n Central New York, being “on the Hill” refers to being part of a collection of higher education institutions or the small businesses and neighborhoods that surround them – co-located on a physical hill in the city of Syracuse. Yet, despite close physical proximity and cross-over of students and classes, research administration services and communications between the Hill-based institutions is disjointed, albeit friendly, at best.

While inter-institutional research development discussions have been strongly supported in recent years through formal collaborations at the vice president and dean levels, there has been little institutional sharing and learning on the Hill among on-the-ground research administrators, apart from joint participation in a few NCURA traveling programs. In 2006, a few of us pre-award RAs from the Hill had the good fortune, however, to cross professional paths and form friendships at the NCURA annual meeting – a mere 370 miles from our campuses. In 2014, we finally began meeting intentionally to discuss local opportunities and challenges.

Our initial discussions have given way to an informal but strong network of higher education professional staff with significant pre-award responsibilities. This network currently provides:

- Collegiality and knowledge sharing in a non-competitive atmosphere;
- Mentoring for less experienced peers;
- Discussions of ongoing and upcoming research projects to facilitate PI-matching;
- Sharing of tangible resources, such as funding opportunities, templates, contacts, and strategies;
- Exposure to diversity of thought, outlook and experience in research administration.

**The Formation of RDP@CNY**

Over a period of a few months, initial brainstorming led to a wider invitation and the development of a calendar of regular activities — and Research Development Partners of Central New York (RDP@CNY) was born. The group’s founders challenged themselves to answer: *How do we maximize opportunities and resources across local partner institutions?* In other words, with dwindling travel budgets curtailing our offsite professional development activities, how could we maximize our localized knowledge to benefit the mini network we wanted to create? We were seeking to build new collaborations between our faculty and/or researchers, but also more selfishly to broaden our individual interactions, create a sense of camaraderie among a much-needed peer network, and to informally increase our individual professional development. Our initial invitations were met with unbridled enthusiasm, and our meetings quickly turned into a highly anticipated sharing activity.

**Our Approach**

RDP@CNY holds monthly meetings during the academic year, which rotate among member hosts. This gets us out of our seats and onto our neighbors’ turf. A common meeting is prefaced by the selection of a primary topic of discussion (usually determined at the preceding meeting); however, conversation topics are allowed to steer to items of interest brought up by attendees. We always set a loose agenda, comprising “Hot Topics” of the season (based on our shared love of an NCURA traveling program of the same name). But it is an open conversation, where the agenda is highly flexible, and there is a “low threshold” for contribution — meaning members can come and listen or come and contribute at their comfort level!
Members are sent email invitations to each meeting one month in advance, with reminders sent out a few days before each meeting. Members may also bring guests, who are “e-introduced” via email before the meetings. Meetings are set up two months in advance to plan for attendance by the most possible members. The overriding air is one of collegiality and equality, yet we thrive on our professional diversity. Often, topical discussions delve into a school-to-school comparison of methods. One of the most common questions at the meeting is, “How do you handle this issue on your campus?”

We purposefully try to broaden each other’s perspectives by discussing our own operational methods and intangible resources. This includes inviting each other to school-based research talks and training sessions, and exchanging weekly and monthly publications offered by each of our individual units. For example, the Falk College at Syracuse University has invited RDP@CNY members to their regular Research Colloquia, with talks by their internal grant recipients—some of whom have served as collaborators with faculty from other RDP@CNY member institutions. The State University of New York (SUNY) Upstate Medical University has invited the RDP@CNY members to training sessions, including a recent program on data services. The F. Franklin Moon Library and the Office of Research Programs at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) publishes the Research Times, a bi-monthly newsletter highlighting awards received and relevant funding opportunities, which members of RDP@CNY now receive via ESF’s circulation list.

Each member of the group has brought something to share that broadens our perspectives on research development and pre-award research administration, outside of the silos in which we tend to work. Undoubtedly, in just over 18 months of activity, the group has helped to grow institutional capacity in research administration by incorporating diverse viewpoints.

Communication, Resources and Results
The use of formal and informal communication is an essential feature of RDP@CNY. Members reach out between meetings on the phone or via email to troubleshoot an issue or find a collaborator for a proposal. Through such communications, we strive to share our individual and institutional agency expertise/knowledge base, to reach out to each other for opinions and recommendations, and also to promote cross-campus events and workshops.

Much of our tangible resource sharing has been accomplished and archived for future use by the development of a Blackboard site open to current members.

Group activities from the past 18 months have yielded these results:

- Multiple cross-college proposal submissions to federal agencies and foundations, supported by close coordination among members of RDP@CNY;
- Retooling of internal grant programs, based on shared program designs;
- Facilitation of the creation of three new grant development positions at two other Syracuse University colleges (currently under review by human resources for posting) through assistance with job description writing and meetings with University administration for those
Colleges—successful, in part, due to RDP@CNY member assurances of a built-in support network for new hires;

- Greater recognition of the value of research development services at Upstate Medical University, including a commitment to re-funding a second staff line recently vacated due to retirement;
- Grant development services provided to two Syracuse-based nonprofits with University partnerships;
- Broader participation in existing programs among partners, to utilize time most effectively and reduce redundancy of information and/or training sessions.

Looking Ahead
In the next year, we plan to explore common issues surrounding data management plan development and data sharing. We intend to purposefully expand our knowledge and integration of library resources and services on our respective campuses. We will also use members as test cases to build profiles in tools for biosketch creation, such as SciENcv and MY NCBI, to better advise our researchers in the creation of the same. Finally, we are scheduling our first free, cross-institutional workshop on identifying funding opportunities. It will target departmental research administrators at our respective institutions. Our intent is to hold one such educational event per semester to engender greater networking and cross-institutional learning outside of our smaller group.

Conclusion
RDP@CNY, at a bare minimum, represents the successful cross-institutional trading of funding notices by email, the sharing of templates and other resources through an online platform, informal discussions of proposal development and support, and initial successful efforts at targeted PI “matchmaking” between our institutions. In reality, the broader impact is much greater. The home-grown exposure to diversity of thought, outlook and experience in research administration brought about by our efforts has already yielded multi-institutional operational benefits and evidence of personal growth – growth we cannot wait to expand upon, and which we encourage you to replicate!

Christina Leigh Deitz, DFS-IM, MLS, Grant Development Administrator for the Maxwell School of Syracuse University, specializes in proposal development and training for social science faculty and graduate students. As an instructor for the Department of Public Affairs, she also works with teams of undergraduate students and community nonprofits to create proposals. She can be reached at cdeitz@maxwell.syr.edu

Holly Chantry, MS, is the Director of Strategic Research Initiatives at SUNY Upstate Medical University in the Research Administration department. She is primarily responsible for research development and program activities on behalf of the Center for Global Health and Translational Science. She can be reached at chantrbh@upstate.edu

Katie Keough, MPH, CRA, is the Assistant Director of the Research Center at the Folk College of Sport and Human Dynamics at Syracuse University. Currently she provides “cradle to grave” support for faculty with a primary focus on finding funding opportunities and developing successful proposals. She can be reached at kkeough@syr.edu

Jessica Clemens, MLS, MGIS, is the Interim Library Director at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She provides a link between the Office of Research Programs and library services to help faculty identify funding opportunities. Her research interests are scholarly communications and research data management. She can be reached at jlemons@esf.edu

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