02/21/2023  
RE: Jessica Billings, School of the Environment AP Contribution Award

Dear Nominations Committee,

The School of the Environment (SoE) is a two-college school who resides in both CAS and CAHNRS that came into being in 2015. We are also on the Vancouver and Tri Cities campus and at the Puyallup and Wenatchee research centers. While there are separate state budgets we are a single school who coordinates across campuses. We also have a degree program in Global.

Jessica Billings came to the School of the Environment (SoE) in Pullman as our grant’s coordinator in 2021. At that time, we had one Budget and Finance manager and a fiscal person thus our office financially oriented staff was comprised of three people (we also have 2 advisors and a grad coordinator). WSU had just moved to Workday and was still in the painful transition. Early summer 2022 our Budget and Finance person left, and Jessica was promoted to that position. Jessica had two weeks shadow training for her new position and was then responsible for all her budget, finance, and personnel duties in addition to managing much of the pre-awards (many were taken on by our colleges) and all post awards. At this point in time, in Pullman we had ~20 tenure/tenure track faculty, 3 career track faculty, 7 lecturers, 20 research personnel (plus RAs) and ~24 teaching assistants. In addition, in fall 2022 I became the new SoE Director with limited knowledge of how complicated our two-college budget situation was to manage. Given we were short staffed before Jessica was promoted, we were now frightfully short staffed. Not unsurprisingly things would fall through the cracks and faculty would become frustrated with our office operations and Jessica would hear all about it. She also inherited the unit side of CAHNRS challenges when their finance group was having challenges of their own. Simply put the challenges Jessica faced were enormous. As I reflect on this situation now as a “fairly” experienced Director I am stunned she persevered. We are now better staffed and have Jessica, our fiscal person, a pre awards person, and a half time post award person. I would also note that between 2022 and 2024 our grants expenditures in Pullman went from ~$4 million to just under $12 million.

During these challenging years Jessica remained not only professional, she worked on her own professional development and helped our staff develop. Here are some of the things they have to say about working with Jessica.

“Jessica is resourceful, and solutions driven. In a unit navigating a two-college system, she excels at creating efficiencies and working constructively with both college cultures.”

“Jessica is a fierce advocate for the people in the School of the Environment, always putting in the extra effort to ensure they get the help they need. She is also a friendly, familial figure within the department, fostering faculty, staff, and student involvement at departmental events and potlucks. As well as serving the greater SOE community, she is especially empathetic and supportive of her staff, offering an ear and advice when they most need it and encouraging them to go above and beyond in their roles. She has helped me grow professionally and personally, and I am very grateful for her guidance.”

“Jessica prioritizes WSU, but she also prioritizes a work-life balance. It’s so reassuring to know that if something happens with my family, or there’s an emergency at home, or I need a mental health day, I really and honestly don’t feel like it is an inconvenience to take care of those things. It’s something extra that makes feel like a valued and cared-for member of the team! Jessica also saw a need for improved productivity for School of the Environment’s grants, contracts, and award management. She was able to facilitate hiring another employee to be a part of that process and in doing so, created a powerful grants management team who works very well together.”
I could not agree more with them. I would also like to add the following. Jessica has become a powerhouse of institutional knowledge given our two-college situation. I cannot emphasize enough how challenging managing two different budget model, policies and procedures can be.

Jessica has become a partner with me as we have navigated 6 hires with different protocols and nuances (CAS, CAHNRS, Provost cluster hire). We are currently moving 8 PI labs and 6 faculty offices from Heald into Webster. She has been a star at prodding faculty and research scientists to get moving in advance of renovation and construction. She hired a custodial position to clean and paint faculty offices in advance of relocation as we have moved additional people around to accommodate research faculty in Webster. Her attention to people’s spaces has created a wonderful morale around what could have been a very stressful and grumpy move. She extends herself to faculty and graduate students when they have challenges with grant management, and she is extremely resourceful managing all our appointments. She also extends herself to AP colleagues who can benefit from her experience.

Departmental culture is critical. Since we became SoE in 2015 we have had to develop our culture from the previous four cultures that formed us. We have all worked hard on this endeavor across our five locations. Jessica is keenly aware of the importance of staff morale and professionalism on our culture. Jessica became our AP Budget and Finance Manager when our Pullman office was in crisis to the point our culture was starting to deteriorate. She has turned it around beyond our expectations. Her leadership is helping SoE mature as vibrant, productive, welcoming, and successful School. To quote three of our last faculty candidates for our recent position “I cannot believe how welcomed I feel by SoE faculty and staff. My experience during this interview has been amazing.”

Thank you for offering this AP award!

Respectfully submitted,

Allyson King
Director, School of the Environment
abeall@wsu.edu
509-335-4037