

Centralization: Negative Effects and Impact on Research

The centralization process at the University of Arizona has had a very starkly negative impact on the productivity of research efforts. Some of the specific instances are outlined as examples of the ongoing situation.

• IT Centralization

The number of IT staff have declined and there is less support for faculty but an increasing number of barriers. For example, simple data analysis software cannot be downloaded from the web on individual computers, but an IT person must do it. The IT personnel are overloaded due to the decline of staff numbers and it takes days to get someone to download the software. What should have been a few minute task has been extended to days. In addition, because of this focus on centralization, there is less flexibility and responsiveness from IT. For example, recently the university IT identified certain file extensions that cannot be shared via university emails. One of the programs that has been affected by this change is SPSS, which is a statistical software program that is widely used by researchers, particularly those in the social/behavioral sciences. Due to these changes, and it is now impossible to share SPSS output with collaborators via email because university IT has deemed these files to be risky. Yet, there isn't compelling evidence demonstrating that these types of files are frequently used to send malicious code by bad actors within the university. Moreover, any attempt to persuade central IT to alter course regarding this approach borders on the Quixotic. IT will not respond to faculty about issues and problems are met with silence or proposed fixes that are foolishly impractical.

Furthermore, on a daily basis, various e-mails are held back and have to be "manually" released by the faculty individually through Mimecast software. The holding back of emails is not effective. It has blocked Senate-related listserves and messages from professional organizations; yet, fails to stop real spam. Moreover, links provided in e-mails undergo a suspicious "vetting" process before they are actually engaged when clicking on them. Is this a "big brother" moment where UITS watches over which websites faculty visit?

• HR Centralization

PIs that receive federal grant funds cannot currently hire the personnel stated in the grant, and thus cannot accomplish the goals specified in their grant applications. There is some talk of the federal agencies suing the university for violating contracts. Also, even if a PI has federal grant money for the purpose, they cannot give raises to personnel paid exclusively off the grants, even though their workload has increased.

• Business Office Centralization

PIs are having difficulty getting grant proposals processed in a timely manner with the centralized system of RII providing "pool" proposal personnel. For example, in a recent proposal deadline in a certain department, seven proposals were not submitted on time to Sponsored Projects. As a result, the proposals were not fully vetted before submission and were not prepared in accordance with the federal guidelines. The lack of personal interaction between the proposer and the processor leads to mistakes and misunderstandings.

• Human Subjects Research Review (IRB process)

For faculty who work with human subjects, the process to get approval for studies has become

nothing less than a Kafkaian morass where it can often take months to receive approval for studies that present no risk to research participants. This is entirely due to the centralization process that the university undertook a few years ago where protocols are now reviewed by IRB staff who do not have significant research backgrounds. Specifically, because they lack substantive research experience, they a) don't understand the urgency to complete research projects in a timely fashion particularly for early career faculty and graduate students, b) approach their work as through a bureaucratic lens (e.g., it is not uncommon for an approval to be held up for days because of a misspelling), and c) lack the necessary 'real world' experience to understand the perspective of researchers. These issues with the IRB have led experienced faculty, early career scholars and graduate students to either abandon projects completely or put future publication at risk because the IRB recommendations have created considerable flaws in a study. There is little motivation to process requests properly because of the lack of accountability.