

Our administrative workloads: increases and hurdles to our research

Increasingly the USFA is dealing with administrative workload related issues. At the heart of issues faced by members are employer unilateral decisions that are taking their toll. This issue of *Collectively Speaking* is about two services: 1-Concur particularly as it pertains to travel arrangements, and 2- Office and home computing related issues.

Concur and Travel

The university has implemented a requirement that all air travel must be booked through Concur or Direct Travel. This decision is disastrous for managing research and for obtaining best prices for university related travel. As we return towards normalcy this issue has come to a head with the University. We provide examples of issues related to travel.

Number of stops, duration. Direct flights provide shorter travel but Concur often imposes connections that waste time and productivity. An 8-hour flight instead of 26 hours of multiple airports obviously means less time in travel and more time at work. It is completely inefficient to spend many hours waiting in airport lounges, in transit to catch another flight, increasing the risk of missing a connecting flight, when faculty could be there and back in a much shorter time frame. What could be a one day or two days there-and-back trip becomes 3, 4, or 5 day events.

Longer time away means delayed committee meetings, less time on research proposals, delayed manuscript submissions, missing classes, additional hotel expenses, etc. Trying to save \$200 on a flight causes inefficiencies on overall faculty time budgeting. Those most affected are those that travel most, forced to spend even more time away and more on hotels. Obviously, this is counter-productive.

It is also difficult to take advantage of seat sales.

Transit Airports. Seasoned travelers know that airports are not equivalent; it makes a big difference which airports you go through. Some airports require 3-4 hours to change flights, others can accommodate 30 min to transit. Moreover, especially on more complicated trips, some airports have poor or missing places to grab a meal while others provide more suitable choices. These discrepancies matter when trying to arrive prepared to go directly into a meeting on arrival. There are numerous variables that affect choice of transit airports. It's not just about cost, it's also about

trying to arrive ready for work, rather than in need of a day or two to recover from lousy travel arrangements. It is not for a random secretary to determine what travel arrangement is appropriate for one's physiology and mental health.

Sometimes one needs a longer transit time through a particular city to insert meetings with colleagues. A longer layover and through a particular airport, means you can stop to give a talk at a university where you have colleagues and meet around a table to work on a proposal or manuscript, avoiding the costs of a separate international round-trip. These are important opportunities to work with colleagues outside of conferences, and are more productive than exchanging documents and emails with different time zones over several days and weeks. This is very difficult to arrange with Concur, at reasonable prices.

Transit Countries. As residents of Canada and as intellectuals, not everyone can travel through any country. Some were born in coun-

tries that prevents them from landing in others. Some have had previous engagements as critics that prevents them from traveling to certain places. Some have personal objections and will not transit through some countries. Some fear persecution (based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnic or religious identities, etc.) while in transit through certain countries. Some need to travel to countries that will object to a passport with a visa from particular other countries. Concur cannot take these into account. Concur insists you will take the cheaper route while you could end-up in jail.

Travel accommodation for parents and caregivers. For new parents travel with children and other family members might be unavoidable. Sometimes a caregiver needs to accompany a parent. These are realities. Without the option to book all seats at the same time, there is no way of ensuring travel as a single group. If booked separately, when there is a travel modification, the group is separated. There are equity issues raised that discriminate particularly against single parents, breast-feeding mothers, and new parents. For a family, university related travel is problematic, more expensive, and reducing costs important because only one person's travel is claimed on a grant. Concur does not permit family or caregivers.

Modifications during travel. The

more you travel the more you accept that unforeseen events will force trips to be modified or interrupted regularly. How does one rebook through Concur from a foreign airport, where you are forced into line-ups to rebook alternative arrangements? Hotel costs to accommodate travel modifications or interruptions are common. Similarly, for a variety of reasons outside of a traveller's control, mid-trip modifications, especially with complicated trips are common and adjustments must be made on the go. None of these changes can be done cheaply or efficiently with Concur.

Moreover, current credit cards provide much better travel disruption and insurance than what is provided by Concur at extra cost.

Cheap airlines, regional airlines. Many airlines that provide cheaper travel are not available through Concur. Some websites provide travel at much cheaper costs than Concur. Regional airlines and local travel websites offer alternatives that are inaccessible from Concur and invisible to Concur. It is a travesty that Concur imposes more expensive travel to a research grant.

Seating category. Today's reality with airline pricing of seats makes it not unusual to find seats cheaper than "economy" in categories with more comforts. Yet, Concur will disallow any seat labelled other than economy. This policy runs counter to the purported goal of obtaining the least expensive seats. Under the current policy, faculty cannot even book seats with more comforts (for what-

ever reason, like a broken leg) if they choose to pay more from their own salary.

Inexperience of concur travel agents. The university often diverts from these facts by saying that Concur travel agents are available by phone. Concur travel agents do not have access to the cheaper airlines, nor the cheaper costs provided elsewhere, and are far too untravelled to understand nuances of choosing appropriate and optimal routes. Moreover, when forced to make modifications mid-travel, one cannot be on hold for hours only to have to deal with someone that is too inexperienced to make the required modifications. Sometimes, it is no longer about how cheap, but about getting to a destination on time.

Loss of airline points. Airline points are useful because it permits a grant to go further. It also allows for points to be used towards graduate student and HQP travel. Suddenly faculty have lost access to accumulating points (that belong to the research grant) because the university uses those for its own purposes. It is totally perverted to have a Concur contract that steals the points to provide cheaper non-economy seats for the university administration.

Field research. Highly disruptive to research productivity is the inability of Concur to accommodate field research. What madness to impose Concur on field research! For many faculty, fieldwork takes place in remote locations such as the high Arctic well-above Iqaluit latitudes, the middle of nowhere Siberia, the Gobi de-

sert, tropical jungles, remote islands, etc. Airlines don't take you there, nor are there hotels. You cannot pay by credit card, bank transfers, or charging to grants. Often travel to such destinations requires cash on the ground. It means calling people until you find a pilot willing to take you there with a private plane or a private boat, or renting horses with a guide, or camping in the middle of nowhere. Often it means making arrangements in private houses. Worse, these complicated trips might need rescheduling at the last minute due to weather changes. The series of phone calls need to be made and there are no Concur options. When it comes to field research, the university travel policy and Concur are obstacles.

Concur receipts submissions. Concur is not user friendly or intuitively obvious. There are many code words and a very specific way that data must be entered, to the minute, of what faculty did and when. For a simple trip (such as going to a conference in a major city through regular airlines) it will take some time to upload the documents to Concur and obtain approvals. Often this process may need to be repeated 2-3 times before it gets through the approvals because something somewhere was not entered correctly. One problem for faculty that don't travel too much is unfamiliarity with Concur and one must relearn every time – this can take a day or two for simple receipts uploading. For

those that travel regularly, the number of hours spent trying to upload through Concur becomes several days or weeks of work through the year. Sometimes it is unloaded to student employment (against research grant rules) because it is too much time wasted on entry level secretarial work. The university's decision to make their most active researchers spend the most time doing data entry best suited for secretaries is a poor use of resources and skills.

An unworkable situation. Having to spell-out these facts to the university administration is indication of how disconnected to the day-to-day reality of faculty the university administration is. It is also another indication of how little consulting with faculty there is when trying to establish policy in support of faculty research and our other responsibilities. For most of the administration, faculty travel means going to a conference or to some other meeting. This distorted understanding of what goes on at a research university, of the kinds of activities that faculty do, of the kinds of trips that need planning, has brought us to a ridiculous position.

The main reason why the points raised above are so upsetting to researchers is that, for so many, a research grant is not more than a few thousand dollars. An additional hotel night, or forced expenses by perverse university policy that imposes more expensive travel, come in conflict with trying to make the research grants go further. Travel is

always an expensive unavoidable large expense. Funds are also needed for HQP or sample analysis and aspects of research that are not travel. More than anyone, researchers have a strong incentive for minimizing travel related costs.

The simple-minded microscale accounting of each bit of a complicated trip results in many days of work wasted. Time that would be spent at work is wasted with data entry, trying to work with Concur and its incapable staff, taking longer than necessary time away, or weeks spent arguing with the university that there was no other way of planning the trip than outside of Concur. Who needs to carry \$20-30,000 of field work on their personal credit card as the only way to make field research travel arrangements?

The purpose of Concur should be no more than a way of accounting and reimbursing faculty activities. Rather than micromanaging travel stupidly through a bad contract with Concur travel agents, the University would be wiser to take a whole year perspective on what faculty time-distribution is spent on. Yes, there are trips that can be arranged through Concur, but typically these are not cheaper or better than an experienced traveller can obtain, especially for more complicated travel plans. The refund documents should be handled by a secretary who is familiar with the inner workings of Concur and can do the data entry more efficiently than faculty who are left trying to guess their way through the maze without any clues.

Information Technology (IT)

The University IT policies on managing and purchasing faculty computers are utterly inept to meet the RSAW needs of a “University the World Needs” and the ambitious goals of our 2025 University Plan. Instead of supporting our RSAW, collaborations, and teaching, they are obstacles to our routine activities. Moreover, the resources to support all our computing-related issues are insufficient to provide timely and efficient support for day-to-day work.

The university has grouped all internet, browser, administrative software, research and analytical software, teaching-related software, and computing-related issues under the umbrella term Information Technology (IT), which we will use below.

Hardware and Computer choices. What was “IT Acquisitions” became “IT Requisitions” last week.

The IT Requisitions” Website provides two options for laptops (both MS-Windows PCs), one desktop option (also a MS WindowsPC) and three Mac options (1 laptop and two desktops), after a long statement discouraging purchase of a Mac. Although this might be purposeful from an administration perspective to manage equipment for administrative staff, it is incomprehensible how the diverse university research activities can be conducted from the six (!) machines proposed by

IT.

IT computer recommendations grossly underestimate the computational resources required for research software and hardware. In many disciplines, such as medical imaging, neuroscience, engineering, chemistry, and sociology, powerful simulations, image analysis and machine learning software are used routinely in the research - all of these require powerful configurations, specific operating systems, and hardware extensions. The computer choices offered have insufficient resources (CPU, memory, processing power, graphic cards, hard disk and storage space) required for day-to-day work and will be outdated in a year or so. In addition, while having an agreement with specific companies (Lenovo in the case of Windows PC), the proposed machines are often overpriced compared to other providers. Buying these computers can be wasting funds on an inadequate computer that just isn't up to the task. The site asks faculty to contact IT Requisitions or a College coordinator if they require a higher-performance desktop. This requires preparing a detailed justification arguing the equipment is needed and represents yet another administrative obstacle when the purchase has already been justified in grant proposals.

Moreover, computer choices are not for the university to impose on our research programs. The choice of a machine/software is guided by research needs and faculty are in the best position to determine their spe-

cific computer equipment needs. For example, some work requires multiple screens, powerful graphic cards, or easily accessible system hardware for modifications that are not compatible with the university's preferences.

Computer software and instruments. Many faculty members prefer to work with Mac/Linux but are actively discouraged from doing it. If one has worked for 20 years on a Mac, transitioning to Microsoft is a real pain. Linux is an operating system commonly used by faculty in the sciences and engineering because it is required by software needed for their research. These preferences are not arbitrary; they are real. Software for research is often made for a specific type of computer or operating system. The university claims this choice improves the security of IT services. However, security is a non-argument. 95% of malware targets MS Windows machines and MS products. Moving campus to MS "solutions" went against a safer IT environment while also being inconvenient for many faculty members.

Our research computers are often connected to research instruments. These instruments often (almost always) come with specific software. Requirements for a desktop to fit the software and the instruments are disregarded by the University. Faculty have reported the removal of critical instrument software from computers without warning. Much time is then wasted, either trying to install a new piece of expensive equipment or trying to figure out why an instrument is

not working. For many instruments, technicians must be flown in to have a look. Research grants don't have budgets for this sort of nuisance (institutional vandalism). Laboratories then need to come up with a way of working around the university's IT regulations, which is problematic from several perspectives. How does this increase security?

Sometimes, before committing funds to buy some software, one needs to download a variety of comparable software for a limited time to test it. What used to be a couple of hours, or half a day, of work now requires weeks of work seeking approval to allow the succession of uploads on your computer, time that could have been devoted to actual research or to students

The University plan 2025 strives for "productive collaboration." Collaboration involves sharing data and coediting documents using various cloud storage services (such as Google Docs, Dropbox or Amazon services), adapting software to partners' needs. The university actively discourages faculty from using these common services. How can we collaborate with researchers outside of UofS when all our data is supposed to reside on OneDrive and can be accessed only with NSID?

Desktop management and personalization. The level of control that IT has over our computers extends to the inability to remove a shortcut icon from the desktop. One cannot add printers, cameras,

or microphones without calling IT to administer the computer remotely and permit a simple software installation or a piece of hardware to be added or removed.

When we had to move to a remote working environment in March of 2020 many faculty members discovered their computers did not have a camera or microphone and bought them to accommodate working from home. At the same time, university administration made unilateral decisions that home internet and cell phone charges to any university account, including APEF accounts, were no longer permissible. Home computers became office computers and cell phones became office phones. Equipment, such as a printers, supporting a remote working environment were necessary and internet connections of sufficient quality were required to provide online teaching. Even after months of discussion at JCMA, IT, and Connection-Point, continue to be obstinate in refusing to reimburse faculty for the expenses incurred to work remotely and questions some of these undisputable needs. Other organizations of this size provided their staff with reimbursements or budgets to support the need to work from home.

Teaching support. At the beginning of the pandemic, while scrambling to discover how lousy WebEx & Teams were and how inappropriate home office furniture and space and computers were to maintain research and teaching activities, we also discovered that the teaching software (Blackboard) could not handle the size of uploads. Faculty were

left to find solutions on their own. The IT support and helpline that existed in classrooms were no longer present; they were saturated to the point of not being accessible.

Since, as emergencies have subsided, the capacity to help in situations where there are technological obstacles has not improved. Faculty are directed to Canvas Support off-campus, where internal problems with our computers cannot be addressed.

IT support and performance reviews. Many technical problems with printers, cameras, microphones, and keyboards are very simple and could be easy to fix on our own. However, they are impossible for us to fix when the computer is controlled centrally, and one cannot troubleshoot. They are difficult to fix when help is by remote access, and nobody is allowed to physically come and have a look.

For example, a wireless keyboard is not working. The battery is fine, it is not an old keyboard. After several communications over two weeks, IT advises the keyboard is broken and needs to be replaced. A colleague walks by and notes that an unmarked button (not an on/off button) needs to be moved; the keyboard works. There are many years of accumulated examples such as this. Where is the cost-saving and time-saving?

Equally infuriating is the "evaluate me" box that is sent immediately as an online interaction is completed or soon after. It ought to be distressing that these are sent when the IT per-

son thinks the service provision was successful and in a timely manner. Are they ever sent when IT bungled it or could not help weeks later?

Finally, the lack of support for non-MS Windows users is just unacceptable. Despite the relentless effort of IT services to force faculty members to use “approved” software and hardware, many of them are using Mac or Linux-based computers. IT lacks support for these users due to constant understaffing of IT specialists able to work with these systems.

Reimbursements. IT rarely takes responsibility for wasting our research funds and our time. For

those of us that know how many grant proposals must be written before one is awarded, these unnecessary wasteful procedures for service provision are not upsetting, they are infuriating. The lack of interest from the VP-Research office is utterly amazing.

Is this micromanagement the way to achieve the ambitious goals of the University 2025 Plan. What shall we tell our partners or communities we collaborate with – that we are waiting for several weeks for IT to resolve a trivial issue or that we are not allowed to use the grant we have obtained for the work to buy the computer and software we need for the project?

It takes a myopic administration to assume that faculty time is infinite and to look for nickel and dime savings at the micromanagement level, not to see that the resulting landscape across campus is one of poor service provision, greatly increased time spent trying to teach, wasted research money, and wasted time of faculty that would be better spent on obtaining research funds, analysis and publishing rather than wasting time, money, and their mental health in fighting with IT and Connection Point to get the equipment they need, the service required and reimbursement from the grants they themselves secured.