

Federal Demonstration Partnership

It was in 1986, thirty-one years ago, when the Federal Demonstration Partnership or FDP first came on the national scene. In those days, it was known as the Federal Demonstration Project. In the early 1990s, it was Dr. Fred Saalfeld, chief scientist at the Office of Naval Research, who suggested that the FDP was no longer just a “project”, but had become a partnership. Fortunately, this did not require a change in the initials. While most research administrators are aware of the FDP and most are impacted by it in one way or another, many do not know the full story of how it came to be what it is today, how it is organized, and about the breadth of its current objectives and activities. This article will shed some light on the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the FDP.



Who? The FDP is an association that includes ten federal research agencies as well as more than 150 academic and nonprofit research institutions. In this regard, the FDP is unique among the Washington-based organizations that are concerned with research. It is the only organization that includes representatives from both the federal grantor and grantee communities where these two groups function as one organization. To add to the richness of the organization, the mix of people who currently make up the FDP include, on the Federal side, senior grants management and policy officials, senior agency program officials, and officials who deal with the electronic research administration programs of their agencies. On the grantee side, we have research administrators, faculty representatives, and “technical” representatives, i.e., people who are involved in electronic research administration at their institution. The FDP also includes a wide range of member institutions from some of the most highly funded to an equally important group of 26 Emerging Research Institutions. In all, it is a very diverse group of people within the area of research.

What? The FDP has as its primary mission the reduction of administrative burdens associated with federally-funded research grants so that investigators can devote more effort to doing research and less effort to administering their projects. Viewed in a larger context, the FDP is devoted to increasing research productivity by creating and testing mechanisms to make it easier for researchers to do their work. The mission has remained constant through its history and is the primary driver behind the decisions about which efforts to pursue.

When? Since its inception, the FDP has been carried out in multi-year “phases”. Membership is established at the start of the phase and remains unchanged until the next phase when membership is opened to additional institutions. The FDP is currently in Phase VI, which runs through the end of 2020.

Where? The FDP meets three times each year in Washington, DC: January, May, and September. On several occasions in the past, the meetings have taken place at other locations. However, the decision was made a number of years ago to hold the meetings in Washington, primarily to facilitate the participation of the Federal partners. In between the Washington meetings, the FDP conducts business through conference calls, email, and web based technology. FDP meetings are open to all members.

Representatives of organizations not currently members of the FDP can attend meetings as “Friends of the FDP”.

Why? The federal research enterprise has grown tremendously, particularly since the 1950s. Along with the growth has come complexity. The rules and regulations associated with the conduct of research grants have grown even more rapidly than the funding. Left unchecked, the rules and regulations risk the strangulation of the conduct of research in our universities and nonprofit research organizations. As an organization, the FDP is dedicated to reducing administrative burdens, including those imposed by the policies of federal sponsors as well as those imposed by the grantee institutions themselves. Constant vigilance and an effort to control “bureaucratic accretion” are definitely in the interest of both the sponsors and the recipients.

How? The FDP is organized into a series of operational and programmatic committees to carry out its functions. The operational committees provide ongoing direction of FDP operations and report to the Executive Committee. Each operational committee has a federal co-chair and an institutional co-chair. The operational committees include finance, membership, and communication. The programmatic committees provide direction for FDP focus areas and report to the Executive Committee. As is the case with the operational committees, the programmatic committees also have co-chairs, federal and institutional. The programmatic committees include Research Compliance, Finance/Costing/Audit, Research Administration, eRA (Electronic Research Administration), and the Faculty Committee. Each of the programmatic committees includes working groups. These groups focus on specific tasks that have been approved by the parent committee co-chairs. Among the current activities of the FDP are the Faculty Workload Survey, Emerging Research Institutions, the DATA Act, Streamlining Proposal Submission, Subawards, the Expanded Clearinghouse, Open Government, Research Terms and Conditions, UG Procurement Standards, Conflict of Interest, Data Stewardship, Data Transfer and Use, Export Controls, IACUC, IRB, and Laboratory Safety.

Keeping administrative burdens associated with the conduct of research in check is a never-ending task. It seems as though no sooner has a particular administrative burden been reduced or eliminated than a new one emerges to take its place. Ceaseless vigilance and hard work are required to move the needle in the right direction! The FDP strives to perform that function and, though not successful in each of its endeavors, there is no question that its overall efforts have been successful and are contributing to a better environment for the conduct of research.

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