How Streamlining Supports Success

By InfoReady

The University of Rhode Island

infoReady™

The Office of Research Development has transformed their department. They now bring a growth mindset to helping faculty find funding and spend less time on administrative tasks.

At URI, Seed Money + InfoReady = Increased Research Productivity

"We long wanted to ramp up our internal seed grant programs for research," reports Dr. Karen Markin, Director of Research Development at the University of Rhode Island, "but it wasn't until our new Vice President of Research arrived that we were given a mandate to do so – as well as to increase our external funding and streamline procedures."

That mandate demanded a solution beyond business-as-usual. Fortunately, the VP also provided an influx of funds to both incentivize faculty and support the adoption of InfoReady. "And that," says Karen, "turned out to be a huge difference maker in multiple ways."

Two specific objectives for URI's research program were to ramp up long-standing internal grant programs supported with State funding and utilize the InfoReady platform to update their grant management program. The VP's financial contribution was significant, and this enhanced the modest state funding available to investigators to stimulate extramural proposals while also improving grant-writing skills.

The limitations of manual systems and InfoReady's solutions

While the funding increases were indeed significant, Karen Markin immediately recognized that the current processes and systems her office employed clearly wouldn't be up to the challenge. Two issues in particular rose to the surface. The first was that investigators were unhappy with the review process. "Even though seed grant funding was supposed to help researchers and scholars learn to be better grant writers, they weren't getting very many useful comments from reviewers that they could use for revisions," Karen explained. "Before InfoReady, reviewers basically wrote some comments as they read the proposal, drafted an email, then quickly dashed it off. The typical result was just a few cryptic remarks from which the proposal authors couldn't possibly tell what they might have done differently to receive the award. This led to frustrated investigators, who'd of course call me to vent their frustration. It's an understatement to report that I was acutely familiar with this review problem."

InfoReady's intuitive and automated process for reviewer input allowed URI to introduce a 10-point scale encouraging considered, thoughtful responses from reviewers. Thanks to this, the Vice President didn't need a lot of persuading to ask that the review committee formally modify the process. "The result," adds Karen. "was a highly detailed protocol with 12 criteria, including a comments and ratings combination, which InfoReady can readily accommodate."

InfoReady also made it possible for the review committee to give different weights to different proposal criteria, calculate the data, and ensure the new rating scale was able to provide useful feedback to researchers. Karen also emphasized that awards aren't made exclusively on the basis of numerical data. There's actually a committee meeting in which reviewers discuss the ratings, which can sometimes display very small differences between proposals. They also try to control for having the same number of reviewers and for large disparities between reviewer responses – all to ensure that the process is as equitable and transparent as possible.

Streamlining Seed Grant Administration at URI

Previous Process for Administering Seed Grants and Limited Submissions

New Processes Using InfoReady

Previous Process		New Processes
PDF collection with signatures.	**Collecting Proposals**	Online application forms with secure PDF attachments, as needed.
Cloudy Process: Qualitative comments from reviewers.	**Reviewing Proposals**	Increased Transparency: Qualitative comments plus quantitative scoring using 12 criteria on a ten-point scale.
Difficult to collect anecdotal information from principal investigators.	**Post-Award Progress Reporting**	Automated periodic collection of mandatory progress reports from PI's — grants submitted, articles and books published, conference presentations, exhibitions, verification of matching funds, etc.
Time-consuming filing of paper.	**Administrative Benefits**	Automation, streamlining and time-saving.

How will you know if the external proposal was ever funded?

The second issue – also readily apparent to Karen – was in grant management, and specifically that there was no follow-up on whether external proposals were actually funded. That's where InfoReady's Progress Report function came to the rescue. "What I especially like," Karen notes, "is that I can specify exactly the information I want to collect. Before InfoReady, we sent PI's a letter asking for grant results but often received incomplete responses. Now, through InfoReady, I can ask explicitly for grants submitted, articles and books published, conference presentations, exhibitions, or whatever output I'm seeking. It's much easier to follow up at one year intervals so I can prepare two- and three-year reports – because that's how long it can take to find out whether something was externally funded."

While much of Karen's efforts are directed toward investigators ultimately seeking major external funding from sources such as the NSF and NIH, career enhancement at URI hasn't neglected scholars in disciplines typically not funded by those organizations. And again, the InfoReady Progress Report function has proven an invaluable tool. According to Karen: "With books and exhibitions, for example, tracking tends to be more long-term. Even though some of these projects don't bring in a lot of funding, they're significant reputation enhancers for the University. When alerted to such achievements through InfoReady's Progress Report function, I can ensure our marketing and communications office knows as well as our research magazine staff. The bottom line to streamlining the process, even beyond better accuracy, efficiency, and intelligence, is that I now spend more time helping faculty at finding funding sources or writing competitive proposals and less time on administrative tasks which aren't particularly productive."

The overarching value of InfoReady's Progress Reports

"Another advantage we've gained through InfoReady is that I can capture with Progress Reports the kind of information I previously had to request via surveys – sometimes proposal subject matter not discernible from the proposal title, sometimes whether an external award resulted from our internal seed grant, sometimes whether follow-up articles or conference presentations were generated from the grant. This is another perfect example of how InfoReady saves administrator time and effort."

The value of Progress Reports and the InfoReady platform in general was underscored by Peter J. Snyder, Ph.D., URI's Vice President for Research and Economic Development – and the individual largely responsible for ratcheting up URI's research efforts. "We have made rapid and extensive use of the InfoReady system at the University of Rhode Island to manage our internal seed grants programs as well as for a host of other purposes. I was quickly sold on the fantastic tools available to track our return-on-investments from our internal grant funding through the use of the multi-year Progress Report function. InfoReady has allowed us to streamline our processes for managing internal competitions, and it is now used by several of our colleges, graduate school, and by the Provost's office for many varied purposes."

"True confessions" on the value of process automation!

Administrators well know that InfoReady is a huge time saver for everyone involved, but Karen's candor is refreshing. "It's almost embarrassing to admit," she continues, "but when we were administering grants before InfoReady, we used PDFs that were being emailed around and requiring digital signatures. These are a real pain in the neck. Having to scan everything to create a PDF package to submit is time-consuming, error prone, and just a huge hassle. With InfoReady, we now have a process which avoids emailing, PDFs, and scanning. We can easily view responses from the dean's office and department chairs, see the reviewers' ratings, even document the final OK from the Vice President. It's just a much more efficient process, everyone's happy with it and, best of all, I haven't gotten complaints about the introduction of a new software procedure."

Sharing the wealth, sharing the cost

As Peter Snyder noted, InfoReady's value has moved beyond his office as VPR. URI's Graduate School, for example, is a very active user of the platform because they have a number of programs – dissertation funding, fellowship programs, and travel money, for example – where InfoReady's process automation has proven of great value. And the Office of Undergraduate Research and Innovation does two cycles a year of mini grants for student research projects using InfoReady, and similarly the Center for Humanities, which also has several grant cycles.

Karen Markin deserves credit for furthering InfoReady's adoption at URI. "Obviously, with different groups using InfoReady, managing the relationships and the number of administrator seats does take some thought. After we first got InfoReady, I went around to offices that I knew sponsored grant programs and might benefit from the platform. The Grad School jumped on it right away -- InfoReady did a training for them and then they were off and running. With other programs, I did a walkthrough and they too are running with it. Since we still have some seats available, we're continuing to promote it to other offices where I'm confident it could lead to greater efficiency and time savings, and there are also the obvious cost sharing advantages to the institution."

And yes, URI also does limited submission competitions

"When it comes to limited submission competitions – we have at least 26 of those a year – InfoReady has been a wonderful tool for keeping track. Before we automated the process, investigators and reviewers would email me and I was always concerned that I'm going to miss or lose track of an email simply because I received so many. Today, we track everything people submit, or haven't yet submitted, and we get it reviewed all in this single system."

At URI, hiring InfoReady meant better use of an administrative assistant

"Quantifying time savings and effort savings is always a hard task" adds Karen Markin, "but in the past when we were very busy during the application season, we needed a full-time administrative assistant just to handle spreadsheet activities -- literally typing in the title, the investigator, the College, the amount – all of which are very, very labor intensive tasks. Plus, we had paper copies that needed to be filed and stored, requiring even more staff time. And even I was put to work inputting Excel spreadsheet data. Now we just download a report, so that administrative assistant can be assigned to more productive tasks, equating to a cost saving for the University. Plus, again, I can spend more time on core tasks like supporting faculty instead of clerical ones. It should be pretty obvious why we love InfoReady, and with a research office of only two individuals, InfoReady's value as a labor saving system is beyond enormous."

Convincing results ... with further metrics in process

URI's analysis demonstrates an enormous return on investment for a seed money program.

Going forward, they plan on using new features in the Progress Report function to:

- collect better data on grant results

- follow up at one-year intervals on proposal outcomes

- track the results of long-term Career Enhancement projects such as books.

Armed with those results, the VPR's reports to the President, trustees, and others will serve as not only proof of the seed program's return on investment, but as a powerful argument for additional funding. For Karen Markin, Peter Snyder, and URI's research efforts, the bottom line in process automation and all its timesaving and error reduction advantages equates to enhanced research productivity, faculty success, and financial savings.

About Dr. Karen Markin

Dr. Karen Markin has been the director of research development at the University of Rhode Island for more than 20 years. During this time, extramural awards to the university have grown from $30 million to nearly $118 million. She has successfully overseen the development of a range of projects, from small grants in the humanities to multimillion-dollar proposals in the life sciences. Additionally, Dr. Markin has served as a proposal reviewer for federal agencies and private organizations, presented research development seminars for a variety of scientific and scholarly organizations, and written a series of columns about research administration for the Chronicle of Higher Education. She has a doctorate in mass communication from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

About InfoReady

InfoReady's software platform is used by 160 research organizations worldwide to make streamlined critical research prioritization decisions. InfoReady does this by collecting and presenting the most vital data for leaders to make important choices. InfoReady allows portfolio managers to collect information from project teams, route it to governance committees for review, manage decision-making, and then store critical information and decision histories in a visual portfolio. InfoReady also automates all administrative processes in portfolio management and governance, saving time for researchers, governance team members, executives, and portfolio managers – a solution that allows high quality decisions which are cloud-based, secure, and easy to deploy.

To learn more about InfoReady, schedule a demo, or get in touch with current users, please visit https://www.inforeadycorp.com or call us at (734) 929-0010.

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