Grant Proposal, Award, and Account Setup Process
Grants and Funds Management and Sponsored Awards Management

The Office of the Controller's Grants and Funds Management area and the Office of Sponsored Awards Management teamed up on the Grant Proposal, Award, and Account Setup Process Improvement Project to prepare the university for the launch of a new grants management system. The project focused on streamlining and strengthening the process — reducing delays, eliminating redundant steps, and improving communication and support — so that when the new system goes live, it delivers greater efficiency and transparency.

 The project's goals were to:

- Enhance service to customers
- Increase understanding of the process and emphasize its importance
- Reduce time spent on post-proposal error corrections and unnecessary problem-solving

Project Team

Sponsors: Tommy Coggins, Executive Director, Office of Research Administration
Mandy Kibler, University Controller and AVP for Administration and Finance

Team Leads: Denise Koon, Grants and Funds Management
Nida Majied, Sponsored Awards Management

Members: Toni Bracey, School of Medicine Columbia
Alysia Bridgman, McCausland College of Arts and Sciences
Lauren Angelo Duck, Sponsored Awards Management
Michele Hay, Sponsored Awards Management
Susan Klie, Grants and Funds Management
Charlotte Stalvey, Arnold School of Public Health

Facilitator: Maegan Gudridge, Office of Organizational Excellence

PROJECT PHASE 1: DISCOVERY

The project team analyzed the grant proposal, award, and account setup process to understand current practices and identify opportunities for improvement. After reviewing each step and studying input from stakeholders, the team pinpointed inefficiencies and opportunities to reduce delays, minimize errors, and improve communication.

Process Mapping

The team created a current-state process map (see next page), tracking each step from when a PI identifies a funding opportunity to when a modification is made or new award is activated in PeopleSoft. Analysis of the map revealed common inefficiencies, including:

- Duplicate data entry
- Loopbacks to correct errors
- Long, unpredictable wait times
- The need to use multiple disconnected systems

Feedback Sessions

To complement the process analysis, the team gathered feedback from staff and faculty. All staff members in Grants and Funds Management and Sponsored Awards Management were invited to respond to an online survey, and Columbia and system campus faculty researchers and departmental grants administrators participated in online focus groups. Participants were asked what works well, what challenges exist, and what changes they want to see.

Key insights included:

What Works Well

- Strong, knowledgeable staff across offices
- Helpful templates and how-to resources
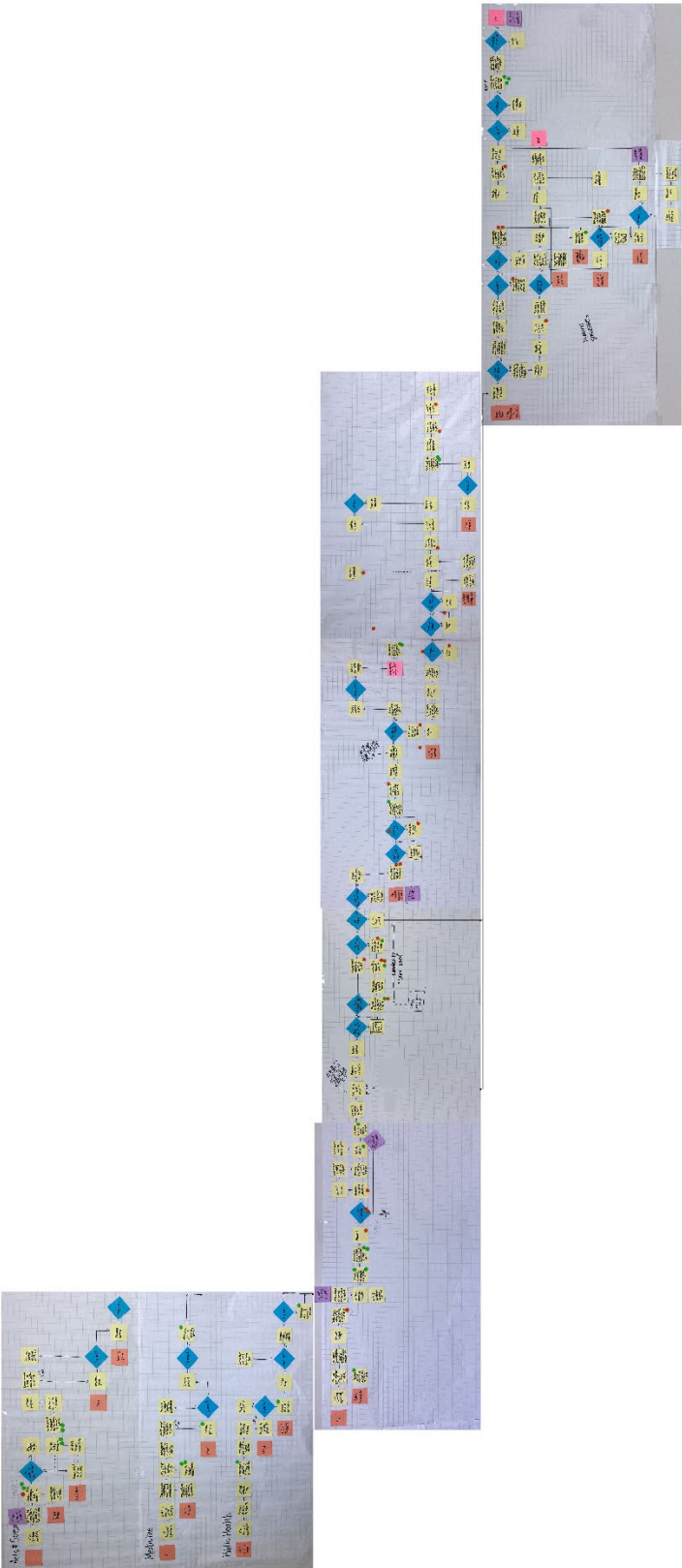- Clear separation of pre- and post-award functions

Challenges

- Manual data entry and redundancies
- Limited communication
- Delays and complexities in subawards

Wish List

- Real-time tracking and centralized communication
- Enforced internal deadlines
- A single, unified platform

Current-State Process Map

PROJECT PHASE 2: POSSIBILITY

Building on the process analysis and stakeholder feedback, the project team developed a range of ideas for improvement. Team members first generated ideas individually, then brought them together in subgroup discussions to refine and expand the list. In these sessions, the subgroups highlighted the ideas most likely to have significant impact and added detail to clarify how they might work in practice.

PROJECT PHASE 3: PLANNING

By generating, refining, and prioritizing ideas, the team built a foundation for focused action. The next phase translated these possibilities into a practical set of recommendations.

The project team recommends the following improvements:

Leverage Huron to reduce errors, manual work, and duplicate data entry and to increase communication and transparency

Lead: Nida Majied
Status: In progress
Timeline: Estimated launch late spring 2026
Key partners: Sponsored Awards Management, Grants and Funds Management

- Prevent submission of proposals missing required documents
    - Define requirements (documents and systems)
    - Create pre-submission checklist to show progress, alert PIs to missing items
    - Investigate ability for Huron to restrict upload formats (e.g. require Excel for budgets)
- Automate or streamline manual tasks and duplicate data entry
- Eliminate inefficiencies (steps, subprocesses, reviews, approvals, or other "requirements") caused by excessive risk aversion
- Automate the transfer of award information to PeopleSoft
    - Transfer essential information earlier in the process to enable concurrent PeopleSoft account setup
- Centralize subaward communications in an online portal
- Monitor setup time for future improvements

Enforce the internal deadline for more thorough, consistent review

Lead: Julius Fridriksson
Status: Proposed
Timeline: 30-60 days
Key partners: Office of Research, Associate Deans for Research

- Begin immediate enforcement of current deadline: three business days before the sponsor's deadline
- Establish and enforce a new proposal submission deadline -- seven business days before the sponsor's deadline
  - Clearly define "final form" submissions
  - Specify submission platforms (e.g., Huron, sponsor portals)
- Require college/school-level review before routing to other units/colleges for review/approvals
- Define exception criteria and process

Require training to reduce proposal errors and improve grants management

Lead: Emily Devereux
Status: Proposed
Timeline: 6-12 months
Key partners: Research Development, Sponsored Awards Management, Grants and Funds Management

- Require all PIs to complete research administration training prior to being authorized to submit a proposal
  - Define minimum learning outcomes for required training
    - Possible topics: policies and procedures, basic research administration tips, Huron system use, and PeopleSoft system use
  - Investigate role-based permissions in Huron to enforce completion
- Develop role-specific training modules for new and current staff
  - Create a responsibilities matrix to assign/recommend trainings by role
- Develop a refresher training calendar to reinforce key policies and system updates
- Support training with 3-5 min. on-demand videos on narrow topics (microlearning)
- Encourage knowledge sharing through peer-led sessions and documentation of best practices

Build staff capacity to support growth, complexity, and compliance

Lead: Julius Fridriksson
Status: Proposed
Timeline: Undetermined
Key partners: Vice Presidents, Deans

- Enhance employee knowledge through participation in STRIVE program
- Facilitate cross-training opportunities to build redundancy and reduce bottlenecks
- Continue to offer remote work agreements to maintain pipeline of high-quality candidates
- Align research administration environment to efficiently and effectively manage the increasing volume of sponsored awards

- Secure commitment to funding model that supports grant administration operations at a level that advances USC strategic priorities and that is comparable to peer institutions
- Conduct workload analysis to determine appropriate staffing levels for both pre- and post-award functions
- Design a staffing model that aligns with grant volume, complexity, and compliance risk
- Increase the total number of FTEs dedicated to grant administration (both central offices and colleges/departments)

Clarify departmental and college pre- and post-award points of contact for proposals and awards

Lead: Elizabeth Renedo
Status: Proposed
Timeline: 30-60 days
Key partners: Research Development, Sponsored Awards Management, Departmental Administrators

- Include directory identifying key RA staff on department/college research administration webpages
- Require a Huron SmartForm (or document) to ID the key pre- and post-award department/college contacts and other staff involved in the proposal and management of sponsored projects

Standardize web resources for accuracy and consistency

Lead: Elizabeth Renedo
Status: Proposed
Timeline: 30-60 days
Key partners: Research Development, Deans, Chairs

- Establish CGI Hub, GFM and SAM websites as the authorized sources of consistent, current information on sponsored projects
- Require unit websites to link to these sources

PROJECTED IMPACT

The improvements recommended by the project team will deliver both immediate efficiencies and long-term gains across the grants process.

Immediate Time Savings
By eliminating duplicate data entry and reducing manual work, the implementation of Huron is expected to save an estimated **750–1,000 hours annually** in the Office of the Controller's Grants

and Funds Management area. These hours can be redirected to higher-value efforts that directly support faculty and staff.

Early Progress, Long-Term Leaps
As the recommendations take effect and mature over time, the impact is projected to grow substantially:

- **On-time proposals will nearly triple**, improving from 30% today to 85% over the long term.
- **Substantially correct proposals will increase more than sevenfold**, from 10% currently to 75%.
- **PI training completion will reach 95%**, ensuring faculty are well-prepared to submit strong proposals.

	Current	18-Mo. Projected	Long-Term Goal
Proposals on time (internally)	30%	50%	85%
Proposals substantially correct	<10%	30%	75%
PIs completed required training	0%	50%	95%

Together, these improvements will cut errors, reduce delays, and ensure researchers and grants administrators are better prepared and supported — creating a smoother, more efficient grants process.

NEXT STEPS

With recommendations defined and planning underway, the project is positioned to move forward, ensuring that the improvements bring measurable benefits for faculty, staff, and the university as a whole.

The following actions will guide the next phase:

Continue Huron Implementation
The Huron project is already in progress, with regular meetings and ongoing work. An estimated launch is targeted for late spring 2026.

Advance Proposed Improvements
Additional recommendations are ready for action, with clear leads, timelines, and key partners identified.

Strengthen Collaboration
Success will depend on close coordination across research leadership, central offices, and academic departments. Key partners have been identified to ensure the improvements are broadly supported and effectively implemented.

Recommended Improvement	Status	Timeline	Point Person	Key Partners
Leverage Huron	In progress	Launch late spring 2026	Nida Majied	SAM, GFM
Enforce internal deadline	Proposed	30-60 days	Julius Fridriksson	Office of Research, Assoc Deans for Research
Clarify points of contact	Proposed	30-60 days	Elizabeth Renedo	Research Development, SAM, Dept Administrators
Standardize web resources	Proposed	30-60 days	Elizabeth Renedo	Research Development, Deans, Chairs
Require training	Proposed	6-12 months	Emily Devereux	Research Development, SAM, GFM
Build staff capacity	Proposed	Undetermined	Julius Fridriksson	VPs, Deans

CONCLUSION

The work completed through this project has laid a solid foundation for lasting improvement in the grants process. By combining detailed process analysis, broad stakeholder input, and focused planning, the team has developed a roadmap that addresses current pain points while preparing for future growth. With leadership support and collaboration across offices and campuses, these improvements will reduce inefficiencies, strengthen communication, and ensure faculty and staff have the resources they need to succeed in securing research funding.