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Colleges and universities that receive federal grants must keep careful records of the time and effort their employees spend on grant-funded projects. Keeping track of all this information can be a difficult process, especially when employees are working on multiple projects simultaneously—and many institutions admit they struggle with this task. But it doesn't have to be that way.

There are two keys to tracking the time and effort spent on grant-funded projects more accurately and efficiently, according to national grants consultant Deborah Ward: (1) making sure employees document this information on a timely and ongoing basis, and (2) giving employees an easy way to do this.



THE CHALLENGE

To learn how colleges and universities approach the tracking of labor for grant-funded projects, the Governing Institute recently surveyed 120 higher-education officials from a variety of institutions. Forty-four percent of respondents said they were not satisfied with their department's tracking of grant projects.

“The single biggest challenge in effective grants management is that many people don't record their time and effort on an ongoing basis,” said Ward, author of the books *Effective Grants Management* and *Writing Proposals That Win*. “They might let that slide until the end of the grant period, at which time they are forced to go back and try to recreate this information from memory. But that's an incredibly difficult thing to do after the fact.”

Not having an efficient way to record this information also causes problems.

According to the Governing Institute survey, 83 percent of colleges and universities still track grant projects manually in paper files or data entered in spreadsheets—processes that are time-consuming and vulnerable to mistakes. These manual processes make real-time visibility into the status of grant-funded projects very difficult to obtain, 52 percent of respondents acknowledged.

Being able to record their hours via a mobile device can make it much easier for grant-funded employees to comply with time and effort certification requirements, Ward said—especially if they are working in the field. But 52 percent of survey respondents said they are not able to track grant projects on a variety of devices, including cell phones or tablets.

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WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Colleges and universities must be able to produce time and effort documentation quickly in the event of an audit, according to the federal government's Uniform Grant Guidance. Failing to do so could put their funding at risk, not just for a current grant project but for future applications as well.

Colleges and universities that receive federal grants must fill out a Schedule of Expenditures of Federal Awards (SEFA) form at the end of the year, listing all of their grant-funded projects. Institutions that receive at least \$750,000 in federal grants must undergo an A-133 audit, in which auditors pick a few grant projects at random to focus on.

"You have to produce all of the documentation for whichever projects they select," Ward explained. "And it's not like you get six months' notice that they're going to do this. In some cases, it may just be a few weeks' notice. They'll say, 'We'll be coming on such and such a date, and these are the projects that we want to see documentation on.'"

If you don't have documentation to show how much time and effort your employees have spent on a grant-funded project, you could end up with a finding in your audit, Ward said. In that event, the funder "would have the right to ask for those dollars back."

When a college or university receives findings in an audit, it has to respond to the auditor within a certain period of time and explain what measures it will put into place to address those findings. If an institution receives the same finding in multiple years, Ward said, "that organization could be viewed as a high-risk grantee," and it might have trouble securing funding in the future.

While these rules apply to federal grants management in particular, private funders also reserve the right to audit grantees.

"An organization has to make the decision: Do we want to require time and effort certification forms for federal grants only—or do we want to cover our bases and require them for every grant, no matter who the funder is," Ward said, "because a private funder certainly has the right to come in and audit how you are spending its grant funds."

According to the Governing Institute survey,

37% of respondents said they have been audited by an external agency—and **9%** were found to be out of compliance with reporting requirements.

A BETTER WAY

With the potential for audits in mind, it's essential to keep careful records of the time and effort that employees spend on grant projects—and be able to produce this documentation quickly on demand. Ward described two keys to effective compliance.

First, “It's really critical that people are keeping track of (time and effort) on an ongoing, regular basis,” she said—and not trying to recall this information after the fact. And second, employees need an easy way to record this information in a single, centralized database. Kronos' automated workforce management system is one such solution.

Kronos' workforce management software includes an “Activities” module that makes time and effort tracking for grant projects easy. Like a “timecard within a timecard,” this module enables employees to punch in and out when they start or finish working on a specific project, leading to more accurate and effective reporting.

Ward described three key features that an automated system for tracking time and effort should include:

- (1) It should communicate with the existing HR and finance systems a college or university is using.
- (2) It should allow for various levels of security clearance, enabling administrators to restrict their employees' access only to information that pertains to them. “You want to be able to restrict their level of access, so they can only go in and fill out their own time and effort certifications and pass these along to their supervisor,” she said.
- (3) It should enable employees to record their time and effort using a wide range of devices, including mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets.

Kronos' intuitive and easy to use automated workforce management system meets all of these criteria and more.

If colleges and universities are not using an automated system to track and certify their employees' time and effort for grant-funded projects, “moving to an automated system is certainly the way to go,” Ward asserted.

The investment this requires easily can be justified by the amount of money at stake if an institution cannot produce convincing documentation during an audit, she noted—not to mention the peace of mind that such a system delivers, which is priceless.

“There's something to be said for not having to panic in the event of an audit, because you know that you've got that documentation in place,” she concluded. “And you should have that documentation in place.”

How current grant tracking processes are limited

A survey of 120 higher-education officials revealed the limitations in current grant-tracking methods:



(Source: Governing Institute Grant and Project Tracking Survey, 2015)

ABOUT DEBORAH WARD

Deborah Ward is a grant writing consultant for clients in the education, nonprofit, and health care sectors. A former columnist for *eSchool News*, she provides workshops covering a variety of topics related to grant research, writing, and management. She is the author of the books *Effective Grants Management* and *Writing Proposals That Win*. She is also a grant writer for the Gundersen Lutheran Medical Foundation in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

ABOUT KRONOS



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Kronos: Workforce Innovation That Works™

297 Billerica Road
Chelmsford, MA 01824
(800) 225-1561
info@kronos.com
www.kronos.com/highereducation

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