

We conducted an email survey of Franklin College Department Heads and Institute Directors to identify strengths, concerns, and recommendations regarding Franklin Works implementation (4/2-25/2021). We asked Heads/Directors to consult with faculty and staff to develop responses. Below is a summary of 32 responses and our discussion of 4/28/2021.

Overview. If we consider most departmental offices right now, the business manager has two defined roles: business manager and office manager. The business manager role involves financial services that are mostly captured in the Franklin Works Phase I description. However, the office manager role is also absolutely essential for most departments to function. In this role the business manager not only supervises other department staff, but also serves as (i) a single point of contact for faculty – especially new faculty – to help route requests; (ii) an invaluable source of knowledge about precedent and procedure in the department; (iii) a person who follows up on requests to figure out if they have been overlooked or declined; (iv) a backstop who ensures that occasional, seasonal, emergency, and department-specific tasks that are mission-critical are carried out. Several departments recognized the transition to Franklin Works as an opportunity to reduce the burden on many business managers but also have a broad concern that the vital necessity for an experienced departmental office manager is not explicitly recognized in Franklin Works materials.

A second broad issue has to do with staff satisfaction and the nature of their allegiance. In terms of satisfaction, many staff members pride themselves in playing key roles in their department's mission. A successful concert, balanced grant budgets, the maintenance of vital inventories – they know that their participation in such efforts ensures their department's success. Many staff members appreciate contact with students, an inspirational feature of university life that often compensates for the higher salaries available in the private sector. It is not clear whether and how these drivers of satisfaction will be available with centralized business activities. In terms of allegiance, staff who are employed by Franklin College may have different priorities than those whose primary affiliation is to an individual department. Will Franklin Works be able to accommodate last-minute requests? There are urgent tasks for which there is never much lead time, such as moving personnel to a different funding source. If a requestor has to wait his/her turn, then a student may not be paid, grant funding may lapse, or the marching band may lack transportation.

Our discussions converged on several recommendations:

1. With regard to implementation, we recommend most strongly that units retain an experienced staff member with the role of office manager. That person will be a single point of contact for Department Heads, faculty, postdocs, students, and other staff with Franklin Works teams. That person will guide faculty through precedents and procedures, will serve as an assistant to the Department Head, and will be able to monitor progress of requests to help avoid having things fall between cracks.
2. A second recommendation related to implementation is to extend the time frame for centralization, adopting a step-wise approach that can develop functioning workflows with simpler units before taking on departments or units that have complex needs. There are units with quite similar needs (e.g., Microbiology, Cellular Biology, and Biology) that are co-located. These groups would be natural starting points because their needs are similar, and because the potential isolation of remaining departmental staff members could be mitigated by having a single shared staff office for all departments in the cluster. For units with more complex or specialized needs, such as the School of Music, centralization could occur at a later time after we have some experience with this transition.

3. With regard to communication about Franklin Works, we recommend an appraisal of effectiveness and an adjustment of approach. We appreciate that a lot of effort has gone into providing information through several approaches, but the responses we received and discussions we have had indicate that there are still many misunderstandings about what services will be covered by Franklin Works Phase I. Some specific suggestions include (i) making Franklin Works updates from the Project Leadership Team a standing agenda item for Department Head/Director meetings this fall, and (ii) developing a portrait of our office staff and roles “before” and “after” implementation, so that we can understand who will do what.
4. A second recommendation related to communication is to develop and publicize specific implementation plans as soon as possible. We applaud the fact that input from our group and many others will be central to developing implementation plans, but the short time line makes uncertainty loom large. It will be important to provide specifics as soon as they are available.

Itemized summaries

Strengths. Many responses recognized several strengths.

1. Centralization will allow business managers to focus on core responsibilities rather than department-specific accessory tasks.
2. Business centralization will enable coverage of business processes when a staff member is on leave.
3. Centralization may provide an avenue for promotion and professional development.
4. A centralized system may offer cost savings.
5. Centralization may provide consistent and quality expertise in certain areas (i.e. grant management and HR) if implemented properly.

Concerns. Concerns that were raised in multiple responses included the following.

1. Top concern. Specialized tasks for each unit, which have been carried out by business managers, are outside of the typical job description yet critical for unit operations. The concern is that these tasks will fall on the faculty’s shoulders after centralization.
2. Top concern. Business managers have historical and contextual knowledge that enable many unit-specific tasks to be conducted efficiently. These tasks can involve a massive web of accounts and activities. The concern is that this knowledge and understanding will be lost though centralization.
3. Top concern. There is uncertainty about anticipated workflow after centralization: whom to contact for what, and (related) the prospect that turnover will require identifying and educating new contacts.
4. It is now often the case that a business task, once initiated, may require follow-up to assure completion. There is the concern that follow-up with off-site business personnel will require increased time and effort.
5. Departmental staff are now willing and able to process rush requests. There is the concern that a centralized business staff will not have the necessary commitment to individual departments’ success to follow through in a timely manner.
6. Communication by email can be extremely slow and tedious, for example when there are several rounds of conversation or when a complex or occasional sensitive situation requires a lengthy written explanation, trading of screen shots, and so forth. There was the concern that the time-saving afforded by a brief face-to-face conversation will be lost.
7. There is the concern that many business managers provide departmental cohesion and esprit de corps that will be lost when they move out of departmental offices. Closely

related to this matter is the concern that a department office with only one remaining staff member will not be a fun place to work.

8. New faculty rely upon guidance about numerous issues from business managers.
9. There remain many questions about which roles will and will not be centralized, leading to concerns about centralization of staff that, for example, oversee graduate and undergraduate affairs.
10. A few departments felt that there would be no benefit to the respective department because they now have a stable, highly trained and dedicated staff.
11. Several advisory committee members expressed the concern that the negatives outweighed the positives for the current centralization plan.

Recommendations. Several units made specific recommendations that would ease the transition to centralization for faculty and department heads.

1. Having a staff member within the departmental office serve as the “single point of contact” with centralized business staff would alleviate concerns about workflow and overburdening staff who remain.
2. It will be extremely helpful to be able to monitor task progress with a web interface (rather than through email).
3. It will be helpful for business managers to remain in their main departmental office for part of the day/week to provide greater continuity and face-to-face discussion opportunities.
4. Several business managers accept building maintenance as one of their critical tasks, yet this responsibility is unlikely to be centralized. It will be essential to have building managers in place in order to ensure that our aging buildings remain functional.
5. Communication remains a critical challenge right now. Misconceptions about the project only increase anxiety and dread among faculty and staff. One specific suggestion is to provide departments with a more detailed view of which staff will stay within departmental offices. This information will allow everyone to more clearly envision the new system, and an understanding of how specialized department-specific tasks can be accomplished.
6. Most important. We feel that the rapid and ambitious time frame for implementation of Phase I across Franklin College will cause serious disruptions in many units, and for this reason we recommend a more gradual implementation that starts with co-located units that have similar staff organization and needs.