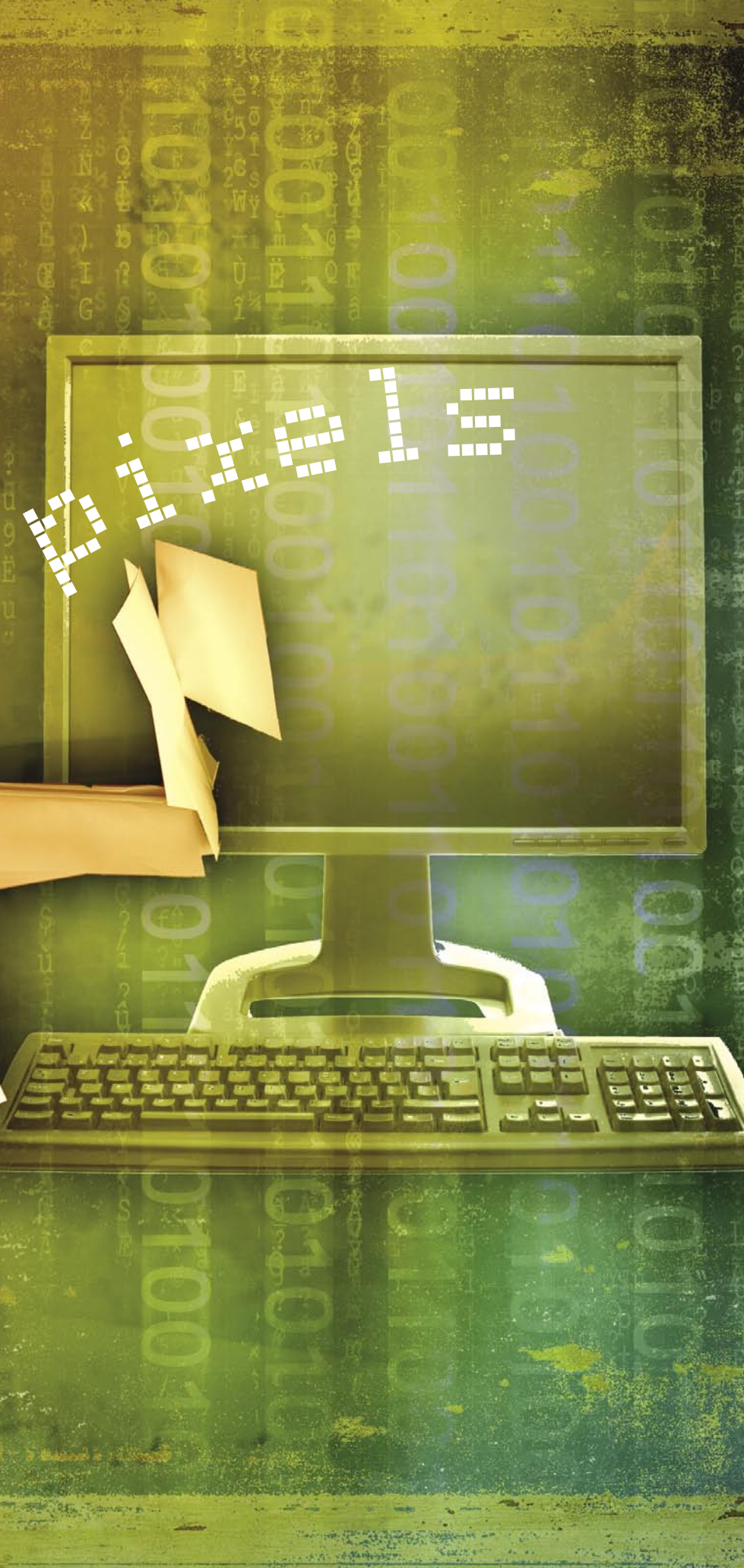


**The digital revolution
in research administration**

From paperweight to



If five or 10 years have passed since an *emeritus* faculty member last submitted a research grant application, he or she probably wouldn't recognize the process today.

Initiated by a move to streamline government during the Clinton administration, and fueled by rapid advances in technology and electronic communications, the way federal-sponsored funding agencies — places such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities — do business with campus research administrators and the faculty they support has changed significantly during the past decade.

And the changes at all levels of sponsored research funding and administration just keep coming.

Federal mandates, for instance, call for all federal agencies to have transitioned to an all-electronic submission process by summer 2007. All agencies will also need to have their program announcements available for electronic response via a unified and aptly named website, Grants.gov, by then.

Changes such as these don't just affect the Washington end of the equation. They also mean that all applications submitted by Binghamton faculty will have to be prepared and submitted electronically, an eventuality for which Binghamton University's Office of Research Development Services (RDS) has been preparing for years.

"What we tried to do was become part of any type of demo group we could,"



“Success tends to ease even the scariest of transitions.”

— Lisa Gilroy

said Lisa Gilroy, director of Research Development Services. “That allowed us to get a head start so we knew the ins and outs, and the quirks in the system. That way, when we worked with our faculty, we knew what to expect.”

This year, to make the transition even smoother, Binghamton University is adopting, in cooperation with the other three university centers in the State University of New York system, a system known as Coeus. Developed at MIT and named after the Greek Titan Coeus, god of intelligence and deep, searching questions, the system allows for total online proposal management.

“Say we’re submitting to the NIH,” Gilroy said. “We go in and tell the system which specific program announcement we’re submitting to. Then it will collect and deliver to us all the necessary forms and information related to that announcement. On their end, faculty can forward things to us, and we can go online and see if their information is complete and ensure that they’ve met the guidelines.”

Coeus also facilitates required institutional electronic reviews, including those by department chairs and deans. Until just

months ago, that part of the application process still required walking proposals around campus to obtain administrative reviews and signatures, Gilroy added.

Though Gilroy’s office has gone by several different names since she began working at Binghamton as a grant and contract administrator in 1988, the mission of Research Development Services has remained essentially the same throughout the years. The role of the office is to help faculty identify funding opportunities; assist with proposal preparation, review, negotiate and accept awards; and assist with award administration.

Statistics suggest it’s a role the office performs well. Sponsored research funding applications have increased from \$40 million in 1996 to slightly more than \$110 million last fiscal year. In that same time, awards also more than doubled — from \$16 million to \$34 million.

Meanwhile, in the post-9/11 era, compliance issues have grown increasingly complex and challenging, and Binghamton has seen a burgeoning of multidisciplinary and multi-institutional proposals, which by their nature are more demanding to prepare than single-investigator applications. But because

of the expertise embodied in its staff, and supported by advances in research administration practices and new technologies, the size of the Research Development Services staff has remained essentially unchanged during the past decade, Gilroy said, managing more than double the results with the same number of people.

Last January, along with much of the Division of Research, RDS moved to the Innovative Technologies Complex, a shift that significantly enhanced the physical size of the office, as well as the space it now affords faculty working on grant proposals.

"I can remember on more than a few occasions before we moved having faculty camp out at our desks to work on their proposals with us on deadline," Gilroy said. "We were already doubled up or in very small offices as it was, but we had nowhere else for faculty to work."

Now Research Development Services includes a private office for every grant and contract administrator and a comfortable faculty resource room, complete with six PCs and one Mac workstation.

Looking back, had the only goal of President Clinton's National Partnership for Reinventing Government — the 1993 program that set in motion many of the changes in research administration — been to cut back on paperwork to avoid cutting down trees, the program would still have to be rated a huge success, Gilroy said.

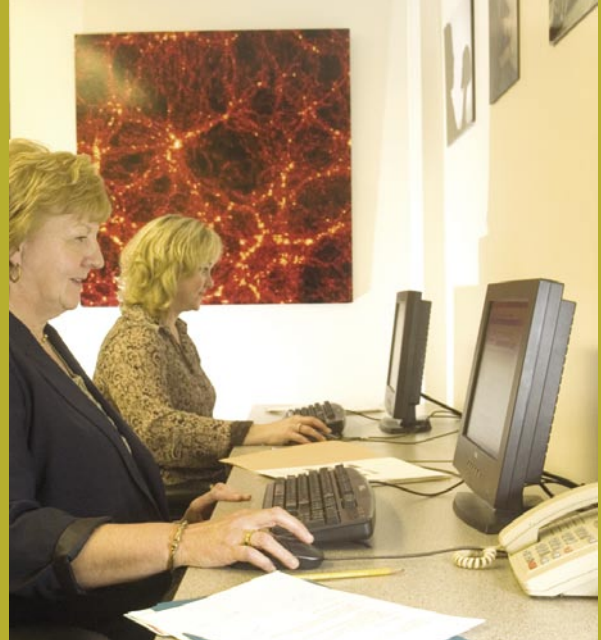
She remembers well the challenges she and her colleagues faced 10 years ago.

"Back in 1996, the electronic age hadn't quite hit us yet, so we spent a lot of our time preparing all these paper grant applications for faculty," she said. "Many of the forms from sponsoring agencies were provided to us in packets or booklets, where we had to rip out the form and throw it in the typewriter to complete."

But that wasn't the tough part, Gilroy said.

"Let's take an NSF application for example," she said. "A basic NSF would allow you 25 pages of project narrative, plus the forms. So you were looking at a good half-inch stack of paper when the documents were compiled."

So "big deal," you might be thinking. "A half-inch?"



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And then with perfect comedic timing, Gilroy delivers the punch line.

"They required us to send anywhere from 22 to 30 copies."

Even that, it turns out, was likely a cakewalk compared to the preparation of a National Endowment for the Humanities application.

"While the application for some agencies, such as the NEH, might not have been that long, they wanted appendices of every faculty publication," Gilroy said.

"So some of our very successful, prominent faculty would give us publications in stacks maybe 2 or 3 feet high.

"And we had to send two or three copies of those as well."

It has been said that most humor has its roots in the truth, so it's no surprise that in 1996 Gilroy and her colleagues often joked that the defining moment of a great day in the office was finding a good, sturdy copy-paper box that had been left for recycling by someone in a neighboring office.

Still, Gilroy also recalls feeling wary about electronic research administration when talk of it first started up.

"Oh, how times — and attitudes — do change," she now says.

"Success tends to ease even the scariest of transitions." ■