

## 12320.19 **Strategic Planning for Offices of Sponsored Programs at PUIs**

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In the realm of higher education, “true north” typically points to student success for all students. Sponsored funding fuels many of the paths to that destination, especially for underrepresented populations, and it takes a well-defined, knowledgeable office to efficiently oversee activities needed to cultivate a grants culture on campus.

Whether your institution is establishing a new sponsored programs office, considering restructuring an existing service division, or simply assessing the effectiveness of an office and the role it plays on campus, having a strategic plan in place for the office ensures the most efficient use of institutional resources related to grant administration and compliance. As you can imagine, the size of sponsored programs offices and their responsibilities vary based on the institution type, size, and of course its guiding vision and mission. Functional areas of an office may be centralized or distributed depending on institutional needs and how the grants culture evolved on campus.

Regardless of where in the process your office resides, its functions should align with your institution’s overall strategic plan. This article includes a brief overview of the components of a strategic plan and shares ways in which a sponsored programs office can create its own plan tailored to its specific needs and responsibilities.

### Purpose of a Strategic Plan

A strategic plan is something that nearly every business venture has in place – at least if they plan on succeeding. This guiding plan defines the entity’s purpose and goals for the future and serves as a roadmap for activities aligned with achieving that institution’s mission.

	<b>Proactive vs. Reactive</b>	Dynamic system to accommodate changing priorities
	<b>Decision-Making Support for Institutional Investments</b>	Supports staffing plans Existing vs new programs Institutional commitments
	<b>Research</b>	Faculty development Curriculum expansion Student engagement and success

A sponsored programs office – or SPO – complements the institution’s mission by pursuing and managing grant-funded programs. These activities are often coordinated under this broad umbrella by assessing and strengthening the capacity for obtaining and managing sponsored awards, by identifying and pursuing funding opportunities that support the institution’s overall mission, and by overseeing funded programs from start-up through to evaluation and closeout. Before developing a strategic plan for the SPO, institutional priorities should be clear. These are laid out in the overall strategic plan, based on its mission and vision, which should guide all activities according to the overarching goals. The strategic plan is a foundation – activities are planned based on this foundation, and progress is evaluated against it. Strategic planning for your SPO is no different in its purpose but instead guides the activities of your office towards its own mission, vision, and goals that stem from institutional priorities.

### *Strategic Planning for Grants Administration*

Developing a strategic plan is a relatively straightforward process, though of course it's never the same for each institution.

One of the primary goals of a strategic plan is to support a dynamic system to accommodate changing priorities. It's preferable to be proactive than to put out fires. A strategic plan for the SPO supports the broader deployment of the institution's own strategic plan when making decisions related to grants administration. For example, does the grants office have the staff or "bandwidth" to pursue certain funding opportunities? This is important not only in the pre-award grant seeking phase, but also when deciding whether existing campus programs involved can accommodate a new or expanded initiative. Do those programs have the capacity to support or perform what is being proposed? Have those resources been previously committed elsewhere?

And of course, many of the research endeavors at institutions of higher education (IHEs) are supported through sponsored funding. If you have research faculty, or if your college wants to grow its research program and strengthen related academic programming, research scholarship will be an important component of your strategic plan. Research, in addition to generating new knowledge, encourages faculty development through professional engagement. It connects students with leaders in their chosen fields, supports curriculum development, and fosters student engagement and success.

The SPO strategic plan provides much-needed guidance to an office challenged to meet the ever-growing demand for external support with its own limited financial and human resources. SPO leadership can allocate work based on the plan, and when that perfect opportunity no one saw coming arises, they can quickly confirm alignment and assess capacity to respond.

### **Developing the Strategic Plan**

A quick glance at any position description within a sponsored programs office highlights the wide variety of activities besides writing grants in which they are involved. Faculty training, development of policies and procedures, cultivating relationships with grantors, and monitoring compliance with federal, state, and local regulations just scratch the surface. This is especially true at Predominantly Undergraduate Institutions (PUIs) where it is common to only have one or two people staffing an office. An SPO's strategic plan should not be limited to only grant funding goals but should ultimately contribute to and strive to improve the overall health and success of the institution by addressing all their functional responsibilities.

The first step in this process is to define – or review and revise – the SPO's vision and mission. The vision is the future that your office wants to achieve for the upcoming three to five years, while the mission is a statement about the office itself and how it interacts with the campus constituents it serves. Naturally, these should be aligned with those of the institution. Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* comes to mind, and Habit 2 in particular: "Begin with the End in Mind".

Considering where you envision your SPO in five years, identify big-picture

goals that, if achieved, advance the office's ability to meet institutional needs. Each goal should then be expanded by creating measurable objectives for each one and outlining specific activities for attaining them. The strategic planning process is one of defining attainable, time-based milestones. It is critical during this creation phase to be ambitious but realistic – if a plan is too rigid, it cannot be flexible and adapt to campus needs, much less to evolving state and federal regulations or policy changes. Without adequate detail, there are too many opportunities to lose track of progress, drift away from the overarching mission and vision, or otherwise fail to accomplish meaningful improvements.

As mentioned earlier, take care that goals and activities are not focused only on grant funding opportunities and dollars raised. Attention should also be given to broader office functions such as faculty training across campus, staffing needs (including professional development), compliance and reporting, and communication and education. Goals are general and outcome-based but should still be clear. Objectives are more detailed and explain how the goals will be accomplished, and include the activities needed to achieve the goal. All of these are detailed in an effective strategic plan.

As grant writers, we turn to a tool commonly used in proposals that lends itself perfectly to developing a roadmap for the office – the Logic Model.

#### *Logic Model as a Planning Tool*

In its most basic form, a logic model or theory of change diagram provides a visual graphic of how to achieve a goal using available resources. The prescribed structure illustrates how different pieces fall into place in a logical, methodical manner to achieve short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes. Grant writers use these regularly, and they are often required by funding agencies because of their utility in designing projects and communicating the structure at the highest level. The process lends itself well to strategic planning, and their utility can be extended into project management with information that can be used for accountability.

*Inputs.* The inputs are the resources available to the SPO for planned activities. This includes the staff (perhaps just one when starting up an office), other offices or departments at your college, external partners, and your operational budget.

*Activities.* Activities are just that: the general actions the office should take to achieve the desired results. At this preliminary creation stage, use broad strokes –

Inputs	Activities			Outcomes-Impact		
	What?	Who?	When?	Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
				ST	MT	LT
				ST	MT	LT
				ST	MT	LT

“Implementing a Training Program for Departmental Administrators” or “Creating a Policy and Procedures Manual for Grants Administration.”

*Responsibilities.* A theoretical logic model typically includes outputs and deliverables next – those are things you can count or create. While these components are important and necessary to illustrate a theory of change for a grant proposal, when using a logic model for strategic planning, it is helpful to instead define responsibility for who will complete or oversee the activity and when it will be completed.

*Outcomes.* Short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes are just the strategic plan goals in different stages. The short-term outcomes capture the immediate outputs and deliverables, albeit sometimes obliquely, while the mid- and long-term outcomes reflect the broader change intended through successful activity implementation. Perhaps your grants office has set a goal of implementing a rigorous training program to cultivate an institution-wide grants culture. When plotting this strategy in a logic model, it may be helpful to think of the deliverables as the list of training topics, materials and curricula, and a training schedule. The outputs include the number of topics on these lists, or the number of research administrators or faculty researchers attending the training sessions.

In a living strategic plan, SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-based – metrics for the outputs allow for evaluation of the program’s success and impact. Capture the outputs and deliverables in the outcomes by articulating the results of the activities with concrete language. In the list of example goals, notice how each defines specific parameters to aid in measuring success toward achieving an identified goal.

#### Examples of SPO Goals & Activities

- Implement a training program offered each semester for campus research administrators
- Develop a grants policy and procedures manual this calendar year
- Establish an Institutional Review Board by 2022 and obtain a Federal-Wide Assurance
- Grow the SPO office from one to three staff members by 2025
- Launch a quarterly newsletter addressing topics in research administration
- Incentivize research growth by building a competitive bridge funding program by 2025
- Grow the college’s annual proposal submission activity from \$5M to \$15M in the next ten years

Remember: While the strategic plan should include at least one goal addressing pursuit of grant funding aligned to institutional priorities, SPOs do far more than secure funding. A comprehensive strategic plan includes not only grant seeking, but also administrative management and capacity building activities to grow and strengthen the grant seeking function.

More and more, administrators are being asked to provide metrics to define progress and success. Methodical planning in this way lends itself to measuring and tracking metrics. One of the most immediate ways in which an SPO’s effectiveness is measured is through tracking the number of proposals and award funding. However, as previously mentioned, an SPO does so much more than just write and support grant proposals. It is equally important to measure the non-financial return on the office’s activities.

The increased number of faculty and staff engaged in grant seeking as a result of implementing a grants training program will undoubtedly result in increases in the

financial measures, illustrating how non-financial metrics can be used to demonstrate your office’s overall effectiveness and long-term success. Other non-financial metrics to consider include website traffic, form downloads/submissions, and campus-wide communications including social media analytics.

### Assessing Support for Grants

With the basic structure in mind, one of the most critical steps for planning is assessing the existing grants culture on campus, current grant funding priorities, and the SPO’s capacity to broadly support successful grants administration and compliance across campus departments.

First and foremost, an SPO must regularly inventory the institution’s resources and needs. This process should be designed not only to inform the funding priorities, but also to ascertain what support can be garnered from various campus divisions, departments, and offices. A simple matrix is useful when capturing the various offices across campus and their roles in activities related to grants administration, including Finance, General Counsel, Academic Affairs, and compliance offices. Once created, keeping this document current is incredibly helpful when developing and updating grants-related policies and procedures. It also can serve as supporting documentation during impromptu discussions with leadership about where to assign grant seeking resources when needed.

Responsible Party		Roles and Responsibilities in Grant Administration															
PI/PD	SPO	FIN	LEGAL	PROV	DEPT	BPC	OTHER	PI/PD	SPO	FIN	LEGAL	PROV	DEPT	BPC	OTHER		
Principal Investigator/ Program Director		Participate in university policy formulation															
Sponsored Programs Office		Oversee the administration process															
Finance		Review, interpret and disseminate policies from federal and non-federal funding agencies															
Office of General Counsel		Keep current with policies related to compliance activities and assess and communicate their effect on the university															
Office of the Provost		Prepare and negotiate indirect cost rate proposal															
Department		Communicate indirect rates to university personnel															
Budget & Finance		Maintain database of proposal submissions and awards and provide reports to administrators for tracking funding trends and determining resource allocation															
Various offices		Establish policy and procedures that ensure the accuracy and timeliness of all financial transactions posting to the general ledger specifically as it relates to grants															
Responsible		Provide university oversight related to documenting cost sharing and/or enabling															
Accountable		Provide university oversight related to collaborative research policy															
Consulted		Oversee policy formulation for cost transfers															
Informed		Oversee policy formulation and provide university oversight to resolve overfalls															
		Overall university responsibility for oversight on grant and research compliance															
		Provide oversight on implementation of university, state and federal policies and regulations															
		Provide local oversight for effort certification															
		Provide oversight for record retention and ownership of scientific data															
		Establish policies and procedures governing fair payments and the removal of uncollectable costs															
		Promote compliance with university policies and procedures and applicable laws and regulations, and improve operational efficiencies															
		Provide university oversight for adherence to protocols and policies for research involving live animals and human subjects															
		Provide university oversight for adherence to protocols and policies if the research involves recombinant DNA, infectious agents or biological toxins															



### Stakeholder Involvement

A successful grants culture is impossible without the input and support of the entire campus community throughout the assessment and evaluation processes. Meet with campus members and learn about their responsibilities, their roles in business functions, and what they would like to see expanded or improved. Look for opportunities where their work may intersect with grants at the project, management, or compliance level, and consider how their needs or ideas may be included in future proposals. Don’t limit this data collection phase to senior leadership and faculty but include staff and students as well. Their perspectives on student success services,

on needed technology, and on research and academic programming will inform decision-making at every stage of the strategic planning process. In turn, what role do they expect the SPO to play? Face-to-face interviews, surveys, and focus groups are ideal for gathering this type of data.

Don't forget about meeting with external community partners. K-12 schools, community colleges and trade schools, and other organizations with whom your institution has existing articulation agreements or other relationships. This has the added benefit of providing a roster of potential partners for future programs, initiatives, or research projects where partners are a required component of successful proposals.

Whether establishing a new office or restructuring an existing division, learn how peer institutions are structured. What type of funding do they manage, and how much? What project management systems do they use, and how? Are they centralized or decentralized? How are their policies implemented? Consider the benefits and drawbacks before replicating or adopting their approaches to ensure there is a clear benefit to your institution.

#### *Campus Resources and Support Offices*

Familiarize yourself with available support services, identifying those services to be established based on the needs and growth of the institution's current grants culture and size. Refer to the supporting matrix identifying roles and responsibilities – at a glance it should be clear where gaps exist, which will in turn inform the strategic goals and activities for addressing those deficiencies.

#### **Divisions Supporting Grant Administration**

- **Advancement:** this is the office that coordinates fundraising activities; SPO functions often grow from this area
- **Institutional Research:** gathers/reports data related to student recruitment, retention, and completion, and often income or financial aid
- **Human Resources:** state regulations and policies related to staffing needs and compensation
- **Finance:** federal, state, and institutional cost accounting policies
- **Information Technology:** increasingly important in institutional and capacity-building grants, and in supporting student success on campus; IT should have seat at the table early in grant planning
- **Compliance:** depending on the research activities faculty are involved in, including an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC)

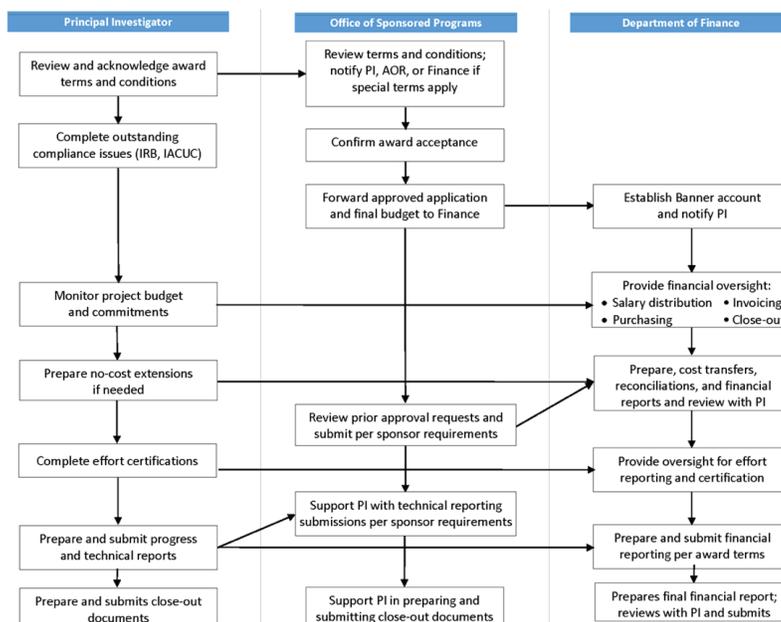
Depending on the size of your institution and the partnership between the sponsored programs and advancement offices, capital campaigns may need to be considered when deciding how to allocate SPO resources. While fundraising for new buildings may not be a grant funding priority, the SPO should be familiar with ongoing capital campaign targets or other major fundraising initiatives. A foundation solicitation to fund nursing lab simulators lends itself to partnering with advancement efforts toward capital improvements in the nursing facilities. Opportunity also exists to leverage financial commitments to meet sponsor-mandated cost share requirements through close collaboration between the offices.

#### *Policies & Procedures*

Appropriate policies and procedures oversee all aspects of grants administration and ensure compliance with institutional, state, and federal regulations. They provide a structure for standard, consistent processes, and are typically required by funders

before awards will be issued to an institution. The SPO is involved in all phases of an award, often working closely with principal investigators as well as post-award accounting and compliance offices. It may be helpful to include visual diagrams or flowcharts in your procedure manual or on the institution's intranet for easy access.

Inventory the existing institutional policies as related to grant activities and review them for weaknesses. Triage those that are most important and may be lacking, such as policies addressing Facilities & Administrative Costs, Time & Effort Reporting, Faculty Compensation and release time, and financial conflict of interest. Connect with your



finance office to ensure procurement policies – including sub-award monitoring if needed – are up to date with the Uniform Guidance regulations that were officially implemented in 2014. If research involving humans or animals is ongoing or planned as grants activity accelerates, consider those research-related policies covering IRB or IACUC regulations. If an IRB is already reviewing human subject research, it may be appropriate to obtain a Federal-Wide Assurance to document compliance for human subject protection. This process may take several months and is appropriate to add as a goal to an SPO strategic plan, as are the ongoing review and revision of policies and procedures to reflect best practices and changes in governing regulations.

### Operationalizing the Strategic Plan (a.k.a. Getting it all Done!)

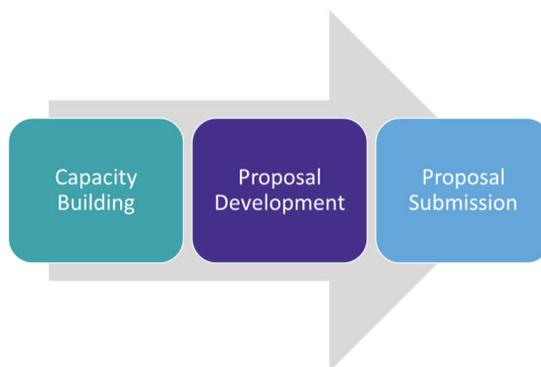
Once the SPO strategic plan has been drafted, reviewed by appropriate division administrators, updated, and ultimately approved, it is time to put all the plans into action and move toward the desired outcomes.

#### *Master Calendar*

A calendar identifying institutional and research grant proposals planned for the next 12 months is required for an efficient sponsored programs office with grant seeking responsibilities. At a glance, the SPO staff should be able to see which weeks or months during the year will be focused on grant seeking activities versus those with few to no deadlines. This allows office staff to focus on those activities with non-financial returns that are critical to an office's overall effectiveness.

### *Workplan*

Having a workplan for the office is a way to map out all the planned activities in one place. It includes the broad goals for the office with target timeframes for completion, the measurable objectives and activities, and the role the grants office will play. This is the place to identify the quarterly, semi-annual, or annual activity markers with deliverables. Make sure to include all administrative or capacity-building responsibilities, not just those related to proposal development. Insert the grant deadlines from the master calendar, adding intermediate milestones such as planning meetings, input from key personnel, and time for internal review and approvals. Most grants offices have some level of responsibility for reporting on post-award programmatic progress and closeout, so monitoring and evaluation of specific grants should be included when appropriate.



Training events for faculty and staff belong here, too. Does the SPO need to factor in webpage maintenance? What about the newsletter the Provost wants to launch to spotlight grant and research activity? Staffing increases and even professional development for SPO staff belongs here as well. Let's say the SPO is responsible for launching an internal bridge funding program to fund faculty research. Proposal solicitation, collection, review, and project selection should all be captured in the workplan.

This working document reflects the daily and weekly reality in which grants and research administrators function and offers a semblance of order to an ever-changing list of needs. While your strategic plan should be revisited every three-to-five years, the master calendar and work plan should be revised annually.

### **Communication is Key**

Of course, none of this happens in isolation. Meetings come up. Legislation changes are announced. New funding opportunities are announced that are a "perfect fit" and all else takes a back seat. This is the advantage of having a workplan for all SPO activities. It becomes a tool for evaluating the office's capacity to effectively respond to new opportunities or unplanned events. When the perfect funding opportunity pops up, an effective SPO can quickly gauge its alignment with grant funding priorities and assess the impact of pursuing the opportunity on other responsibilities. Sometimes it's ok to delay tasks, particularly administrative tasks, to prioritize an unexpected deadline. Other times, delaying tasks could jeopardize submission deadlines for other proposals or for required reporting.

Once a strategic plan has been approved, disseminate it. Present it to the governing board and publish it on the SPO website, allowing opportunities for feedback.

Communication, of course, is key when developing and disseminating a strategic plan. Not only should leadership be kept abreast of progress in implementing

the plan and accomplishing its goals and activities, but your campus community and stakeholders should also be given periodic updates that not only reflect their input into the process but also the resulting process in support of institutional success.

#### **About the Authors**

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