The COVID-19 pandemic forced us not only to think more carefully about how we spend our limited resources to keep the School of Arts and Sciences (SAS) running in support of our educational and research mission, but also how we actually perform our duties day-to-day. With regard to how we do our work, the pandemic has afforded us the opportunity to break our reliance on paper in ways that all the previous cost-containment initiatives and pushes for increased sustainability haven’t. Most of us are not back on campus yet and, unless we have printers of our own at home, we’ve had to learn to do without. I, for one, had a pretty significant paper habit and was very set in my ways. It took me awhile to get used to working exclusively with electronic documents, but if this old dog can do it, so can everyone else.

Thus an obvious target of cost savings was our lease on the majority of the 95 copiers we have across SAS was coming to an end. The data from recent months shows a significant decrease in the number of copies we are making – even with our return to research activities on the rise – and we have developed a plan to replace nearly all of these copiers with small, multi-function, networked printers for the short-term, and only lease new copiers after we analyze the need upon a full return to campus. We estimate the cost savings when we make the change in the coming weeks to be at least $20,000 a month and we are aiming to eventually replace significantly fewer copiers then we had – and downsize the units we put back in most cases as well.

It wasn’t a hard sell for this phase as few areas are using their copiers much, and the hope is that by offering more cost-effective and eco-friendly options in the months ahead we can reduce the overall expenditure on copiers (and also toner and paper) as well as our carbon footprint.

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During the summer, External Affairs implemented a new step in the purchasing process that would not significantly impact the time-to-purchase. Staff are now expected to provide a brief justification for their purchases, in addition to the required supporting documents, to determine whether the purchase was necessary and reasonable to support the department’s core mission and operations; and whether the purchase is being procured at the lowest cost. The justifications must receive approval from our division leaders, so their support is critical.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the number of cost saving changes External Affairs has and will make in the coming months, the commitment shown by the department as a whole has resulted in existing agreements for core goods and services being negotiated or re-negotiated as the case dictates. This has helped us fine tune our needs and redirect resources that maximize the benefit to the university. This has also helped our department weather the more recent budget cuts.

There are always challenges when implementing process changes. However, in many cases, those challenges can be overcome to a certain extent by providing staff with the context necessary to support the changes. The purchasing process and requirements at Rutgers are complex and adding any additional steps at a time when changes are a regular occurrence are difficult. However, I periodically meet with all department preparer’s to review important changes and updates, which has helped to provide them with context and specific details regarding the changes. In addition, I have planned to conduct virtual sessions for our staff to ensure they are aware of the changes and how it affects their role in the purchasing process.

My advice for other units is that training on the local level is important. Identifying key stakeholder groups and delivering them the information they need is important. While it’s difficult to find time to train key personnel, especially if different groups have different needs, it’s important to make sure all stakeholders have the information and context they need to avoid frustration and limit issues and mistakes.