

Learn It, Teach It, Share It, and Innovate at George Washington University

An InfoReady Case Study



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A robust research program couldn't possibly have been envisioned when Congress chartered what became George Washington University back in 1821. Today, however, GW is a major international R1 research institution with over 70 centers and institutes spanning science, technology, health, policy, global security, and arts and humanities.

Directing, coordinating and facilitating that enormous volume of research activity falls under the supervision of the Office of the Vice President of Research (OVPR), and one especially critical determinant of success is what happens at the pre-award level. That's where Shari Thompson, Research Enhancement Analyst, brings her impressive skills and InfoReady's capabilities to the fore.

Shari's role focuses on sponsored projects research development and includes a range of services offered to faculty applying for federally funded grants – consultation, scientific editing, proposal review, workshops and training seminars, and facilitating collaborations that lead to cross-disciplinary proposals. But that list barely begins to convey the breadth of her purview and contributions.

Shari's responsibility encompasses all the limited submission processes and procedures, usage protocols, and compliance for intramural competitions requiring progress reports. She also tracks research outcomes and monetary return on investments; and for the OVPR's cloud-based platforms, Shari is the university manager for [Pivot](#), the database for funding opportunities (offered as an integration option with [InfoReady](#)).

That's an unusually broad range of responsibilities, but totally appropriate for an administrator whose own background is unusually broad and deep. Trained as a microbiologist and virologist who conducted HIV bench research at GW in the 90s, then performed clinical research trials, followed by 13 years as a senior technical administrator at the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH), Shari's intimacy with both faculty and research administrator perspectives makes her uniquely qualified to have pioneered InfoReady's presence at GW. This is a role she continues to serve as its hands-on InfoReady expert.

Prior to InfoReady, GW's OVPR staff utilized email and massive Excel spreadsheets for limited submissions and internal competitions. Not surprisingly, they experienced the same issues affecting manual administration at other institutions – errors, inconsistencies, unopened emails, lost files, and huge outlays of administrative time and workload required for each competition. "It makes me cringe when I think of it," recalls Shari.

After familiarizing herself with the InfoReady platform, Shari began exploring limited submissions using two major intramural competitions as a test bed, with the latter actually the first use case at GW. “I prepared a draft set of instructions,” Shari noted, “included a link, and asked applicants to input their information into the InfoReady portal. I made certain to write my instructions in plain English, sequentially added every step beginning with how to log on, and clearly communicated what needed to be submitted by when. I also provided open and close dates and added the official OVPR ‘notice to proceed to sponsor submission’ when appropriate.”

From Learning to Teaching

Part of Shari’s role at that time, and one which remains of primary importance, was training other InfoReady users. “I’d ask other units and departments if they needed InfoReady training, then go around with my PowerPoint presentation and even offer to come to individual offices for one-on-one training. I was always accessible and that seemed to be a key to adoption. Everyone I worked with was very receptive, too, although, to be fair, I think my science background also helped in terms of credibility and acceptance, especially in the early days. That said, I’ve found more admins today being educated on the science side and I think that really helps immensely.”

Because InfoReady’s value increases dramatically as more units adopt the platform, Shari views dissemination and training as key elements of her role. “At the NIH, I was always used to going to seminars and speaking and teaching people how to do contracts, so it’s just my nature to want to enthusiastically disseminate information. That’s why if colleagues need me to pop in their office to walk them through InfoReady, I’m happy to do that. In pre-COVID days when we were on campus, I’d schedule the Academic Center so people could come in, have access to a computer, and play with InfoReady at their own pace while I have it on the big screen – which is a much better training experience than the PowerPoint presentations I’ve delivered. Of course, now with Zoom, I just do it from my dining room table, but I still keep open door hours on the first and third Thursdays.” On a more formal basis, and especially valuable for new faculty and staff members unfamiliar with InfoReady, Shari also conducts training sessions three times during both the fall and spring terms at GW. Clearly, her commitment to training, frequently and in different formats, significantly expands the University’s research capabilities and outcomes.

Consistency is Beautiful in Research Submissions!

“One of the perhaps understated benefits of InfoReady, at least for me, is that it mandates consistency as part of the process, and that’s so critical in terms of both helping applicants and reviewers and achieving greater award success. Before we started using InfoReady, we’d have to manually catch any skipped or incorrectly

completed fields and send them back to the investigator or reviewer or the application couldn't go forward. With InfoReady, the application can't be submitted unless required fields are completed, so while that may seem a minor issue, it's really a huge one in terms of saved time and frustration for everyone involved. Plus, faculty know what to expect every time – there's no need for them to figure out what different kind of information they need every time they want to submit an application. And reviewers really appreciate seeing a single PDF for each application – versus one PDF for the application, one for the CV, one for each letter of support, and so on. That's a huge difference.”

InfoReady's Power to Enable Innovation and Customization

Shari goes on to explain that another significant benefit of the platform is that, thanks to the InfoReady developer staff's enthusiasm for continuously improving and adding functionality, she's been able to maximize her own proficiency. “For example, I was able to shorten and simplify our limited submission competition forms to a two-page version that doesn't even require a budget submission, just a project summary, requested amount, key personnel, and a CV. Now it takes me only two or three minutes to launch any limited submission.” Customization and additional functionality features are included in InfoReady's Gold license.

“One of the really very helpful enhancements I introduced was a keyword system that expands what Pivot has available. I developed a list of 3000-some keywords and we now require applicants to provide us with at least five keywords per application. Keywords automatically populates individual applications, and for GW offices or individual researchers trying to track past applications and awards, the keyword system makes it much easier to identify the most relevant ones. We also use the keyword system in allowing a pool of reviewers, from our Advisory Council on Research, – to self-select those applications they'll be most competent and comfortable reviewing.”

“I try to look at the whole InfoReady platform and see how we can use it not just in competitions, but even in terms of administrative processes. For example, the OVPR team use InfoReady for administrative processes like submitting applications for new or renewing Institutes or Centers, and we use it for our no-cost extension request.”

The Advantages of Multitrack

“I also really love InfoReady's multitrack functionality, of which a major benefit lies in reducing our administrative workload. We began accessing the multitrack functionality soon after its August 2019 launch.”

“So why use the multitrack function at all? One good example is if you need to collect information or applications and later need to separate them for various purposes. In our office, one such application for multitrack is the NSF medical research instrumentation solicitation, which has two separate tracks and allows an institution to advance up to three awards. Another example would be competitions where you can forward one junior faculty member and one senior faculty member. These are the type of competitions I look for to employ InfoReady’s multitrack template.”

“Using the multitrack feature versus using a multiple choice question also makes great sense because it eliminates having to keep a spreadsheet of all the applications that fall under a specific choice and then having to direct those applications to the right panel or reviewer. In other words, multitrack “forces” faculty to decide which track they go down, relieving the administrator of that responsibility. Back in 2017 and 2018, when I had hundreds of intramural competitions and needed to separate out each one for the right track, that’s a task I can now avoid thanks to multitrack. It just saves so much in work, time, effort, and mistakes while increasing the efficiency and efficacy of the work product.”

Shari Thompson’s influential role as pioneer, trainer, and InfoReady advocate has clearly made a mark on George Washington University’s research enterprise as it continues to grow and flourish – a testament not only to her own expertise and extraordinary commitment, but to what can be achieved by InfoReady-enabled research administrators everywhere.

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