Research Administration in Japan

The Rapid Evolution of My URA Work

By Keiko Okano

Keiko Okano, NCURA Magazine Global Contributing Editor and Dan Nordquist, NCURA Magazine Sr. Editor, at INORMS 2014 discussing Japan funding opportunities as a topic for the next NCURA Magazine issue.

At EARMA 2013, I participated in a session on how to prepare an NIH proposal, which was taught by my fellow NCURA Magazine Global Editor, Olaf Svenningsen. At the time I did not know of any faculty in my department who has or was planning to apply to an NIH program. I just thought that, in the future, there might be someone who wants to apply for it, and it would be nice if I could help. Just maybe!

Well, who knew? While I was still at the conference, I received an email from the accounting office in my department. They asked me for assistance with processing some US funds, and these funds happened to be from NIH! To be more precise, it was a sub-award – actually, subawards, as I found out later that there were two concurrent ones. For this, I am so grateful to Olaf. His session wasn't meant for the task I had, but without the information I obtained from him, I would not even know where to start.

Nevertheless, the accounting personnel and I struggled through preparing the required documents. It was like working on crossword puzzles with a lot of blanks, where reading the clues leaves you with more questions. There were so many terms I did not know—OMB Circular, A-133 Audit, purchase order, F&A, fringe benefit, accounts payable, to name but a few. I was not quite sure if our compliance policies were compatible with those in the US. On top of all those, we did not have an effort reporting system, and were not familiar with issuing invoices in English.

I don't know how much of what was going on our side was within the expectation of the PI's research administrators, but I felt badly for them. They had been very patient and provided answers to all of my questions. Still, it took us a long time to finally turn in acceptable documents. This task landed on me because of my English language skills, but apparently, that's not enough. There was (and still is) a lot I had to learn.

That was when I started to consider attending the NCURA FRA Conference in San Francisco. At first I was just hoping to meet someone who had handled NIH subawards internationally (hopefully with Japan). I needed to hear a whole story, not fragmented bits of specific tasks, with background or significance I knew nothing about. Then I was thrilled to see the term "subaward monitoring" on the program, and my mind was already set.

After attending a discussion session, three sessions and a workshop on/related to subawards in FRA and PRA conferences, I now have a much better idea on what was going on during my past experiences. There were so many "I wish I knew then what I know now" moments, and it gave me some ideas on what I needed back then. Here, I would like to share them with you; your input would be highly appreciated.

1. Have a single point of contact on both parties. Ideally, that person on the Japanese side is an accounting personnel who is fluent in English and familiar with your system. If there is no one like that, a URA (usually, English is a requisite for his/her employment) would be the next best choice. I think I had most, if not all, of the emails to the accounting office and to the co-PI forwarded to me, but it is simpler if they come in the order they were received. Having to correspond with multiple persons on the PI's side was a bit confusing, too.

2. Provide an overview at the beginning. Walking through the whole process step by step would help us be better prepared. Knowing who is involved in each step would be nice, too. This is especially important when the process involve both pre- and post-award tasks so that the point #1 above cannot be met. Moreover, if you could involve us from an earlier stage, e.g. proposal writing, it would make things easier later on.

3. Make sure that the questions asked are fully under stood, then answered correctly. Denise J. Clark from University of Maryland, College Park mentioned this point during her session. Sometimes people check "Yes" hoping to hasten the process. Others may be too embarrassed to ask so many questions (not me!). Or they don't understand what they don't understand. This is not easy, but it should help avoid future surprises.

4. Got sample(s)? Knowing what exactly is expected is a great relief, and shortens the processing time.

So far, all I have been doing is asking, so I should do my part too. I will learn more about NIH funding and prepare myself. As I have to invent this wheel for Kyoto University, I would like to share it with other Japanese universities, too. The systems are different from institution to institution, but hopefully it will help them and their counterparts in the United States. Here is one of my new (fiscal) year's resolutions.

I thank NCURA and everyone at the conferences. I'm so glad I went!

Keiko Okano, Ph.D., *University Research Administrator at Kyoto University in Kyoto, Japan.*