CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH ETHICS EDUCATION IN THE UNIVERSITY: THE VIEW FROM UNIVERSITY OFFICES OF RESEARCH: THE BOSTON COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

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INSTITUTIONAL DESCRIPTION

Boston College is a Jesuit university composed of a College of Arts and Sciences as well as five professional schools in Education, Law, Management, Nursing, and Social Work. It has a vibrant scholarly life with very high academic standards. The University has about 650 full-time faculty and a student body that includes 9,800 undergraduate students and 5,000 graduate students. Boston College is generally regarded as a medium-sized research institution. For the past couple of years it has had sponsored funding of over $50 million per year. It has seen a fairly rapid growth in such funding over the past ten years.

BOSTON COLLEGE’S RESPONSIBLE CONDUCT OF RESEARCH (RCR) PROGRAM

Boston College’s RCR program was initiated in 2002 under the oversight of Karen Muskavitch and under the author’s direction. We created it in anticipation of the federal Office of Research Integrity’s (ORI) finalizing its proposed rule that was first introduced in 2000-2001. Even though it became clear that ORI was not going to accomplish the formalization of its program, Boston College decided to move forward because it was evident from our discussions that it was the right thing to do irrespective of whether we had a regulatory requirement with which to comply.
Our RCR program had an auspicious beginning:

- We held brownbag lunches to which faculty and students were invited. These brownbag lunches were generally attended by 5-10 graduate students. Occasionally, faculty attended, particularly when the subject matter concerned publication rights and responsibilities and peer review.

- We held hugely popular evening workshops for graduate students. These were not purely RCR programs but focused on professional skills into which we wove ethical questions. These workshops were aimed at graduate students and had an average attendance of 60 students from Arts and Science departments and as well as most of the professional schools. We recruited faculty presenters as well as others from our administrative offices, and we found that once they participated, they looked forward to being asked to present again in the following year. We ran eight workshops each academic year.

We conducted specialized educational sessions upon request. Generally, we were asked by faculty members to do these sessions on research misconduct and human participant research. We also conducted specialized sessions for particular groups of advanced undergraduate groups.

In 2006, we applied for and received an Office of Research Integrity (ORI) contract to create an RCR program that approached various modules from the perspective of administrators who could become involved in researcher conflicts, misconduct, financial improprieties, and other issues. This is certainly not the typical approach of gearing RCR education to faculty and students. At the same time, we recognized the fact that administrators both in departments and central administration confront ethical issues frequently and those issues often are related to situations involving RCR-covered topics. With the funding from ORI, we were able to complete five modules of an online program. The program is in the public domain and is available from ORI to others who wish to use it.

We were over four years into our RCR Program when we had a perfect storm of events that forced us to suspend the major parts of the effort.

- The most devastating was Karen Muskavitch’s illness and eventual passing. Karen was the soul of our program, and her passing left a gap we have yet to overcome. We carried on as best we could, but the
time and effort Karen dedicated to our program could not be duplicated by other volunteers.

- At the same time, personnel losses and administrative reorganization led to the Director of Research Integrity and Compliance to also take on the direction of the Office for Research Protections and our Animal Care Facility.
- Budget restrictions and cuts further restricted our ability to restore staffing in order to replace Karen as well as other positions.

Taken as a whole, our RCR program suffered, and we decided it would be better to suspend the program temporarily rather than do a poor job that would meet no-one’s needs or reasonable expectations.

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In April 2011, we were informed that our request to expand our part-time RCR position to a full-time education slot had been approved. The RCR program will be part of this person’s responsibilities. The position will also be engaged in a variety of research integrity and compliance topics. Some of those will also involve assisting other offices in terms of content development of their education programs. This is a major step forward that will enable us to restore the RCR program that had such an auspicious beginning.

In 2010, the National Science Foundation implemented its requirement for its grantees to develop RCR programs to be conducted for undergraduate and graduate students as well as post-docs. We developed the plan required by NSF in late 2009, and from January through May 2010, we created an online program which contained seven of the original RCR modules. Human participant and animal research modules are handled separately, generally through the CITI program for both. We also hold specialized training in our Animal Care Facility for everyone who uses that facility in their research. Currently, we are unable to supplement the seven online modules with in-person sessions, but we hope to phase that in as the general RCR program is restored.

The National Institutes of Health has continued and refined its required RCR program. Our School of Nursing developed an RCR program that satisfies the 8 hour of in-person training requirement. They currently have all but one of the covered awards on campus. In that single non-nursing award we are making special provisions to conduct one-to-one training.
We also have faculty in Biology and Chemistry creating RCR programs for their graduate students. These were created because our central program had been suspended and the faculty recognized the need for such programming. We will be collaborating with the Biology and Chemistry departments once our education position is filled and that will serve to strengthen departmental as well as central programs.

A significant challenge will be to recreate the RCR advisory committee and reinstate the faculty relationships that resulted previously in our developing a cadre of faculty volunteers. This will take time and dedication to this task. It will probably not happen quickly, but as we discovered early in our efforts, it must happen so as to ensure our success.

Finally, we need to finish the RCR for Administrators program. As noted above, we created five modules and we are looking to create five or six more. (We have added intellectual property and financial administration to the original nine RCR modules.) Given all that we need to do, it is likely that this will have a lower priority than the re-creation of our core programs. At the same time we feel strongly that this education is needed and that we will have to take more time in preparing the modules than would be the case if we did not have the core issues to deal with first.

All things considered, we are looking forward to engaging in the hard work it will take to restore and improve our RCR program. That effort will be a key component of our overall education program on research integrity and compliance issues.