July 31, 2025

Kamil Tamimie

Senior Assistant Director, Training, Outreach, and Data Management
Sponsored Programs Administration

Dear Kamil,

I am delighted to nominate the IRBonline Team for a 2025 SPARC Collaboration Award. The team roster is shown below and consists of people from two units: the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) and the Research Applications Development team with the OVCRI:

- Sarah Mumford, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
- Jennifer Ford, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
- Justin Sun, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
- Michael Brosco, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation
- Jillian Fleming, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation
- Max Gordon, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation
- Israel Herrera, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation
- Benjamin Percy, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation

I am delighted to nominate this team that designed, developed, and deployed the University's new system for online processing of human subjects research protocols, IRBOnline (https://irbonline.research.illinois.edu/dashboard). Researchers can now use a sophisticated context-sensitive front end to submit their protocol applications and keep track of them all on a dashboard, instead of the old system of mailing PDF files. Furthermore, the reviewers from the Institutional Review Boards and staff from the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects are more easily able to track and respond to the more than 1,800 new study applications received each year. OPRS has developed numerous training resources for the university community as well (https://oprs.research.illinois.edu/training/irbonline-training).

Creating a more effective and efficient system for human subjects research oversight is an important compliance goal for the OVCRI. There are about 800 principal investigators who submit more than 1,800 new study applications per year, plus there are many more amendments and other reports associated with currently approved studies.   IRB approval is required before human subjects research can proceed. Furthermore, even more data analysis and reporting is needed to satisfy a variety of Federal compliance reporting requirements and voluntary accreditation by the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP; see aahrpp.org).

In years past, the OVCRI looked into purchasing commercial IRB IT systems but none of them met the needs of our research community. With the arrival of Sarah Mumford in October 2022 as the Director of OPRS, building an online system became one of her key professional goals. Sarah re-architected the PDF forms that investigators used in 2023, in anticipation of the shift to IRBOnline that launched in 2024. This implementation would not have been possible without the dedicated service of the Research Applications Development team. The subject matter experts of OPRS (Sarah, Jen, and Justin) worked closely with the OVCRI development team (Mike, Jill, Ben, and Israel) to design, develop, and deploy this system in about 18 months.

Sarah Mumford's January 2025 report to the OVCRI describes this effort more fully, with light editing and bolding by me here:

*"[We have] put in an overwhelming effort to transition old "paper" IRB applications into the new IRBOnline electronic submission system. … [The] old method … was insufficient to prove that UIUC as an institution and individual researchers were compliant with federal research regulations and adequately protecting human research participants. [Therefore], the transition from "paper" … to electronic submissions was **more than just an administrative process to input data** into the system. Instead, researchers were required to provide more details …, and OPRS staff and IRB reviewers were required to re-review every project with ongoing research activities to ensure all regulatory requirements had been met. … The **response from faculty has been overwhelmingly positive** to the changes being made based on the ease of use, efficiency of review, and alignment with other institutions' processes. … During 2024, the Amendment, Continuing Review/Renewal, Report Forms, and HRP Progress Update module[s] were developed and launched. Additional reporting elements were also designed to support [internal] reporting as well as reporting required for OVCRI, AAHRPP accreditation, and federal regulatory requirements. While the coding and development of the system are conducted by the OVCRI IT applications team, the design and process flow of modules and reports are the responsibility of OPRS and require substantial effort from OPRS to complete. In addition to the pride in the final products that are being released, we also take pride in how well our teams (OPRS and OVCRI IT) have worked together to create such a monumental system."*

To amplify Sarah Mumford's note about positive user experience, here are example testimonials:

"We very much needed to move our IRB processes "online" and I am grateful for the IRBOnline team's hard work to get us there. The transition has had its challenges – as all changes do! – but I am impressed with the team's ability to weather the storm and continually improve the process." -- Jennifer Hardesty, professor of human development and family studies in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences

"I have served on the IRB as a community member for 15 years and previously taught a course in health administration at UIUC for 15 years. I have seen significant advances in research, scholarship, and the systems to support these activities. The development and deployment of the IRBOnline system has been the single most helpful advance. It is easy to use, straightforward, and it makes the reviews and responses much more likely not to inadvertently omit a critical concern, leaving time for more serious consideration. The development team also listened to our concerns in early versions and promptly addressed them which made the process collaborative and helpful. My thanks to everyone involved." – Sandra Jones, member of the Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board

"As a board member, I really appreciate IRBOnline because it has greatly improved and streamlined the review process. I feel that it has enabled us, as reviewers, to be more thorough and consistent in how we are carrying out our reviews." – Maggie Berg, member of the Biomedical Institutional Review Board

I believe that this OPRS+OVCRI team's exceptional work is highly deserving of the SPARC Collaboration Award for 2025.

Thank you!

Patricia M. Jones, Ph.D.
Associate Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation - Compliance