University 101: What Community Partners Want to Know about How Research is Conducted at Universities
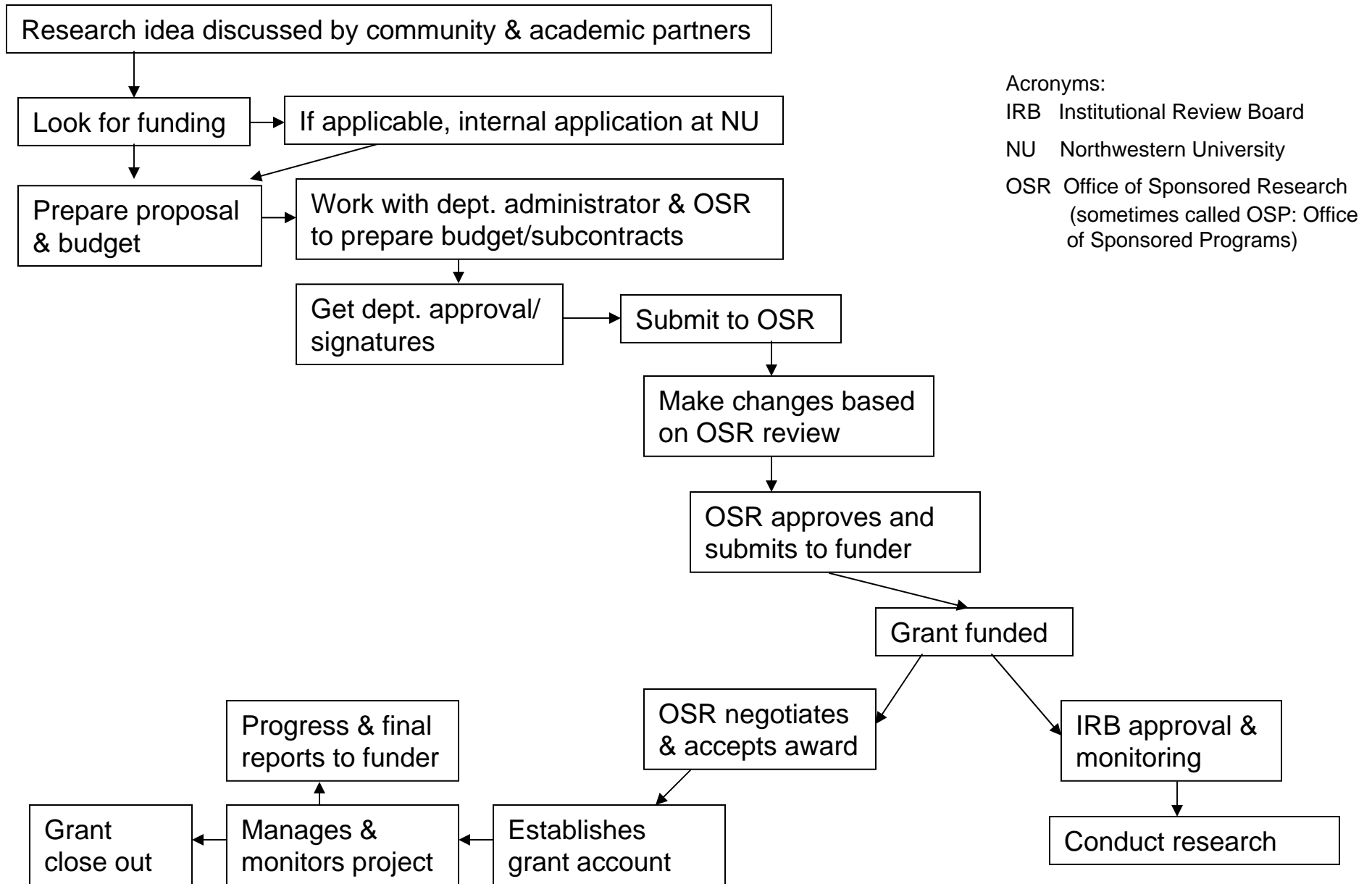
This resource covers basic background information about the logistics and administrative processes research projects and grant submissions are routed through in the university. This information may be helpful for community partners to understand when partnering with an academic research team. _Note_: _Most universities have similar processes and offices but the specifics may differ between Northwestern University and other academic institutions._

How a research project flows through the university: Research idea to grant completion

1. Research ideas are conceptualized (and discussed by community and academic partners, if an engaged project). Faculty informs their department at the earliest stage of discussion.
2. The partners look for funding opportunities
    a. If a grant application only allows only one submission per university, the project may need to go through an internal application at the university.
3. Proposal and budget preparation
    a. Faculty partner works with their department administrator and the Northwestern University (NU) Office of Sponsored Research (OSR) to prepare grant budgets.
    b. If applicable, also prepares subcontracts to community partners or academic partners at other universities. Organizations (community or other universities) that are subcontractors may need the proposal to go through a review process at their institution.
4. Get department approval and signatures of proposal and budget
5. Faculty partner submits the proposal to the OSR. Must submit to OSR at least 5 days before the grant deadline.
6. OSR reviews and identifies necessary changes. Faculty (and partners) make changes.
7. Once review is completed, OSR endorses the proposal on behalf of NU and submits the proposal to the funder.
8. Grant is awarded
9. OSR negotiates and accepts the award
    a. Establishes a grant account
    b. Manages and monitors project. This includes submitting progress and final reports to the funder.
    c. Grant close out when the project and grant are completed.
10. Faculty submits project plan and materials to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approval.
11. Conduct of the research project.

Note: Proposals must go through the above process even if NU is a subcontractor on the application, not the main applicant.

Flow through the University: Grant idea to grant completion

Research idea discussed by community & academic partners

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Look for funding → If applicable, internal application at NU

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Prepare proposal & budget → Work with dept. administrator & OSR to prepare budget/subcontracts

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Get dept. approval/ signatures → Submit to OSR

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Make changes based on OSR review

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OSR approves and submits to funder

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Grant funded

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OSR negotiates & accepts award   IRB approval & monitoring

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Establishes grant account   Conduct research

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Manages & monitors project → Progress & final reports to funder

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Grant close out

Acronyms:

IRB — Institutional Review Board

NU — Northwestern University

OSR — Office of Sponsored Research (sometimes called OSP: Office of Sponsored Programs)

Alliance for Research in Chicagoland Communities

Indirect Rates
During the preparation of the grant budget, you will hear about indirect costs. Indirect costs are items that cannot be directly tied to the project itself. Examples of indirect costs are: Computers, internet access costs, administrative assistant salary, utilities, rent, copies, and general office supplies. Universities have very large indirect rates that have been negotiated with the federal government. At Northwestern University, the rate is 52.5%. Community-based organizations (CBOs) may also be able to include indirect costs for their portion of the grant budget. _Note_: More info below on this topic.

Letters of Support
During the application process, CBOs are often asked to write _letters of support_ and a description of their capabilities and contributions to a project. This may be something required by the grant proposal or something that is thought to strengthen the application. The letter of support usually names the grant, describes your organization and its relationship with the researcher, and states what part your organization will play if the grant is funded. A letter of support is not a formal commitment. The commitment is formalized through a subcontract and/or memorandum of understanding.

Subcontracts
While the project may be conducted with your CBO and the NU faculty, the formal legal subcontract is between NU and your organization. The negotiation of the subcontract will involve the NU faculty member's department and OSR. The subcontract will include the following: a letter of intent, a statement of work, a budget, and a budget justification. The letter of intent is signed by the executive director and demonstrates that the head of the organization is aware and is committing the organizations resources to the project. The statement of work describes completely the work the organization will do on the project. The budget outlines the funding that the organization requires to participate and the justification outlines in detail (including the effort and role for each person on the project) why that funding is needed.

Timeline
Once the grant is submitted, there is no guarantee that it will be funded. Sometimes it may take up to 6 to 12 months to find out funding status, as research grants usually go through a peer-review process by other scientists, followed by reviews from the funding agency. It is not unusual for a large grant to be revised and submitted up to three times or to multiple funders before it is funded. During this waiting time, it is advisable for grant planning and collaboration work to continue so implementation can begin on schedule when the proposal is successfully funded.

Grant Management and Funds Distribution
Once funding is obtained, funds flow from NU to subcontractors and partners. OSR and the NU Accounting Services for Research and Sponsored Programs (ASRSP) manage the grant awards. This responsibility of grant accounting is shared by the NU faculty (principal investigator), the department administrator, the department chair or research center director, the dean, and various central offices.

CBOs that do not have a subcontract must submit invoices for grant expenses to the researcher, who then forward it to ASRSP, which then writes the check. This process can be slow, so CBOs are advised to plan for delays in receiving funds. Often delays in payment are out of the control of individual investigators.

Reporting
Researchers are obligated to report, usually on a semi-annual or annual basis, the progress of their work to the funder. Research partners may ask you to submit reports on behalf of your CBO

subcontract or work on the grant to help them write their reports more accurately. The timing of reports and expectations for what reports contain should be made clear in your memorandum of understanding or subcontract.

What kinds of rules and regulations do researchers have to follow?

All NU researchers are required to follow rules and regulations that are specified by NU, their funders, and by state and federal regulators. Some of the most important regulations have to do with assuring that research does not harm study subjects, and that patient confidentiality is protected.

The **Institutional Review Board (IRB)** at NU reviews research proposals and grants permission for implementation, once the safety and privacy of study participants is established. The review process is intended to protect those who participate in research by providing oversight of issues such as study quality (*Is it good science?*), disclosure of risks and benefits (*If there is the possibility of any benefit or discomfort or risk to the participants, how will you let participants know about it?*), and the design and administration of consent forms (*Are the consent forms clear and explained in a consistent manner?*).

This process must take place, even if your CBO holds the main grant and the researcher is only working for you as an evaluator. The NU researcher is responsible for submitting the application to the IRB and following the regulations, but this process very likely will require your organization's input.

IRB approval must be renewed annually. Any changes in the research protocol (plan for how research is conducted) or research materials (e.g. recruitment materials, survey/interview guide, etc.) must be submitted, reviewed, and approved as they occur.

The IRB requires that members of the research team, which may sometimes include you or your CBO staff, take part in IRB human research participant projection training to assure that everyone who is involved in the study has an appropriate level of understanding of the principles of the safe and ethical conduct of research. *Note: CCH and the NU IRB offer an in-person community-friendly training. Contact CCH@northwestern.edu to learn more.*

Timeline: No research participants can be recruited and no research data can be collected until the project receives IRB approval. The time it takes for a project to go through and be approved varies depending on the complexity of the project and the sensitivity of the topic and the participants (e.g. research with sensitive populations like youth or sensitive topics like illicit drug use will likely take longer to be approved). The IRB review usually takes no more than two or three months to complete but it can be longer or shorter depending on the type of project. Often the IRB requests revisions before they will approve the project. IRB delays should be anticipated when planning the timeline of a project. *Note: IRBs are required to have lay members. Contact CCH@northwestern.edu if you are interested in learning more about serving.*

Who else may community partners interact with at the university?
A research project is usually conducted by a research team, not just a single faculty member. The size and nature of the team varies depending on the size of the project. The lead scientist on a research project is usually called the Principal Investigator (PI). S/he usually assembles a team that may include a Project Manager, data analyst or biostatiscian, and research assistant(s). In community-engaged research projects, some of these roles or additional roles may be filled by community partners.

How are faculty evaluated and rewarded?

Most NU researchers are supported by grants. Like CBOs, they raise the money for some or all of their salary and the salaries of their research team by obtaining grants. Researchers may be interested in pursuing a project with a CBO, but need to secure funding in order to conduct a full-scale collaborative research project. On the other hand, many academics also are willing to give talks, review proposals, or serve on boards of CBOs because they share a commitment to the same community or health concern.

To have successful careers, researchers must establish themselves as an expert in a particular area of inquiry, whether it be basic science, clinical, or community health related. This is typically done by building a program of related research projects and presenting the findings of this research to other faculty at meetings and in professional journals. Academic promotion is based on demonstration of expertise as evidenced by getting grant funding for research projects, authoring journal publications, serving on committees of professional organizations (e.g. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists) or government agencies (e.g. National Institutes of Health), and providing education and mentoring for students and junior faculty. For most faculty, all of this translates into a focus on grants (typically, federal research funding from agencies like NIH, CDC, AHRQ or PCORI) and papers (peer-reviewed journal manuscripts).

Faculty are on different promotion tracks. Some tracks are 'tenure' tracks and some are non-tenure tracks. Faculty on all tracks are promoted from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor to Full Professor. Faculty are promoted to these different tracks by fulfilling requirements and career progress as described above. Faculty can only be in a certain position (e.g. Assistant Professor) for a designated amount of time before being required to go up for promotion. (For example, faculty typically have seven years to meet the requirements to move from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor). If they do not fulfill the promotion requirements in that time period, they may be asked to leave the university.

What is tenure? Why should faculty promotion and tenure matter to community partners?

Tenure is a faculty member's contractual right not to have their position terminated without just cause. Once a faculty member is tenured, they cannot be fired. The original purpose of tenure was intended to ensure that faculty had the right to academic freedom (it allows them to have intellectual freedom to study controversial topics and report honest conclusions). There are a decreasing number of faculty who are in tenure-track positions.

The success of research partnerships depends on the development of personal relationships, most often with individual faculty. It is in the best self-interest of the community that a faculty member be recognized and rewarded for their work on community research projects. Establishing respectful, trusting relationships takes a lot of time and effort. Once a community partner is able to build these type of relationships with faculty, you want to count on them being there well into the future. You have made an "investment" in building a relationship with them and teaching them about your community. Ensuring that faculty are successfully promoted and recognized at their university ensures that they can stay and continue to partner with you.

As mentioned above, most faculty are rewarded and promoted based on how many grants they bring in to the university and how many journal articles they publish. Most promotion decisions are not based on the impact the faculty member makes in the community. Community partners can work to influence the criteria used in faculty evaluations for promotion and tenure to ensure they reflect a university commitment to and value of community improvement. As more community-

engaged faculty members are promoted, the more likely they will become leaders at the university who can also help to push for these types of institutional changes.

Information, Resources & Quick Links for Preparing & Submitting Grant Proposals to NIH

Note: Info below may change. Best to look at grants.gov for the most up to date info.

Whether you are applying directly for National Institutes of Health (NIH) funds, or are working with another investigator who is handling the application, there are many requirements for NIH proposals that are best taken care of well in advance. While it can be time consuming, figuring out the NIH maze is well worth the effort. These steps will allow members of your organization to apply for funds as investigators (as opposed to "other significant personnel") and will allow your organization to apply directly for funds (as opposed to working with other investigators through their institutions/organizations).

Organizations submitting grant proposals to the NIH need to have a Central Contractor Registration (CCR) registration, an organizational Data Universal Number (DUNS), and individuals within those organizations submitting grant proposals as principal investigators (PIs) need to have Electronic Research Administration (eRA) Commons IDs. Organization representatives signing off on grant proposals need to have Authorized Organization Representative (AOR) designations. The process for registering for these identification numbers takes several weeks and coordination with departments inside your organization. There are also software and hardware requirements for submitting grant proposals. Here is a checklist and a list of websites to go to for information on how to register and submit proposals (with helpful tips along the way).

Your Organization's DUNS Number
Many of the processes below require your organization's Data Universal Number (DUNS). The DUNS is a unique nine-character identification number provided by the commercial company, Dun and Bradstreet (D&B). If your organization has one, it can be found on this website: http://www.dnb.com/US/duns_update/

To obtain a DUNS number, go to this website: (You should not apply for a DUNS number without involving your organization's administrative office.) http://fedgov.dnb.com/webform/displayHomePage.do

eRA Commons Identifications (Organization and Individual)
If you have been or think you will be working on a grant proposal going in to the NIH, register for an eRA Commons ID now. This is the single most important identifier required of the NIH for individual investigators. In order to do this, your organization has to register in the eRA Commons database (if they haven't already). The only person that can register your organization is the person that is able to sign contracts and financial documents for your agency, usually the CEO, CFO or grants officer. (This person will usually become your Authorized Organization Representative (AOR).

Once the account is created, there is a person in charge of assigning eRA Commons IDs in your organization, and that person will request one for you. Your AOR will either act in this role or assign this task to someone in your organization. This entire process can take 2-4 weeks.

General Questions about eRA Commons IDs for your organization or individuals needing IDs can be answered here: http://era.nih.gov/commons/faq_commons.cfm

Northwestern University can also request an eRA Commons ID for community partners submitting proposals. (This process requires you to submit your name and social security number to NU.) If you would like assistance with this, contact CCH@northwestern.edu.

Grants.gov Registration
To submit proposals directly from your organization to the NIH often requires electronic submission through grants.gov. Here are two good websites to visit regarding this process (with info about hardware and software needed for applications):
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/ElectronicReceipt/preparing_grantsgov_reg.htm and
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/ElectronicReceipt/preparing.htm

Negotiating Indirect Cost Agreements
Grant proposals permit applicants to budget for costs directly related to the project described in the grant. Indirect costs are not permitted in the budget. Indirect costs are items that cannot be directly tied to the project itself. Examples of indirect costs are: Computers, internet access costs, administrative assistant salary, utilities, rent, copies, and general office supplies.

A negotiated indirect rate is a formula that the federal government uses, based on audited financial records of your organization, to account for these costs as a part of your grant proposal.

When applying for federal grants, agencies and organizations that have a negotiated indirect cost rate can include a percentage of direct costs as part of the grant proposal to cover indirect costs. Without this negotiated rate, these indirect costs are not allowed.

The Federal Government negotiates indirect rates with non-profits, educational institutions and small businesses. The agency that negotiates indirect rates for health and human service agencies is the Department of Health and Human Services. http://rates.psc.gov/fms/dca/background.html

A very good Q&A can be found here: http://rates.psc.gov/fms/dca/faq-general.pdf
Negotiating indirect cost rates can take weeks or months – this process should be initiated very early.

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health held a Community Partner Educational Conference Call on June 3, 2009 on the "why and how" of obtaining a federally negotiated indirect rate, a federal wide assurance for human subjects research and registration through grants.gov and NIH eRACommons. Access the call audio file and handouts at
http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/pastpresentations.html (scroll down to June 3rd date to find materials).

Sources
Community-Engaged Research: A Quick-Start Guide for Community-Based Organizations. Community Engagement Program, Clinical & Translational Science Institute at the University of California, San Francisco. http://ctsi.ucsf.edu/files/CE/guide_for_cbos.pdf

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