

# Report on Research Compliance Volume 17, Number 10. September 24, 2020

## Research Admins Report Few Issues With Telework; Adopt Strategies to Ensure 'Balance'

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By Theresa Defino

When Kris Wolff, director of the Office of Sponsored Programs at Fordham University, came down with COVID-19, she didn't hide it from her staff. "I was really open when I got sick and let them know things to look out for" should they also become ill, Wolff said.

Wolff started showing symptoms shortly after her last day in the Bronx office, which, "ominously," was Friday, March 13; her husband also got it. These were the early days of the pandemic, and Wolff remembered thinking—as did others—that maybe she'd be back on campus in a few weeks.

At about the same time, on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Maura Gilmartin was saying goodbye to the large screen computer and scanner that helped her do her job as the lead sponsored programs officer at The Rockefeller University assisting more than a dozen research labs. Lacey Rhea, meanwhile, had gathered her belongings from the University of Florida (UF) Department of Physics where she is the research administration manager, bringing home her ergonomic mouse, office chair and wireless keyboard.

When the pandemic hit and research administrators and others were told to work off-campus, some were more prepared—at least when it came to technology—than others.<sup>[1]</sup> Some, like Wolff, actually contracted the virus; all have had to settle in, at home, for the longer haul. (Some do not want to go back—ever. See related story.)<sup>[2]</sup>

The candor that Wolff expressed to her colleagues is but one strategy that she, Gilmartin, Rhea and John Baumann, Indiana University (IU) associate vice president who leads the Office of Research Compliance, shared with RRC that have helped them maintain the level of service they and their staffs provided their institutions before the pandemic. Setting personal limits, offering options (not mandates) for socializing and allowing some to return to work are among the other steps designed to keep both research administrators and their coworkers healthy while teleworking during the pandemic.

### Meeting Basic Needs First

The level of ease with which the research officials were able to quickly move to fully remote operations was based, at least in part, on how much telecommuting an institution previously allowed. Research administrators, by and large, are expected to be on campus; this meant that work cell phones and laptops weren't universal.

Initially, Wolff tried using her nine-year-old personal laptop, but it "started cracking under the strain." Quickly ordering laptops and having the Fordham information technology (IT) staff update them became the first order of business, a process Wolff said went fairly smoothly.

At IU, all 45 individuals on Baumann's staff had IU laptops that they used in the office with a docking station and two monitors. But knowing workers might not have brought home everything, "when we realized it wasn't going to be short-term," they were invited to go back to their offices and get anything else they thought they might need, said Baumann, including chairs and monitors. Phone calls can be made from the laptops, he added.

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Adapting to a smaller screen has involved some creativity. “I set my laptop atop a tower of books to get the best height,” Gilmartin said, adding, “I also miss having the opportunity to print things out on occasion, which afforded me a chance to take a break from the screen.”

As far as the technology used to enable connectivity and communication, most, if not all, who spoke to RRC had experience using Zoom, but not to the level they now rely on it. Workers also stay connected via Skype for Business, Google Chat and Microsoft Teams.

## **Keeping the Team Connected**

All stressed the value of regular communication, both among direct reports and colleagues and from the university or institutional leadership on down, to provide reassurance, answer questions and to just, as Gilmartin put it, be a source of “comfort.”

Due to some telecommuting, the Rockefeller research administrators had developed practices that they just expanded once everyone was remote. For example, staffers send an office-wide email each morning at 9 a.m. to just check in and say, “I’m online,” as Gilmartin put it. The staff meets Wednesday mornings at 10 a.m. by Zoom as well, which Gilmartin called “really helpful.”

“My boss started that pretty early on,” she said. “Especially when everything was so sort of crazy, it was just emotionally comforting to see all of my staff members—previously I would have been very uncomfortable with video chat or video calls.” Rhea and Wolff also said their offices hold weekly staff meetings, something they hadn’t done before the pandemic.

Wolff uses Google Chat and Gmail, which all Fordham employees use; Wolff and her coworkers also text each other “a lot.”

## **But Not Too Connected**

IU’s Baumann acknowledged that he “was concerned about the cultural impact of telecommuting” and “was worried that people would not reach out electronically.” But he was pleased that “people found ways to interact. They had Zoom happy hours.”

Throughout the pandemic, Baumann’s office has held several town hall meetings to discuss some of the challenges of remote work and dealing with the pandemic, and to discuss “how successful everyone was.”

In late June, research compliance workers were surveyed (anonymously), because “we wanted to know what people were thinking” about how things were going. Some mentioned the stress on their families, with one indicating a separation was underway, Baumann said.

Others disclosed they needed a place away from home to work at times so they could be more productive, so his office began letting workers go back—with permission and based on a schedule.

A good 40%, when asked if they wanted to participate in “remote social activities” organized by Baumann’s office, said they were not interested. For those wanting to meet in small groups, Baumann plans to organize outdoor lunches later this fall.

## **No More Faculty Pop-Ins**

As far as communicating with others, Wolff has found it “easy” to stay in touch with principal investigators and noted she has held individual Zoom meetings with PIs, sharing a screen, for example, to review budgets.

Wolff is still using her personal cell phone (she could order a university phone but has chosen not to). Her office line still has the message she recorded on March 13, which states that she's working from home and to email her rather than leave a message on that number. At UF, phone calls are routed from desk landlines to personal cell phones, Rhea said.

She and others told RRC communication is actually better—and not just among colleagues. “We’ve seen such a significant improvement in communication between each other and with our faculty,” said Rhea.

Remote work “really has forced structure on all fronts and has given us a lot more control over how we spend our time during the day with each other and with faculty,” Rhea said. She and her staff hold two Zoom meetings a week now, and she meets daily with her department chair.

Impromptu and drop-in meetings with faculty used to occur frequently, Rhea said. It was common for someone to approach her outside her office in what she referred to as “the hallway-ask.”

Now if Rhea needs to discuss something with a faculty member, that person is “more likely to respond” to a request for a meeting. Previously, faculty would respond by popping in an hour later.

Gilmartin also had praise for the responsiveness of federal agency officials. She recalled receiving six responses to a question she emailed NIH about an unclear expiration date on a funding opportunity.

## **Messages From Chairs Helped**

But that doesn't mean there haven't been a few problems. “Out of sight, out of mind” is something Wolff said she experienced.

Particularly because of quick deadlines, Fordham “had a rash of people just applying for things on their own, thinking that they didn't have to follow the procedure of working with my office [or that] they didn't have to go and get the internal approvals from their chairs, from their deans. That was very frustrating,” Wolff said. “We've tried, from that point on, to really let people know we're not in our offices but are still working, diligently; we are as busy as ever.” Communications from deans and department chairs helped reinforce this message, she said.

At the same time—as in nonpandemic times—research administrators have had to establish realistic expectations about what they can do.

Fordham, for example, doesn't have a hard-and-fast rule about deadlines for getting applications into the office for review before submission, but generally handles this on a case-by-case basis, Wolff said.

She's working with a PI who is “completely overwhelmed because she put out a bunch of letters of intent a while ago,” and all organizations invited her to apply for funding. This “is a great thing to happen, but she's got three of them at the same time. So now she's really scrambling, and I'm not going to tell her no. I'm going to do everything on my end to try to get [these] in.”

Adding new staff or supporting recently hired employees proved difficult at times.

At UF, for example, “we had recently done a significant amount of recruiting for admin staff. We had started a new team [to handle] fiscal transaction processing” in February, Rhea said. “The biggest drawback to this has been pulling the rug out from underneath our new teams and not being able to be super hands-on, like we would have been with them, but force them to be a little more independent a little earlier than I probably would have liked; they aren't getting the emotional support that they might have gotten were we in person. But they adjusted.”

Other than this, Rhea added, “the remote work itself from the perspective of me and my team has been only positive.”

## **Staff ‘Kept Everything Going’**

Of course, work has gone on—new and old. IU contended with completing its reaccreditation application to the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs, which was due in June, Baumann added. Regarding misconduct investigations, “there were a couple of sequestrations [of evidence] that we wanted to do in April and May,” but in these cases, “people or data were not at risk, so we didn’t start doing them until July,” said Baumann, adding that “if there was truly a risk to either, we would have gone in right away.”

IU’s biomedical institutional review board has continued its thrice-weekly meetings, and others—including the social-behavioral IRB, noncompliance review committee, emergency review committee and institutional animal care and use committee—have stayed on their schedules.

“I was regularly impressed by the commitment of the staff, of the researchers, by the unwillingness to not let anything interfere with the integrity of the research; they kept everything going,” said Baumann. “Our turnaround times were not affected. We came up with accommodations that helped the researcher and the subjects to be as safe as possible.”

In the midst of remote work and the pandemic, research administrators and PIs are having to implement new initiatives, such as the updated Uniform Guidance recently issued by the Office of Management and Budget.<sup>[3]</sup> Wolff attended a webinar on the changes and noted that there were a “ton” of questions. Her preference would have been to delay the implementation until after the pandemic subsides; a number of changes go into effect next month.

## **Be Patient, Understanding**

Even in “normal times,” Wolff had “gotten very used to dealing with faculty or administrators that have grants or contracts and their anxiety,” she said, and became adept at “not taking really anything personally that people say when they’re stressed out like that.”

Now with the added pressure of the pandemic, “I definitely give people slack, and it really takes a lot for me to snap back and say something really salty to somebody,” Wolff said, and she’s advised her staff to “just be patient with these people. If we can help them, let them know we can help them [so] we’re not adding to their burdens.”

That advice was particularly aimed at encounters with human resources, IT, accounts payable and benefits staff, who are likely under “special” pressure already, said Wolff.

Because the situation has continued to evolve, her approach has been to be “in the moment,” Wolff said, adding “the most important thing” has been to remain flexible.

## **Make ‘Nonscreen Time’ a Priority**

Getting weekly emails from Fordham’s wellness office offering programs such as online yoga and meditation classes has also been helpful, said Wolff.

Gilmartin has employed a number of strategies to cope, taking advantage of the added flexibility that telework permits, including an occasional nap at 5 p.m., “especially during the first couple of months. My face and eyes felt especially drained due to all the screen time. Now, my goal is always to take a complete lunch hour, away from all screens, but I’m still not successful with this every day. I’ve learned that I am more successful when there is an

outside obligation to scheduling in these breaks,” she added.

For example, “there is a local food scrap drop-off—composting—scheduled once a week from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. about a mile from my home. I am committed to walking or riding my bike there every Monday for this purpose. I get there right before they close, and I take the time to enjoy the park where it’s located until the hour is up,” said Gilmartin. “I’ve also scheduled in a Zoom personal trainer for 30 minutes, once a week, during my lunch hour. Lastly, I try to schedule more activities during my personal time so that I don’t gravitate towards the computer whether work-related or not: bike riding, puzzling, reading a book or the actual newspaper—nothing online—cooking, etc.”

## **Fears of Commuting, Interacting Persist**

Many report struggling to take time off and also keep up with activities such as attendance at industry conferences, albeit now on a virtual basis, to stay abreast of developments in the field.

Rhea acknowledged keeping balance between work and home is “always a challenge for us in our profession,” but may now be even more difficult due to what she termed “the mental component.”

With a home office, “there’s this compulsion to just do a little bit more, work a little bit longer.” Rhea said she is “better at calling my team on it” when she sees via Skype, for example, that someone is still online at 5:30 p.m. “We’ve had to constantly remind each other not to do it, but because we are holding each other accountable to maintaining that balance, I don’t think we’ve really had that big a problem with it.”

For now, home is where these research administrators want to stay. In her situation at Rockefeller, Gilmartin said it would be “much more challenging for us to go back to work and maintain social distance protocols than it would be for us to all stay home,” and trying to stagger hours would be complicated. Aside from whether the office environment is safe, Gilmartin’s “biggest discomfort is traveling there and back,” a commute that takes 45 minutes one way and involves a train and a bus—concerns Wolff also expressed to RRC.

Wolff, who recovered from COVID-19 after several weeks, said such anxiety will likely continue “until we get a vaccine that’s reliable and going to allow us all to get back out there and actually interact with people—without being afraid.”

**1** Theresa Defino, “From Remote Oversight to Wind-Downs: Research Struggles in the Time of COVID-19,” *Report on Research Compliance* 17, no. 4 (April 2020), <https://bit.ly/2K6bgrZ>.

**2** Theresa Defino, “When Telework Ends, ‘I Don’t Want to Go Back,’” *Report on Research Compliance* 17, no. 10 (October 2020).

**3** Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements, 85 Fed. Reg. 50,757 (August 18, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3kteTIS>.

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