Research Administration: Navigating a Diverse and Rewarding Career Path

By Angela A. Yost

The topic of “Research Administration” in general brings to mind very diverse thoughts – even among Research Administrators. Do you work for a Medical School? Do you work in a central office? Do you prefer Pre-Award tasks or Post Award tasks? How each of us progresses through the day is different. Yet, perhaps the key unifying factor is that we all want to travel an enriching and rewarding career path. The tools to do just that are right within reach!

Whether the current role you play is more focused, or, as in the case of most departmental administrators, more all-encompassing, my personal experience is that you can never know too much. Investigators appreciate someone who can guide them wherever they need to go. So, with that, comes the idea of “diversifying our portfolios as research administrators” – after all, our profession is largely based on providing quality customer service to our faculty.

Diversifying Your Portfolio

The Why. Gaining as much experience, education, and information as you can get your hands on pays dividends throughout your career. You’re able to keep a cool head – while also helping to lower the anxiety levels of your investigators. In these days of limited funding, I’d much rather be able to offer a well-rounded set of skills than a narrow focus. If you have a broader focus, you’re more likely to have the skill-set to take the bull by the horns – and as Research Administrators, we all know that no matter how many years we’re in the field, this is a constant learning process.

The How. Be innovative and branch out! It’s time to take your career into your own hands! There is so much knowledge out there to be gained, a lot of it at no cost other than your time and willingness to pursue it. The more contacts and sources of reference you have, the more extensive your library of knowledge becomes. The following touches on a few areas that come to mind – though I’m sure they are not “all-inclusive” by any means.

- Learn, keep current on, and utilize funding agency guidelines, and laws pertaining to research. Yes – unfortunately, this DOES mean reading the guidelines. Reading is vital – especially in the lives of pre-award. The agencies put down in black and white what they are looking for – it’s our job to read the guidance and follow it. Reading guidelines includes funding announcements that give you guidance for applications, policy guides / statements that advise you throughout the lifecycle of the grant, and notices that may inform you of changed guidelines, etc.
- Cross-train. Volunteer for different tasks within your own department. Often, supervisors are so swamped that they would be more than willing to delegate a different task to a willing and enthusiastic employee. Inquire whether your school has an interdepartmental “exchange” program to gain experience in different areas. Some institutions offer this type of training for more junior administrators in order to give them an idea of the whole picture as it pertains to research administration. The idea of “cross training” is becoming more popular – and
for a very good reason — knowing different aspects helps you become more efficient in your own area, as everything ties so closely together (Brewer, R.).

- Seek a mentor and/or ask directed questions to senior administrators. Ask a senior administrator, in your own organization or outside, to be your mentor. You can ask that person about his/her experiences to gain insight. Asking around in general regarding other areas of research administration are of great help in determining what areas interest you the most.

- Search for training opportunities. You’ll find some within your own organization. Most central administrative offices offer some sort of training for their institution’s administrators. NCURA also has traveling workshops, online workshops, and webinars — which have proven invaluable to me. (In fact, in my current position, I had no idea how to negotiate / set up budgets for clinical trials prior to taking the NCURA online tutorial on clinical trials... shhhh!)

- Go back to school — online, that is! If you’re looking to gain a higher education and / or more formal training, there are now several schools, as you know by looking through this magazine, that offer Master’s degrees and/or certification in Research Administration.

- Become certified. Searching for training options without breaking the bank? Click through and read items in the Body of Knowledge for the CRA / CPRA / CRA exams. You can learn at your own pace — and whether or not you decide to take the exam, there is a wealth of great information to guide you throughout your career. (The RAC also offers full day study sessions for a minimal fee. You can find their information here http://cracert.org/examschedule.html under “Body of Knowledge Review Sessions”. For an online meeting option, Virginia Tech has an organized study group and you don’t need to be from Virginia Tech to join. For more information on this CRA Study Team, please contact Vicky Ratcliffe, Manager of Research Education and COI Administrator at vratcliffe@vt.edu or 540-231-7964.)

- Take available compliance training modules. Regarding compliance, each institution has their own training structure / modules that researchers are required to take prior to beginning their research. Just recently, I’ve learned a few things while taking my institution’s training modules for IACUC, HIPAA, and IRB. Knowing what is required of your researchers helps tremendously when guiding your young researchers through the various processes. (Not to mention, if you are sitting for an exam, these compliance topics do surface quite a bit!)

- Use technology to your advantage.
  - Twitter offers a variety of topics of interest to research administrators. While I’m definitely not an expert on Twitter, I do know that if you “follow” certain organizations, you get helpful little tidbits from time to time — ranging from changing processes and procedures, changes in agency guidelines, all the way to innovative new research in the world!
  - Google — ‘nuff said! What can’t you find on Google? Yet — it consistently surprises me that this continues to be the easiest way to amaze your investigators with your vast and expansive knowledge! (I’m pretty sure everyone has to know about Google, right?) If you search using the right combination of words, you can come up with a wealth of knowledge and ideas. If one set of words does not bring the desired result, try again. This gets me out of pinches 99.9% of the time.

- The World Wide Web — you can visit other Universities and see how they operate — right from the comfort of your own office. The recent NCURA webinar, entitled “The Research Administrator’s Toolbox” repeatedly noted the advantages of just that. There are templates to be found out there for just about every task. Modifying to suit your needs, rather than re-creating the wheel is much more time effective.

- SmarterAdmin.com — Do you use Excel extensively? I recently discovered this resource online, dedicated specifically to helping Research Administrators simplify their reporting tasks. Smarter Admin has a wealth of free resources on their website. They also have a very popular webinar series where they cover the more powerful aspects of Excel; all while gear- ing their focus toward the needs of Research Administration. (This source would be the most helpful for the administrator whose organization relies mainly on Excel for reporting purposes / information gathering)

- Participate in NCURA Collaborate. I feel a little Déjà Vu here... Seriously — you learn a lot! For fun, I read what people post to see what I know the answers to. If I can add something, I do. More often than not, I’m just absorbing like a sponge. This is my morning entertainment while I’m sitting there sipping coffee and contemplating what I need to accomplish for the day.

- Research & Write. Volunteering to write an article gives you an excuse to delve more deeply into an area that may be of interest to you. Or the intent may just be to help you gain more of an understanding of a topic that you know very little about. You’ll also gain networking experience out of the deal! (Not to mention, if you currently have CRA status — this is a great way to earn credit toward your certification renewal!)

The Ugly. Constantly looking for ways to expand your knowledge and skills will help you find your niche in Research Administration. You’ll be an invaluable asset to your faculty and your senior administrators — and, as a senior administrator, and excellent source of information to your staff. If you have other tips and/or sources of information, please do share — we can all benefit! ■

References
2 Cole, J., Hope, C., Silver, J., Luongo, R., and Gannon, G. NCURA Webinar Series: Research Administrator’s Toolbox

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