MyHMS chats with Matthew Barstow, Senior Pre-award Officer in the Office of Research Administration

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MyHMS sat down with Matthew Barstow, a member of the pre-award team, for an overview of the department and his work at HMS.

What was your path to your current position at HMS?
I had worked as a pre-award administrator at the Joslin Diabetes Center for eight years before joining HMS. As an undergraduate, I studied journalism and English at UMass. Then I worked for two years at WCVB-5 and the Hampshire Daily Gazette covering local sports. I’ve been at Harvard for seven years now. My position and title have changed a bit, but I’ve always been a pre-award administrator.

How would you describe your role here?
I am on the proposal team. Day-to-day my role depends a bit on grant applications in the pipeline. Typically, a PI will work with a grant manager within their department to put together a proposal, and then submit it to our office for review. I review the grant for compliance, making sure everything follows the instructions, federal requirements, Harvard and HMS policies and guidelines, and then submit it to the sponsor. I might also submit progress reports or connect with grant managers or sponsors on other items, depending on the day.

When an award comes in, the grants and contracts team negotiates any terms and conditions that HMS must agree to. Then ORA’s operations team sets up the sponsored fund so the Office for Sponsored Programs across the river can draw down the funds for the departments to access and manage.

What do you enjoy most about what you do?
I enjoy working with, and helping, HMS PIs and administrators prepare and submit the highest quality grants possible, one of my overarching goals as a research administrator.
But it’s also about solving the current puzzle. Each grant, or any application we review, will present a unique set of challenges. I’m lucky to be on a great pre-award team. Kelly, Barbara, Patrick, Debby, Pernille and I—we all work really well together.

I get to work with a huge variety of people in Harvard’s Office for Sponsored Programs and Office of Technology Development, the HMS Office of Finance and the Office of Regulatory Affairs and Research Compliance at the Harvard Chan School, to name a few. Research administration plays a major part in the research efforts at HMS and our affiliates.

**What challenges do you face in your work?**
A big challenge is high volume. I think our record was submitting 15 or 20 grants in one day. PIs at HMS submit large, highly complex grants because they are at the top of their profession and go for the largest gold rings of competitive awards. We sometimes get complicated applications or budgets that need to be reviewed and submitted the next day, or even same day. That results in constantly shifting priorities.

Then there is the administrative aspect. Often, sponsors grant a large sum of money to HMS that has to be divided among our affiliates and beyond. So while my colleagues in the departments are managing the sponsored funds, and the research teams are conducting the research, there’s a huge coordinated effort behind the scenes to ensure that everything runs smoothly from a compliance perspective.

**What do you do to take a break from the spreadsheets and proposals and nitty-gritty details of your work life?**
With two young kids, I’m pretty busy on off days, too! My wife and I enjoy spending time with them, exploring local outdoor spots in our hometown and surrounding areas on the North Shore. I am also an avid Boston sports fan. I not only enjoy watching games, but also listening to all the major sports reporters and journalists on the local radio and podcast markets.