

# Administering College-Specific Research and Graduate Programs at the University of Minnesota

*An InfoReady Case Study*



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*InfoReady for Liberal Arts? The University of Minnesota says absolutely!*

Chalk it up to semantics, but when those of us in higher ed think of [InfoReady](#), we often associate it with Offices of Research and the kinds of limited submissions and competitions typical of medicine, engineering, and the “hard sciences.” But that’s a misperception in two very important ways. First, the so-called hard sciences are very much a part of liberal arts programs and curricula; and second, faculty in the arts and humanities and social sciences are held to the same standards of research and scholarly productivity as their colleagues in the biological, medical, and engineering fields.

Nowhere is that better understood than at the University of Minnesota’s College of Liberal Arts, where Jennifer Coffman, Executive Office Research Development Specialist in the Office of Research and Graduate Programs, takes on two distinct responsibilities. “Fifty percent of my time,” Jennifer says, “is working with our graduate programs and graduate students running various competitions and programs. The other fifty percent is working with our research development team and running faculty awards, identifying opportunities, and also working with faculty submitting requests, seeking assistance with submitting external grants and awards, and similar activities.”

“Jennifer first learned about InfoReady from another unit and was instrumental in just diving in and getting this going,” reports Christopher Stordalen, Assistant IT Director for Process Improvement in the College of Liberal Arts (CLA). “The Masonic Cancer Center was actually the first unit to identify InfoReady and bring it to the University, followed closely by the College of Veterinary Medicine and, through cross-unit conversations and presentations, units from the Medical School are getting involved, as well as the College of Education and Human Development and the Hormel Institute.”

With Jennifer’s interest stimulated by such cross-campus discussion, from both her and Christopher’s perspectives another very strong motivator was the opportunity to learn the tool to benefit from colleagues’ experiences, build a user community, and whenever possible amortize the licensing investment across the community.

### *Applying process automation in a large liberal arts college*

As CLA is the largest College within the University of Minnesota, with more than 30 departments, centers, and initiatives, Jennifer's responsibility encompasses grad student funding, program coordination, faculty research, and interfacing with graduate program coordinators for funding, fellowships, awards, and other competitions, internal and external to CLA. Perhaps not surprisingly, though, it was in the faculty research arena where she initially realized the need for process automation with InfoReady.

"We have two research development coordinators, one for our social sciences-focused programs and departments and the other for those focused in arts and humanities. We were receiving numerous requests from faculty seeking assistance in applying for external grants either to a foundation or an organization like the National Science Foundation. As part of our services, we review application content, ensure correct documentation formatting, support application submission and complete internal processes. So one-off email requests kept arriving and it just got a little cumbersome tracking and keeping up to date on who's working with whom and what stage we're at with each of the faculty. That's why InfoReady made so much sense for us."

"The first component we launched in InfoReady was the intent-to-submit form. At CLA, we have a short URL we send out through our faculty communications, our various newsletters, and include on our website. Faculty know this is where to go to request assistance and to communicate with us what is needed to get started with their application, including a link to their request for proposal and their anticipated timeline. This gets everything started and allows us to track what type of assistance we're providing over time and allows us the ability to analyze our data through the dashboard and spreadsheets. We're able to see the number of submissions our team has assisted with including the types of services such as content reviews, budget development, application submissions and other University processes – all so we really know what we're accomplishing."

### *Where InfoReady can make a major difference*

Jennifer goes on to add that "Once we got that launched and became more familiar with InfoReady, that's when we really started jumping into our competitions. Before that, we were having to manage Google Spreadsheets and Google Forms and really pulling from one source to drop into another source – for example, creating award letters and doing mail merge. As a result, we were in and out of Google and the Google platform then jumping over to the Word side. Now with InfoReady, we're really focused on moving competitions into one system, one platform, and it's working really well and saving us time. We initially moved our tenure track single semester leave application into InfoReady because, with only a handful of applications per year, that was a good way to get the lay of the land. Since then, we've greatly expanded our capability. Now we do certain awards that are endowment and donor based for funding, we've automated the award letters, and I'm really loving the automation capabilities on the reporting

side of the post award. And then this last year, we did a revamp of our sabbatical leave application process, which was a huge undertaking at the college level – making certain that departments were prepared for the faculty to be gone during certain times and semesters. The sabbatical leave has, by far, been our largest and most extensive application process due to the number of faculty applicants, department reviews and the number of approvals at the college level. This transition to InfoReady has worked really well for us.”

*What about the half of Jennifer’s work focused on students?* She reports the administrative challenges before adopting InfoReady were much the same as she and her colleagues faced on the faculty side.

“Again, we were using a lot of Google forms and Google Sheets just to manage smaller one-time funding opportunities. Now with InfoReady, what we do for small amount summer fellowships can be copied into other application processes and be used year after year.”

#### *Can something as simple as grad student awards benefit from InfoReady?*

“Yes! Prior to InfoReady, we required extensive spreadsheets to track how a student was awarded funding, say two years ago, but it’s a renewed four year award opportunity, so we’d be always having to look at multiple spreadsheets to check the eligibility for each student in that situation. Now with InfoReady, we can quickly and easily look at each user and see how many times they applied or were awarded as well as their remaining eligibility,” added Jennifer.

#### *InfoReady for a Center for Writing, really? Really!*

“Since InfoReady has grown pretty much by word of mouth at the University, we weren’t surprised when the Center for Writing reached out to us. They were struggling with receiving around 60 applications for Dissertation Writing Retreat awards and wanted a better way to streamline the reviewer process. With InfoReady installed, the application and review process is automated, as is sending notifications once the application has been accepted. What they especially appreciate is the much faster turnaround time and not being concerned about missed, unopened, or direct-to-spam emails that frustrate communications and jeopardize applications.”

“We’re really thankful we have the InfoReady system in our hands now,” adds Jennifer, “and both Christopher and I are looking to continue expanding usage through partnering with interested departments and administrative offices. We’re focused on assisting our CLA colleagues to more efficiently deal with the myriad documents, reviews, and approvals processes by adopting InfoReady.”

### *How InfoReady's Engagement Hub and Scale add to InfoReady's effectiveness*

“As we’ve been working with offices and departments and sharing templates with them, we’ve also begun introducing InfoReady Scale – which we ourselves just started using this summer. Scale – and its front end, the Engagement Hub – offers a significant advantage by encouraging faculty and graduate students to go to one single website to find a number of opportunities available to them rather than having to visit the College’s webpage, the University’s funding pages and multiple external funding sites. Through the Engagement Hub, faculty and students are able to visit one site to access CLA based funding opportunities, quickly view University awards and directly link to commonly applied for external funding opportunities available through Foundations and federal programs.

“And from the process improvement perspective,” adds Christopher, “the key is thinking about how end users are looking for funding or other opportunities and having one location that can go to that addresses all their needs and manages their information. That just makes sense.”

Jennifer and Christopher have found that implementing InfoReady, and marrying it to the graphic and workflow advantages of the Engagement Hub and Scale, has made a significant difference not only to their own efficiency and productivity, but to the research and scholarly productivity of Minnesota’s College of Liberal Arts. It’s all more solid evidence that, wherever competitive and review-intensive processes are involved, automating them with InfoReady can offer extraordinary benefits.

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