VPR Spotlight: Jennifer Lopez, Director, Office for Sponsored Programs

We sat down with Jennifer Lopez, our Director in the Office for Sponsored Programs, to discuss her transition to BC and the wealth of knowledge and experience she brings to the team.

Jennifer’s Experience and Background
Jennifer joins Boston College after an established career in research administration, which has included operational management roles that include grants and contracts, pre and post award, research finance, clinical trials, and billing compliance functions. Most recently, Jennifer held the position of Director, Research Operations Finance at Dartmouth College & Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. Prior to that, Jennifer was the Director for Sponsored Programs at the University of Miami and previously an Associate Director at Duke University in the Office of Sponsored Programs. Her strong background in both research finance and research administration will be a valuable asset to helping us further establish our evolving research administrative capabilities. In addition, Jennifer holds a Black Belt Certification in Six Sigma, a management methodology for advanced statistical data analysis, and process improvement.

How has your previous experience helped you transition to Boston College?
My previous experience includes the start-up of multiple academic research departments and centers, as well as various departmental reorganizations. I began my research administration career by taking part in the start-up of the Hussman Institute for Human Genomics—the largest funded institute at the University of Miami. After that successful launch, I later contributed to the start-up of the Center for Therapeutic Innovations, which was funded by an appropriation from the State of Florida. My third managerial role within a university/departmental start-up, was in the development and establishment of a newly formed central administration office known as MEDREPS. This particular start-up was more of a university-wide reorganization of departmental research administrative functions across the University of Miami’s Miller School of Medicine. During my tenure at Duke University, I served as the lead financial officer for over 15,000 externally funded grants and contracts— with a portfolio exceeding $1.2BN USD. I also developed and taught courses in research administration for Duke’s Research Administration Academy.

Altogether my training and experience with multiple university start-ups— along with my expertise in departmental and central office administration affords me a wealth of knowledge to draw upon. Thus, my mix of training and experience in research administration positively contribute and support current and future process improvement initiatives at Boston College.

What led you to a career in research administration?
An accountant by trade, I began my career as a Controller for Opera Gallery— a global fine arts dealer with headquarters in New York, Paris, and Miami Beach. Thereafter, I transitioned my accounting experience to the start-up role I took up as Center Administrator for The University of Miami’s Hussman Institute for Human Genomics. Being part of establishing such a scientifically impactful institute helped me to realize how rewarding a career in research administration could be.
In your opinion, what are some of the greatest impacts of Sponsored Programs efforts?
Some of the greatest impacts of Sponsored Programs is to ensure expenditures are within compliance across all of our awards and also to create, disseminate and enforce policies in accordance with the OMB Uniform Guidance across our research enterprise. With a focus on providing excellent customer support to all of our stakeholders, ensuring proper financial reporting is taking place and in a timely manner. Some of the key components to proper grants administration is ensuring the proper allocation of personnel efforts across externally funded awards, maintaining monthly reconciliations to properly track expenditures and to provide projections to investigators.

How do you see research (or specifically, OSP efforts) evolving?
I see the evolution of OSP to include the streamlining of internal processes, the identification of where the proper roles and responsibilities reside within each pre and post award unit, centrally and departmentally, and more collaboration between our office and investigators to assist with the growth of their research funding endeavors.

My current aim is to provide input and oversight over current and future structures and procedures, which could benefit from my expertise in leadership, organizational management, and broad industry perspective, garnered over the years of administrative experience in research administration.

My management style and vision can be described as focused on continuous improvement via the implementation of quantitatively structured change. That said, I do not neglect qualitative dynamics, particularly within my staff’s customer interactions. I particularly emphasize the cultivation and maintenance of a collaborative environment centered on a professional and responsive rapport with, faculty, leadership, and employees. I also place a strong emphasis on my staff’s professional growth and well-being via my leadership, knowledge, and guidance. I have an open-door policy and I do everything in my power to help them achieve their own career goals.

What goals do you have for your role/unit?
Goals for my role and unit are to first identify which processes need streamlining to create more efficient and cohesive workflows across our teams. In the coming months, I will be working in collaboration with my unit to create and/or revise Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), develop and revamp our current policies, and implement better tools to complete the work needed to maintain compliance across our externally funded awards.

Currently we have begun a process improvement initiative across the pre and post award teams, to include, training, effort reporting and payroll, a cleaner proposal process, and identifying the proper internal controls needed to remain in alignment with the OMB Uniform Guidance. Asides from these initiatives, I also plan on working through current metrics to identify opportunities for advancement in order to be ready to sustain the growth of our research portfolio.

What advice would you give to someone pursuing research as a career?
My advice would be to just dig-in! Research Administration is a challenging, yet rewarding career, where opportunities for professional and personal growth are abundant. In this field, you will have the opportunity to help manage the finances and funding for some of the world’s most cutting-edge research projects. Novices to Research Administration will find themselves working with some of the top scientists, managers, and accountants in the workforce. I am very proud of being a Research Administrator and even more proud to be your new Director within BC’s Office for Sponsored Programs. I am also quite thrilled to be working with such a wonderful team!

*For questions or suggestions please feel free to reach out to Jennifer at any time. Her office is located in Joyce House, Suite #205 and her email is Jennifer.Lopez@bc.edu