Core Office Conversations

What guidance and resources are available? Have I read and understood the guidance?

The backbone of core office relationships is giving and receiving feedback. Become familiar with where the policies and procedures are posted, and whether they have any supplemental guidance. Ask yourself, “Have I read and understood the rules?” If yes, great! Give them that feedback. “Hey core office…just wanted to let you know I read this policy and it is great – super clear, easy to follow, thanks so much for making my job easier!”.

Are they responsive? Am I asking questions? Am I responsive?

If you find something is confusing or seems contradictory, find the person in that office who will answer your questions AND will listen to feedback about how those rules are presented. Many offer trainings, tooltips, workshops, or open labs to make sure the campus community is aware of them and understands them, but sometimes you have to pick up the phone. If enough people have the same concerns, we have a better chance of getting clarification for everyone.

What support can they offer for local processes? Am I doing my part to encourage compliance?

Include the core office in your process improvement plans. Are there ways they can reinforce what you’re putting into practice? Will they do a local presentation designed for faculty? And within our own scope of control: Are we doing what we can to encourage compliance? Are we setting expectations locally and holding people to those expectations? At the start of our change efforts, we set an expectation that all faculty members meet with us individually. When some were adamantly against this, our department chair gave them the option of meeting with him instead.

Faculty Conversations – an effort exercise

Meet in person

First, we met in person with every faculty member, every term. I realize for some of you, this may sound impossible. And it is impossible unless you and your unit decides it is worth your time. In any given unit I’ve worked with, there were a multitude of areas that needed addressing. There are issues in my current department that I simply haven’t gotten to yet. Because time is a finite resource. I am a finite resource. I cannot address all things at once, and neither can you. We made the conscious choice to prioritize effort. It meant some other things had to wait.

List all activities

In these meetings, we run through all activities we’re aware of that the faculty member engaged in for that term. Meeting in person to do this gives us the opportunity to prompt the faculty on things they may not otherwise recall. For example, serving on a proposal review panel is a typical service activity our faculty engage in, but that we’re not usually aware of. In these meetings, we may say “what about service – did you do any journal refereeing or proposal review?” and many times the answer is “oh yes, I forgot about that”.

Average hours per activity/total hours = percentage effort

Once we have all activities accounted for, we start talking in terms of average hours spent per week on each activity. "Understanding that it fluctuates week to week, about how many hours a week would you say you spent on x,y,z?" This is the opportunity to dispel commonly held myths about how faculty should be thinking about their "work week". In almost every discussion that first term we had to explain that effort isn't a percentage of an imaginary 40-hour workweek, but a percentage of the total time worked. From this task we can create fractions which we can then turn into percentages. This is a more tangible way to think about and calculate effort.

Faculty Conversations – common discussions

"Why are we doing this?" or "who does this go to?"

We tried a lot of different methods to address these types of questions. The answer that seemed to be most effective – to click for the most faculty – is "so that we can satisfy auditors." Effort reporting is one of the only areas where the PI is the final certifier. It doesn't go to the chair for final approval – it rests solely on the PI. If we're ever audited on this, it is the PI who will have to answer the question "how did you come up with these effort allocations?". Now the faculty can say "I met with my effort coordinator, we listed all of my activities for the term, we talked in terms of average time spent per week, which we then turned into percentages". This shows a thoughtful process and will likely prevent further inquiry.

"Someone has always just filled this in for me"

We used this opportunity to explain that this is the cycle we're trying to break. Going back to the discussion of audits: if the PI isn't familiar at all with the audit process and its potential consequences, you can spend some time talking about those. Several institutions have had to pay hefty fines for falsifying effort reports which is how they view thoughtless effort certification. In some cases, PIs have lost their eligibility for receiving federal funding. Sometimes the pushback here is that an audit may never come and that we're spending a lot of time preparing for something that may never happen. To this I always say that "it isn't a problem until it's a problem and then it is a BIG problem". Sometimes the consequences are big enough that you need to mitigate the risk.

"This is so subjective"

Especially when trying to identify average hours for tasks, we often hear this comment. As long as it is based on the PI's perception of how they spent their time, it is ok that it is subjective. No one else should compel them to certify something that doesn't feel right to them. It is also understood and accepted that these are not exact – no one is punching a clock here, these are estimates.

"I work more than 100%"

This statement is a good opportunity to talk about when "work time" is. It isn't just when they're in the office, and it isn't a 40-hour work week. It doesn't matter if they're on campus in the middle of the weekday, or if they're on their couch at 2am. If they're working in their capacity as a UF faculty member, then it counts. No one can work more than 100%, but everyone's denominator is different and theirs is just bigger. Using the tried-and-true pie analogy – their pie is bigger, their slice is bigger, but it still all adds up to 100% of a pie.

Post culture-shift possibilities

Once the foundation of trust and policy understanding is established, it is possible to loosen the reigns a bit and providing flexibility. Consider giving two options: 1) continued in-person (or virtual) meetings to complete their report and certification, or 2) independent entry directly into the system. See final pages for a sample of how we presented this to our Physics faculty. Please feel free to edit for your unit as you see fit.

We also called upon our core office partner, cost analysis, and asked them to help facilitate this for us. Since they are aware of the process we're trying out, they serve as a second set of eyes on reports that come in with a large percentage allocated to that category.

We still require meetings with any new faculty for at least a full year (full effort cycle) to lay that foundation for them.

Physics Effort Reporting Options

Effective with the fall 2020 reporting term, Physics faculty may choose between two options to complete their effort certification reports.

Option 1 – Continued face-to-face (virtual) meetings with RA (research administrator)

Faculty set up a time with their assigned RA to prepare and certify their effort report:

1. The RA enters all students, committees, and sponsored project information ahead of meeting
2. The RA completes the effort report in real-time with the faculty
3. The RA advances the report to the faculty in the system
4. The faculty certifies the report

This all-in-one meeting allows for real-time support from the RA, and in most cases will result in a one-and-done approach for the faculty.

*This option is required for the first 3 effort terms for all new Physics faculty.

Option 2 – Independent in-system preparation and certification

Faculty prepare and certify their effort report independently in myUFL, after some input from the RA:

1. The RA enters all students, committees, and sponsored project information
2. The RA allocates the minimum effort for courses and sponsored research based on commitments as currently recorded in UF's systems
3. Effort must total 100% to advance the report so the RA enters the total remaining percentage in the "University/College/Department Administration" category as a **placeholder only**
4. Before the effort certification deadline, the faculty re-allocates the effort percentages based on actual effort estimates for the term and certifies the record
5. The RA reviews the certified record and addresses any concerns with the faculty

Other items of note regarding Option 2:

- Faculty should certify a report that represents their best estimate of how they spent their time.
- If the certified report allocates less effort to any course and/or any sponsored research project than the UF system expects, the RA works with the faculty to address the discrepancy and faculty recertifies once resolved.
- The report as advanced to the faculty is not appropriate for certification as-is (see items 2-3 above). It is therefore critical that faculty thoughtfully allocate their effort, just as they would if meeting with their RA. If the effort report is certified with obvious neglect, an in-person meeting will be required to review effort fundamentals and complete the current report.

Helpful tools and guides

[Effort Reporting Glossary]
[Effort Reporting Activity Categories]