever else that's needed, and route it in our system. We use Cayuse as our routing mechanism. So our sponsor program staff will assist our faculty

members with their budget, budget justification and get it ready and sound for review. It will then go through review within Cayuse. It goes to various offices around campus, so not only does it go to the PIs and potential co-PIs, if they're included, it also goes to our grants and contracts financial administration, which is a central office focusing on the financial administration and really the post-award aspects of our sponsored projects.

It'll also go to research compliance, and then depending, it may need to go to research security as well. And it does make its way to our associate deans for research, our department heads. And then ultimately it lands in my office in Central Sponsored Programs Administration, which is within our division of the vice president for research for final approval. Once that proposal gets that final approval, then it goes back to the colleges. The colleges now have approval to submit the proposal, and so our college sponsored program staff will be the ones who actually submit the proposal on behalf of the institution.

Jose Alcaine: Wow. Sounds like an interesting process for you all. I think overall, I would say when submitting proposals, I would think of ourselves as more centralized. In other words, for the most part, and it does depend, there is some nuance, but for the most part, we prepare the proposals at the school level. So in other words, the proposal development, the narrative, the budget, it gets put together at the school level, and then depending on what it is, we do use a Huron system for our grants, the database, grant routing. So once we prepare it at the school level, the PI then electronically routes the proposal for approval at the dean level, and then from the dean level, it goes to our central office or division of sponsored programs where it then gets reviewed, vetted. Mostly it's for compliance issues, also compliance issues both at the institutional level and fit for the sponsor submission. And then once it goes through that level of approval, our central division of sponsored programs then submits to the agency or the funder. Does that kind of make sense?

Stefanie Keto: It does.

Jose Alcaine: A little bit? Yeah. So overall, I would say that there are some cases where, and depending on the sponsor, we go through that whole process that I described, but then AOR signs off on it and the school submits it. But for the most part, our division of sponsor programs is the unit submitting the proposals. So yeah, a lot of pieces to work out.

Stefanie Keto: I was going to say a lot of hands in the transition for your proposal.

Jose Alcaine: For sure, for sure.

Stefanie Keto: You say, Julie, you sound a lot more like what we do at our institution where it's kind of more sort of centralized, decentralized approach.

- Julie Swaringim-Griffin: Yes, yes, very much so.
- Stefanie Keto: Yeah. I used to joke in one of my old roles that I'm in a college that we are decentralized, but we're centralized, but we're decentralized, and that's how we operate on a daily basis. And it makes no sense, but then it makes sense, but then it doesn't.
- Jose Alcaine: And then I guess if we were to go to your institution, Stefanie, that would be part of the learning curve. You have to figure out where the proposal would go and depending on what school we're in, what's the workflow and so on.
- Stefanie Keto: Yeah, we have 11 different colleges here, and some of the colleges are very centralized, and some of the colleges are very decentralized, but then some of them need assistance from the central office, whereas others don't because they have the AORs in their own college to be able to submit the proposal. But negotiations are all handled with our sponsored programs office. Same with export control and IRB and IOC. We all have central offices for those that manage that. Nobody can do that individually at the college.
- Jose Alcaine: Yeah, that's interesting. So that was the submission process, right? So when it gets reviewed at the sponsor level and then it comes back, notice of award comes back, then our central division of sponsor programs does do the negotiation. They do the award set up, all the award term check and all that stuff gets reviewed centrally. And then once that gets figured out, then they award it in the system, and then they kind of hand off to our central grants and contracts office, which then they do their processes and issue, we call them indexes, but a project account. That's when we at the school level know that an award that's come in has gone through the whole central process, and then we're then empowered at the school level to spend the money once all that's set up, do the project, etc. So yeah.
- Stefanie Keto: Now, do you get an email notification that that's happened, or is it just like you rub the lamp and you hope the genie comes out and says, "You got an award"?
- Jose Alcaine: Yeah, through the Huron system, the division of sponsor program, census emails about the process or any issues. And then also the handoff happens, they call it a award snapshot document that gets produced from the award setup that then goes to our central grants and contracts office. And that's how they know... It's kind of like the trigger to set up the project account, again, in most instances. There is a way to trip up the account setup process by getting what we call advance index accounts, so before everything's signed and dotted and there is a way to do that. I know some schools call it at risk accounts or at risk set up because what if something falls through? But that's kind of the exception. For the most part. Once the central grants and contracts office gets noticed from our central sponsor programs office, they set up the index and then we get

notified via email. Yes. So, yeah, a lot of pieces and handoffs and waiting. But like you said, Stefanie, somehow it seems to work.

Stefanie Keto: It does.

Jose Alcaine: Until it doesn't. Until it doesn't.

Stefanie Keto: Yeah. Yeah. As one of my PIs in a previous job said, "Just make the magic happen." So we all make the magic happen from central all the way down, right?

Jose Alcaine: Correct.

Stefanie Keto: Yeah. So when we're looking at your specific models to your institutions, what are some of the biggest advantages to the model that you currently have? When it comes to communication, obviously there's a lot of handoffs, consistency, the delivery, the service that's provided.

Julie Swaringim-Griffin: I think one of the advantages of our model here at OSU is that within the colleges, our sponsor program staff are able to really build relationships with the faculty. It's not just a transaction every single time, it's a relationship building technique, which makes things a little more interesting and a little bit more unique for our institutions because our sponsor program staff actually get to know the faculty they are supporting.

Jose Alcaine: Well, that's great.

Julie Swaringim-Griffin: Yeah, I think that's one of those things that's kind of unique to how our structure is, and it makes the job very humanistic.

Jose Alcaine: Well, that's good. I think that sounds like a good way to think about it, because a lot of the stuff that we do is based on relationships, how you build relationships.

The way it's set up right now at my institution, the units themselves... So for example, my office gets to know the faculty, gets to build relationships with the faculty, and then we serve from my office as the liaison with the central offices. So there is kind of a, unlike, if I understood Julie, there's more of a transactional thing. In other words, an interfacing with the systems, the PIs are more interfacing in a sort of transactional way of looking up information and that kind of thing, but rely on the school level personnel to form relationships with the central offices, which are key in terms of getting work done. So that might be a little bit more nuanced or different than what you described, Julie. But yeah, I think in the end though, it does come to those relationships that you build from school level with central key functions as well.

- Stefanie Keto: I would say trust too, right?
- Jose Alcaine: Trust, absolutely.
- Stefanie Keto: If you're working with a faculty member, getting them to trust that you do know what you're doing and you do know how to build a budget and you can put your paperwork together correctly so they can get their funding, I think that does also play a part.
- Jose Alcaine: Absolutely.
- Stefanie Keto: Now I have a question because we have a unit here that helps with large-scale interdisciplinary research proposals. Do either of y'all have an institution that kind of helps when the proposals get too big or complex that kind of takes over for either of your org structures that you have currently?
- Jose Alcaine: An institution, did you say, or an office?
- Stefanie Keto: Well, we have an office that supports... If something comes through our proposal routing, like, "Hey, we're going to submit a proposal," it's over a certain threshold and it's super complex, super big, this unit comes in and says, "Hey, we can help with the development of the proposal to get it ready for submission." Do y'all have anything—
- Jose Alcaine: That's a great question.
- Stefanie Keto: ... like that?
- Jose Alcaine: So that touches more on sort of do we have a research development team, a dedicated research development team that specializes in complex projects? Is that kind of—
- Stefanie Keto: Yeah. I mean, ours is called a proposal development unit, but they specialize in helping with the super complex, super large proposals. I'm talking over a couple million dollars. I just didn't know if y'all had anything like that at your institutions.
- Jose Alcaine: Julie, do you have such a thing since you provide capacity at the central?
- Julie Swaringim-Griffin: Yes, we have something similar. It's not quite the same as what we would call research development, but within my office, within our central sponsored programs administration, we do have grant writers. So we seek out those large-scale proposals, and we work with the faculty members that are working on these large projects to help supplement and help through the writing of the actual proposal. So that's, I think, a little bit different than what you're talking

about, Stefanie, but that is our way of providing that service for those large-scale is providing a designated grant writer to assist those faculty members in keeping it organized, editing that proposal, ensuring that what that solicitation is asking for to be in the proposal is actually written into that proposal. So it's a little bit different than true research development, but that is one service that our central office does provide.

Stefanie Keto: I was going to say, Jose, you don't have anything like that, right?

Jose Alcaine: Well, I was going to say, that's a really interesting question because I think of that more of a research development function, and we do have at the vice president for research level, so again, at the central level, dedicated staff and resources that have helped us at the school level be involved in more complex across units sort of projects, and they have some capacity there. But increasingly, I think that that has become really a point of focus I would say. At the school level, a lot of it falls to the school to initiate, if it's complex, those relationships, and then rely on the central research development office to help coordinate some of those more complex functions.

Also, the research development office at the central VPR level, they do contract with consultants that also help in some of the more complex elements. So I know a lot of schools and universities are investing a lot in those type of big or are focusing on getting more large multicenter, center grants, that kind of stuff. In fact, we're thinking about how to do that hopefully for the coming year. And it starts, I would say, because of our system, it starts at the school level, I would say. And then depending on the complexity, then we reach out to the central research development office.

Stefanie Keto: That's kind of how it works here for us. The PI would come to a unit and say, "Hey, I want to submit this proposal. I have this idea. This is kind of what we're looking at threshold wise." And then we're like, "Hey, PDU, can you swoop in and help us out?" And they service the whole university, so depending on workflow and bandwidth, they look to see what they can do and what they can't.

Jose Alcaine: Right. And bandwidth, right?

Stefanie Keto: Yeah.

Jose Alcaine: Yeah, similar. But certainly those functions like research and development functions have become really important. And then it comes down to do you have the resources to invest, whether it's a school level or centrally to do those things, more complex things. I think there's a certain payoff though, if you do invest, like Julie, you mentioned grant writers, I think if you make some key investments, there are potential payoffs for those investments for sure.

- Stefanie Keto: A grant writer definitely came up in one of my previous research offices that I worked in. We wanted to look at potentially hiring someone who had that capability but also had the research administration capability so they could hit on both sides if needed.
- Julie Swaringim-Griffin: So in central office we have two grant writers, and then we also grant writer that, Stefanie, exactly what you mentioned, where they can do both functions where it's grant writing and research administration, and they're within a college. They're within our engineering. And so engineering has their own person that's exactly what you described. But yeah, here in the central office, we have two grant writers that serve various campuses within our system and one dedicated to our main campus where we work here in Stillwater, Oklahoma.
- And we try to emphasize, and I hope I've done a good job about this on campus, maybe not. Maybe someone will listen and tell me otherwise. But we have a big focus on this large scale proposals, but an emphasis on the fact that different fields of study, large scale means something different among different fields of studies. And it doesn't always mean multi, multi, multi-millions. A large scale project in a different field of study could be a few hundred thousand or a few thousand, but it's very involved and very complex. And so within our office, we often get the question to grant writers from faculty members, "Is there a specific budget amount to be able to get these services?" And the answer is no. We help with these large scale proposals regardless of the scale of the budget itself. So that's one emphasis we try to implement that our grant writers are not for specific fields of study, they're for all.
- Stefanie Keto: Right. Yeah.
- Jose Alcaine: Interesting.
- Stefanie Keto: And then that makes me... Oh, sorry.
- Jose Alcaine: No, I was going to say, I was going to add, in my context, some of the consulting bandwidth based out of the central research development office does come down to more high value, high dollar amounts, more complex programs. So that's interesting, Julie, that you... And there's a certain bandwidth queue, if I can say it that way. In other words, if you meet a certain threshold criteria, then you can get put on the queue for assistance, that sort of thing. But so far it's based on sort of dollar amount and complexity, if that makes sense. So it's really interesting. But I think, again, especially in our current climate, going after bigger projects, more complex, I think will only increase, I think looking in the future activities.

- Stefanie Keto: And then this got me thinking. I know we have also one step in the proposal writing, and you have data management, the large scale computing systems and stuff like that. And I know our library helps out with that.
- Jose Alcaine: Yeah, libraries are awesome.
- Stefanie Keto: How do your libraries assist when it comes to your proposal writing or post award, depending on how you interact with them?
- Jose Alcaine: Julie, do you rely on your... I have a great relationship with library folks.
- Julie Swaringim-Griffin: Yes. I love that question. Our library helps out so much. What would we do without them? They do assist with data management plans and things like that for our faculty members, and it's just, it's awesome. They host some webinars and presentations and all kinds of fun things. And so yes, right there with you, they're very, very useful.
- Jose Alcaine: Absolutely. And I love the... In fact, it's one of my favorite places on campus to actually go do work, hang out. And I've been involved with a couple of library colleagues and projects myself, and they handle a data management tool that we can use to create data management plans. They also advise on data storage or how to think about how to publish things when there's a requirement that has to be open publishing or posted somewhere. There's a data, or they call it a scholar compass, where it's kind of a repository that they help with. Oh yeah, it's great resources. Love the library.
- Stefanie Keto: Yes. Yeah, A little piece of my heart belongs at the library where I started in higher ed. So my first job was in the libraries here, and I helped the research librarians with everything that they did on the backend. It was the behind the scenes. So I definitely support everything that they do. And I know we've brought them in before to talk to the faculty members, like, "Hey, don't forget the libraries. They can help you. Here, they're going to talk to you about everything that they can do for you, and let's foster this relationship." Yeah.
- Jose Alcaine: They're awesome. In fact, in the spring, we're working on two workshops along with our faculty affairs office, bringing in library folks to talk about, it's not necessarily proposal submission, but it does touch on research development, like how to share your work, how to share your scholarship, how to use data repositories, how to keep up with your orchid, how to share your publications, all that kind of stuff. Yeah, they're awesome. Yeah.
- Stefanie Keto: Go check out your library. No, I'm just kidding. Shameless plug.
- Jose Alcaine: And you say... I mean, we've kind of gotten to the library, but that's all part of the research enterprise, right? And it might be key in some proposals that you



need some sort of data management section or... Yeah, no, I think that all kind of comes into play.

Julie Swaringim-Griffin: Use your resources, they're there.

Stefanie Keto: Yeah. Yeah.

Jose Alcaine: Absolutely.

Stefanie Keto: Exactly.

Jose Alcaine: Absolutely.

Stefanie Keto: Well, I guess the last question I have for you would be, looking ahead at your institutions, do you see them potentially maybe changing models from where you're at to maybe a more centralized or decentralized model? And what do you think you could offer to others who are considering changing your model?

Jose Alcaine: Julie, do you think?

Julie Swaringim-Griffin: For our institution, I have not heard anything of us changing a format anytime soon. As far as for others who are thinking of changing the format, I would think about really how your institution operates in general. What does that format look like? How do different units outside of the research enterprise operate and does it operate functionally? And then going outside of your institution, listening to this very podcast episode or talking to colleagues at other institutions on what works and what doesn't work with their format. And then really going back and talking within your college, within your units and seeing what their ideas have. What would they like to see happen? So if a university or your institution is thinking about changing and changing the model, take your time. Don't do it immediately. Take your time and figure out what works for your institution. Don't make split decisions real quick. Take your time, talk to people, have important conversations to figure out what works. And know that you can try it out and if it doesn't work, if something doesn't work, you can change it. It's okay.

Stefanie Keto: Don't rip the Band-Aid off, but if you do rip the Band-Aid off, you can try again.

Jose Alcaine: I feel like we're also used to change, right? Try something. Yeah. I think that's good advice, Julie.

Stefanie Keto: Why not throw one more?

Jose Alcaine: Think about things, get feedback.

Stefanie Keto: Yeah.

Jose Alcaine: I think in my context, I don't see... It would involve the associate deans for research and thinking about research strategically. I don't think we'll be changing some of those centralized functions. In other words, it starts at the school level, but then it gets sent to a central office that has AOR authority. I don't see that changing. But I do think that in speaking with colleagues across the state, there's other models where the AOR authority does sit at the school level, the authorized representative authority sit that's at school level. And I know a pro would be, you're closer to... So for example, if we were to have AOR authority at my school, we would be closer to the faculty. Perhaps we could be more nimble in terms of the submission process, then we wouldn't have to route it centrally. But then on the flip side, a lot of the responsibility of what it means to be an AOR would then belong to the school.

And so there's these trade-offs in terms of efficiency versus higher levels of compliance or what that responsibility would bring. And I know some colleagues around the state, they have that authority at the school level. It'd be interesting to try. I mean, to Julie, to your point, if you were to try it and it kind of doesn't work, you could always go back. And I know in our histories we've seen that, right? Things get tried, systems get changed, and then, "Oh, you know what? We're going back to this other thing." But I think for in the near future, I don't see the school to central office system changing, but you can always have dreams, right? Or wishes, I guess.

Stefanie Keto: You never know. I think for me, it's you never know until you ask, right? Because I always ask people, "What are your top five pain points? What is it, what would you do to fix it, and why doesn't it work?" Those are kind of the questions that I want to know. And then we...

Jose Alcaine: Those are good questions.

Stefanie Keto: ... can see maybe what could be changed. And if you ask enough people the question and you get kind of the same kind of top two, then maybe you know that there's a workflow that you need to look at and kind of analyze, and then you apply the Band-Aid approach, the trial and error approach. What do we do to fix it?

Jose Alcaine: Yeah, absolutely. And then the other thing I think about is resource allocation. A lot of times with system implementation, whether it's electronic systems or processes, a lot of the times, to Julie's point, is it well thought out and is it well resourced? Because sometimes you could have a great idea, but if you don't resource it well or invest in it, it's just not going to... It's going to fall down in the implementation part. And I think ultimately it's what kind of resources do you have and what kind of resources can you invest and where? So I'm sure we

could have many, many talks about system changes and system adoption and how did it go?

Stefanie Keto: That could be a whole episode. "Have you implemented a new system lately and what were your pain points?" Yeah, let's have a great session.

Jose Alcaine: Yes.

Stefanie Keto: Just kidding.

Jose Alcaine: But it's all interesting. I guess we could all agree, somehow we try to, I guess as research administrators, try to do the best we can with the systems we have and try to make it work. And I think I really value that sense of getting the work done with however best you can given the compliance environment that we live in and try to do a good job. I really appreciate that.

Stefanie Keto: Well, I think that this has been a very interesting conversation about how different institutions work, and hopefully it's been insightful for the listeners. I know I always find it intriguing to find out how different institutions work. And I think both of you have alluded, you never know when something from another institution might be like, "Hey, maybe we try something like that," and then it might help out. So hopefully helps you guys that are listening or I should say "you all that are listening." So thank you all. Thank you, Jose, thank you, Julie, for joining us today. I really did enjoy this conversation.

Jose Alcaine: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, it's fun to talk about some of these processes and functions. It's a lot of fun.

Julie Swaringim-Griffin: I enjoyed it.

Jose Alcaine: Thank you.

Julie Swaringim-Griffin: Thank you for listening to our episode on Structures and Research Administration. Our conversation today highlighted various ways in which our offices and institutions as a whole support the overall research enterprise. If you are looking to change how your office operates or simply optimize your existing structure, remember to take your time, have conversations, and think of what fits your institution's culture. There isn't a one size fit all option when it comes to research administration, but the goal is to provide effective service and contribute positively to the research enterprise. We hope you enjoyed this episode, and be sure to check out other Shop Talk episodes. Remember, research moves with us.

Stefanie Keto: I would also like to thank everyone who continually contributes to enhancing this podcast in our new season, especially our wonderful podcast team.

Together, you all have made this podcast a platform that brings together people, ideas, and new opportunities in research administration. Please feel free to submit suggestions for future episodes of SRAI's Shop Talk to [shoptalk@srai.org](mailto:shoptalk@srai.org). Thank you again for listening to this episode of SRAI's Shop Talk. Don't forget to subscribe and share. I'm Stefanie Keto, and I'll catch you on the next episode.