



How Syracuse University Solved Administrative Approvals Challenges with InfoReady

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Syracuse, New York
15,000 undergraduate
7,000 graduate and professional
935 tenure and tenure-track
faculty
[syracuse.edu](https://www.syracuse.edu)

HIGHLIGHTS

Challenges

- Needed system to get administrative approvals efficiently while university was closed due to COVID
- Gain general awareness of COVID research occurring on campus

Solution

The team selected InfoReady to manage 6 pandemic-related administrative approvals.

Results

"We had a lot of lessons learned from our approval processes and it actually took us a few years to feel really comfortable with experimenting. Once we did that, it made us truly appreciate what the system is capable of, so it really makes sense to talk to your InfoReady reps as they've been so helpful."

CHALLENGE: Getting faster approvals during COVID-related closures.

Christina and Chetna's portfolio involves managing multiple intramural grant programs, limited submission competitions, award nominations, and training and development. This includes working with a decentralized proposal support team with representatives from seven different Syracuse University (SU) schools and colleges, corporate and foundation relations, the libraries, and interdisciplinary institutes.

Our new Vice President for Research arrived in 2017 and suggested investigating InfoReady to manage a new intramural grant program. The institution had run grant programs before, but they were sporadic. This iteration reflected a large institutional investment of \$1 million annually, so the prospect of managing it without an automated system was daunting. This, and the endorsement of the new VPR, was the reason we explored InfoReady.

We adopted the platform in 2018 and since then its use has blossomed. Currently three of the five operating units in the Office of Research utilize InfoReady. In addition, ten other academic units outside of our office – including dean's offices, academic affairs, centers and institutes, and departments – all utilize InfoReady.

The Office of Proposal Support Services assumes responsibility for providing training and overall management of the system. In 2020 alone we launched 60 competitions including 35 limited submissions, 16 internal funding opportunities, 3 events, and 6 administrative approvals.

When we began using InfoReady we did not yet fully grasp the capabilities of administrative approvals until we looked at a case study from Saginaw Valley State University discussing unmanned aerial systems flights. While the topic was far from our task – getting faster approvals during COVID-related closures – the process of obtaining multi-layer approvals for people to access



campus, and needing many sets of eyes on those approvals, was certainly transferable.

A secondary need was the necessity to gain a general awareness of the COVID-19-research occurring on campus, as we needed to have some oversight of the people working under the state's COVID-19 protocols. We also had to be able to provide data on approvals of individuals granted access to campus to our COVID-19 safety committee, emergency services and risk management, and our department of public safety.

Our emergency response protocols required that we have redundancies in place in case of sudden staff absences. **This obviously could not be accomplished through email; the solution had to be a centralized system.**

SOLUTION: InfoReady

When we initially investigated solutions, we had looked at web-based forms, but we wanted submissions and routing to be automatic and not get stalled on any particular email step. We also wanted notifications to keep us up to date on when each step was approved. With InfoReady we receive email notifications when routing approvals are submitted. Additionally, InfoReady provides a dashboard we can check regularly, which is even more powerful when used with customized views and column selection. The dashboard allows us to easily monitor approvals versus having to check every time a single email came in. Now we typically only check routing approvals a few times per week.

We have also learned some added benefits of using InfoReady for administrative approvals. For example, it is highly useful when information needs to be in a fixed format or when an application needs to be routed through multi-level approvals, especially sequential approvals. **InfoReady also allows us to dramatically cut down on emails. In the case of our approval processes, without InfoReady we would have relied on using mass emails and the information returned would not have been standardized. We also would have needed to manually create spreadsheets to track approval status.**

RESULTS: InfoReady handles administrative approvals

So, what were those administrative approvals we ended up launching with InfoReady? There were six approvals and all were pandemic related. Three competitions were related to return to campus to conduct essential research, one was for essential research travel, one was for resuming in-person human subjects research, and one was for visiting scholars coming to Syracuse University's



campus. Understandably, the biggest challenge that we have had with these administrative approvals is adapting the existing competitions to changing federal, state, and institutional requirements and guidelines.

Essential Research Travel Requests

In February 2020 the University halted all non-essential travel, which became a complete prohibition one month later. However, we still had requests for travel to maintain continuity of long-term research – ecological or biological samples or observations, for instance, which we restarted in June 2020. The approvals covered any travel deemed essential for research and excluded teaching, student activities, or academic travel for conference or training purposes.



The competition was revised several times before closing in May of 2022. For example, once the academic year resumed, we added a question “Are you able to teach your classes when you are quarantined?” Additionally, we added a vaccination requirement in July 2021, ahead of the University’s requirement to be fully vaccinated by the beginning of the academic year.

Our office does not log travel information as we are not the locus for emergency information. We do notify individuals that they need to register their travel with our risk management office. Instead, those instructions became part of an InfoReady approval template that we used to convey other procedural information.

The dashboard view for our travel applications allowed us to sort by active and approved reviews. This feature permitted us to see where an application was stuck so we could go into applications and resend notifications to approvers. If the approver was new, we also emailed them directly to ensure they understand the approval process (as we do with most of our competitions).

A timesaver for us early on was the fact that we now have the customizable dashboard, allowing us to strip out default rows or columns that are not critical to the specific competition. InfoReady was great about making that happen and we really enjoy being able to customize our dashboard so we can see the pertinent information on the screen immediately when we open a competition.

Visiting Scholar Requests


Another administrative approval competition is for visiting scholar requests. Approvals are needed for academic visitors on campus longer than a week, who do not have a paid institutional appointment, and who will be using campus facilities. Examples include visiting faculty working on a particular project or in a lab, visiting graduate students working with a Syracuse faculty member, and speakers or community participants working on projects with our faculty.

We had learned a lot of lessons from our approval processes and it actually took us a few months to feel really comfortable with experimenting. Once we did that, it made us truly appreciate what the system is capable of. It makes great sense to talk through complex scenarios with your InfoReady reps

as they can be very helpful and creative. Of the numerous challenges we faced and surmounted, many were solved through discussion with our InfoReady reps.

CHALLENGE 1. Some of the challenges we faced in routing steps arose because we initially investigated department-driven routing subsystems, but they did not meet our needs as well as applicant-driven routing. Applicants do have to manually enter email addresses, so if there is an entry error, it stalls the approval process. We address this issue by checking if email addresses in an application resolve to a name.

CHALLENGE 2. Another challenge was that secondary routing steps do not automatically generate notifications. To solve this, we manually push notifications to the next reviewers and resend the link. This is easy to initiate, even on a mobile device.



CHALLENGE 3. Another interesting challenge we faced is that it is difficult to see some information without going into each application. Our solution is to utilize dashboard updates, which allow us to move columns around and see the information we want at a glance. It is especially helpful to learn where approvals may be stuck in the process and how many applications are pending.

CHALLENGE 4. Application information can also be a challenge if secondary information is required for an applicant but is not always readily available. One situation we continue to experience involves collecting visiting scholars' proof of vaccination, which is a federal contractor requirement for the University. Initially, it was a complicated issue: we collect institutional ID numbers that are created for the visitors as well as proof of vaccination, but that could not be done until after the conditional approval necessary to even potentially host a person on campus was secured. In order to procure the institutional ID, international visitors may need help from our Center for International Services, who in turn wanted the conditional approval in place before working with the visitor. And we still needed the proof of vaccination information for provide full clearance for visitors to come to campus.

As you can imagine, this was a huge bottleneck, and the solution provided by InfoReady was genius! We had not thought of it because technically this was not a competition, but InfoReady told us we can use reports to get the post approval information. As soon as somebody receives a conditional approval, they are sent a report request which includes the requirement for a Syracuse ID number and proof of vaccination. Once the information is provided, and it can also be downloadable as a spreadsheet.

CHALLENGE 5. Another challenge was the need for an additional approval step. This is not a true approval *per se*, but a way to track whether or not the relevant materials (IDs, proof of vaccination) have been reviewed and accepted – specifically to provide an institutional record of application to prevent additional bottlenecks should the competition owner be out of the office. This was not possible using a report, so it seemed like we were back to square one. InfoReady's suggestion was to use a

blank field in the original application, make it for administrative use only and enter documentation review comments after submission.

This is exactly what we did. Once something has been reviewed and approved, we can go in and edit the application that has already been awarded. We note that the materials have been received and the person is cleared to come to campus. In the customizable dashboard we verify that column is displayed so any administrator with access can see at a glance who is cleared.

CHALLENGE 6. *Applications cannot be returned for editing when you are using a multi-stage, automated approval process. This is problematic for our applicants who understand that visitors have to be vaccinated but submit an application for a visitor who is not yet vaccinated. Our Vice President for Research (VPR) will not approve such an application, even if there is a plan to provide vaccination information at a later date.*

Rather than declining an application in this case and requiring a new one to be submitted, InfoReady recommended we add a fourth-stage review to the competition where our office would be the first reviewer and we could check it for compliance. We chose not to do this for a few reasons, so instead we innovated and decided to use the note field to put an administrative hold on the application (this is done before the application is pushed to our VPR as the third and final reviewer). We notify the applicant that they should provide updated vaccination information directly to the competition manager by email as soon as available. Once provided, we edit the application on the back end and continue with the review process. This allows us to keep the application active, and it can be tracked easily in the review process.

CHALLENGE 7. *This last challenge involved situations where some application information can be provided early and some cannot. This particularly impacts international scholars on a much different timeline than domestic visiting scholars, particularly for vaccinations. Our latest innovation involved instituting an option to upload materials early if available, so an applicant can immediately provide vaccination information if available at time of application. This has enabled us to bypass providing a conditional approval for domestic cases; we revise the award notice to state the visitor has been approved and cleared to come to campus all at once when proof of vaccination is provided at time of application.*

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InfoReady has been invaluable to helping Christina and Chetna meet their research administration challenges at Syracuse University. As Christina puts it: “The bottom line is that we are getting better in using InfoReady and taking advantage of more of the platform’s multiple capabilities, partly because of our own learning curve and track record of success, but also due to working so collaboratively with the outstanding staff at InfoReady.

Ready to move from manual to InfoReady?

InfoReady can automate and streamline the work around competitions for funding, awards and much more for your institution.

Contact us at sales@inforeadycorp.com to learn more or for a free demo. Or visit us at inforeadycorp.com.