Research Administration Services at MIT

Research Administration Services (RAS) is a service unit within the Office of the Vice President for Research (VPR). RAS evolved from the former Office of Sponsored Programs as part of a bold plan, launched in fall 2018 by VPR in conjunction with the Office of the Provost, to "re-invent research administration" at MIT. The focus of this plan is to leverage expertise across the Institute to better serve the needs of MIT's increasingly complex research enterprise.

RAS serves as a central hub to support MIT investigators and research administrators. RAS directly provides federal, state, local, and other grant and contract administration services; management services for research subawards; and post-award management services for all sponsored programs.

In addition, RAS is closely aligned with other VPR service areas that provide research administration support and training, research administration system development and maintenance, and research compliance services, including services in the areas of research integrity, export control, and financial conflict of interest (COI).

RAS also works with the new Office of Strategic Alliances and Technology Transfer, which develops agreements to facilitate MIT projects, programs, and consortia with industrial, nonprofit, and international sponsors, partners, and collaborators.

Leadership and Structure

In order to coordinate our services with the other VPR services that are crucial to research administration, RAS shares the leadership of Colleen Leslie, senior director of research administration and compliance, with related VPR service units. The organization structure below illustrates which services are shared.

- Research Administration Services (RAS)

  - Grants and Contracts Teams

  - Research Subawards Team

- VPR/RAS Integrated Services

  - Compliance: COI, Export Control, Research Integrity, etc.

  - RA Systems and Support Teams

  - Data Services Team

This structure allows for the growth of individual functions as the nature of research at MIT continues to evolve.

Building Stronger Foundations

This year marked the first full year of the newly re-imagined RAS, and the emphasis has been on establishing a stronger foundation on which to build. The initial focus has been on stabilizing the staff and fostering employee engagement by establishing a new, small team structure; fostering the development of existing staff members; providing growth opportunities and internal promotions and transitioning temporary staff to permanent roles; filling open positions and repurposing and reallocating talent to meet emerging needs; and implementing new onboarding and training plans. This people-centric focus has resulted in a stronger team environment and better utilization of individual skill sets.

VPR/RAS teams also reached out to expand existing programs and foster new relationships and programming across the Institute. Some key efforts initiated this year are described below.

Coordination with MIT Lincoln Laboratory

MIT Lincoln Laboratory is a US Department of Defense federally funded research and development center chartered to apply advanced technologies as a means of meeting critical national security needs. The contract office at Lincoln Laboratory has traditionally had its own administration systems and procedures separate from those used for MIT campus research administration. The RAS grants and contracts managers began a series of discussions with the Lincoln Laboratory contract office regarding proposal review processes and the use of the Kuali Coeus proposal and award management system to leverage the efficiencies of shared resources.

Expanding Compliance Infrastructure

As the research landscape becomes more complex and interconnected, it is increasingly important to develop robust systems to maintain research integrity, avoid sharing of sensitive materials and information, protect the rights of both human and animal subjects, and mitigate potential financial conflicts of interest. While the comprehensive expansion of the current MIT compliance system is ongoing, some key steps were taken in FY2020.

- The Conflict of Interest Committee was launched. This subcommittee of the Committee on Intellectual Property is charged with reviewing current policies and cases for policy exceptions. It is chaired by Professor Tim Swager and staffed by VPR's COI officer.

- The new Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES) Connect application was piloted. This application is designed to assist MIT investigators with the submission, approval, and management of human subject research protocols; full implementation is under way. A Committee on Animal Care (CAC) Connect module for animal research protocols is being developed through the same platform.

- A second export control officer was hired to meet the increasingly nuanced and complex demands related to monitoring the sharing and transfer of materials and information across the MIT global research community.

Leveraging Strengths to Maintain Operations during COVID-19

While many other administrative projects and initiatives were developed in FY2020, and some were poised to launch, most were put on hold in early March when the global COVID-19 pandemic forced the sudden exodus from the MIT campus. As students and faculty left the campus, all non-essential personnel, including the staff of VPR and RAS, made the switch to working remotely from home.

VPR/RAS operations teams were able to seamlessly adapt to the changing needs of MIT researchers and research administrators. The strong foundation that was built earlier in the year paid off in the flexibility and resiliency of the staff in these unprecedented circumstances. For example, the grants and contracts team reviewed and submitted a total of 3,359 proposals this year (up 7% from FY2019) and processed 1,186 new awards (up 3% from FY2019), continuing an upward trend in overall proposal and award volume.
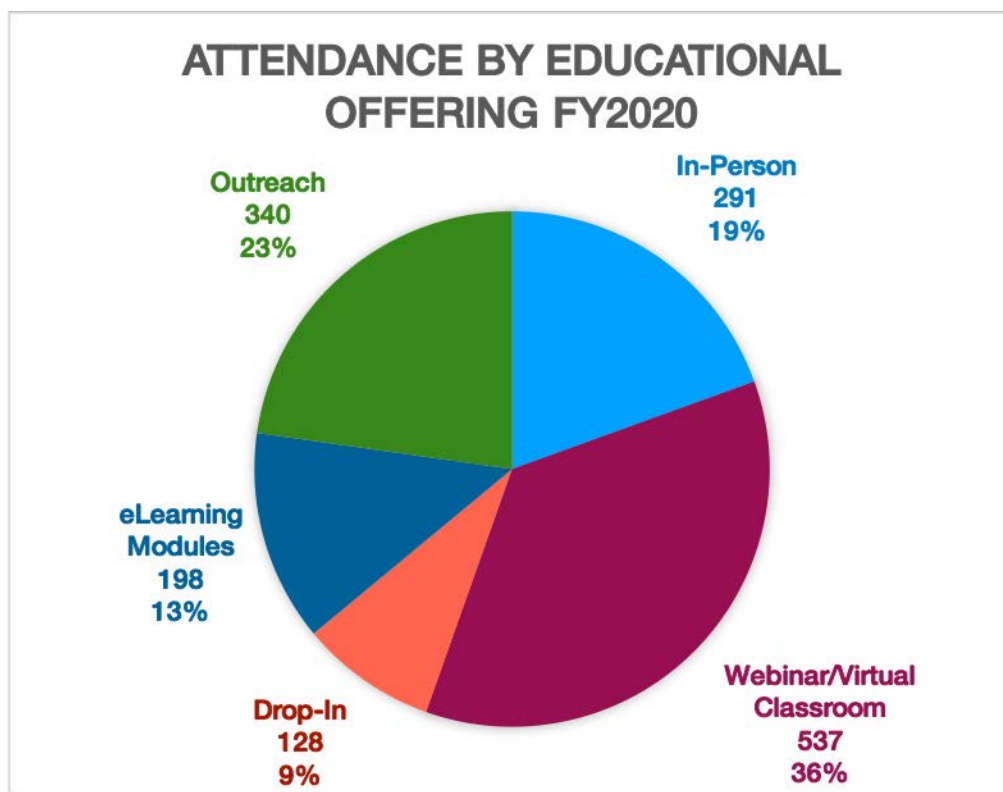
In addition, contract administrators worked closely with investigators, sponsors, and research administrators to process contractual adjustments such as no-cost extensions in accordance with sponsor-specific COVID-19 policies.

- The grants and contracts team, with critical negotiation assistance from the Office of Strategic Alliances and Technology Transfer, was able to put COVID-related funding in place quickly, providing resources for projects aimed at ending the pandemic.

New Proposals and New Awards by Fiscal Year
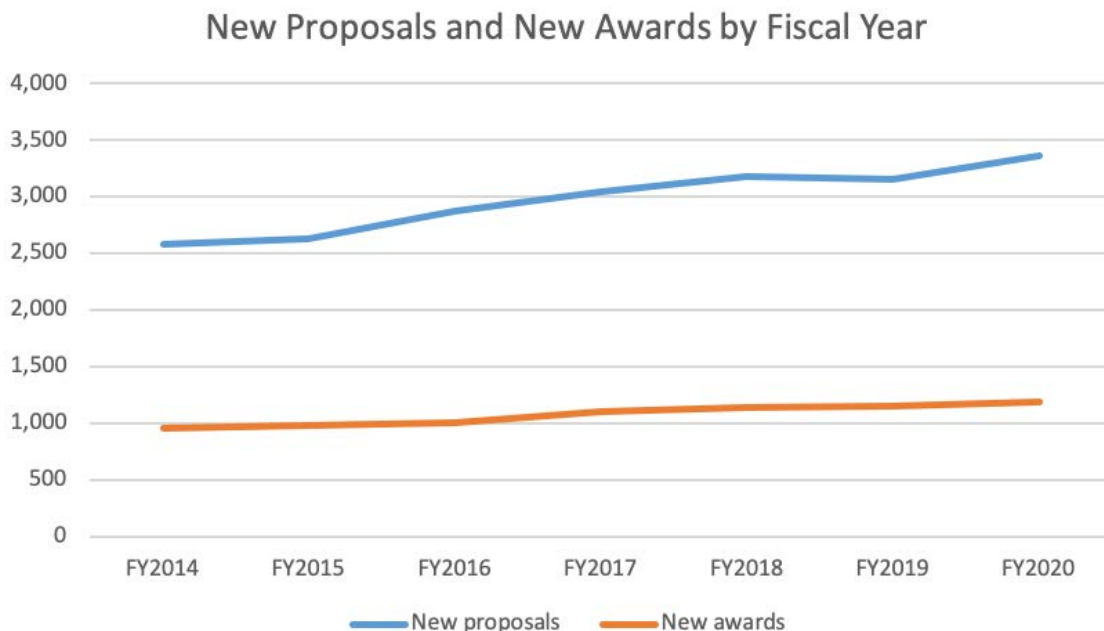
- The research subawards team maintained service and processed a total of 3,338 subaward invoices (up 6% from FY2019).

- The VPR COI officer worked with the Conflict of Interest Committee to allow for review of COVID-19-related research projects that would otherwise be deemed as having real or perceived conflicts of interest in order to facilitate critical research in the areas of diagnostics, drug delivery, and detection. One of the projects reviewed will be moving forward, driving research on CRISPR-based diagnostics for COVID-19.

- To further support the COI disclosure process, the systems and support team quickly enabled Touchstone/Duo (MIT's two-factor authentication system) for the COI module, making it easier for faculty to connect from anywhere.

- The export control team worked with International People Placement, the International Coordinating Committee, the International Scholars Office, the International Students Office, and other groups to incorporate export control reviews of COVID-induced international work-from-home arrangements, helping to protect sensitive data and intellectual property.

- Educational offerings from the RA Hub, a program within systems and support, were pivoted quickly from in-person formats to virtual classrooms, webinars, and new drop-in sessions, serving an even broader audience. The drop-in session format, in particular, has provided a way for research administrators to connect with each other and with VPR/RAS staff while we have all been remote.

ATTENDANCE BY EDUCATIONAL OFFERING FY2020

Outreach 340 23%
In-Person 291 19%
eLearning Modules 198 13%
Drop-In 128 9%
Webinar/Virtual Classroom 537 36%

Looking to the Future

The foundations that have been built in the VPR/RAS teams, coupled with the lessons learned as we face each new challenge during this pandemic, have shown us how nimble and adaptable we can be. We plan to bring this new vision to the processes, tools, and projects that are part of our re-imagined research administration at MIT to better serve the Institute's research community.

Colleen Leslie
Senior Director