

Research Administration –

The Starting Point for Integrating Diversity

By Sarah Browngoetz and Tapiana Wray

One can approach integrating diversity in research administration from several angles, each of which will promote diversification and contribute to the end goal of incorporating diversity into your mission. Crafting a holistic plan to increase diversity across the board within your expertise, your workplace, your portfolio and within your institution gives form to that intention and will provide a pathway to create a community of colleagues that are engaged in increasing diversity in their professional skillset, within their workgroups, and across the institution.

Building diversity in your expertise

A typical career path for a research administrator may start in a department at a research university, advance to a position in the centralized office working primarily on NIH proposal preparation and then transition to a privately funded laboratory managing the funding for clinical trials. This pathway starts with the development of a broad understanding of research administration then moves to developing a specialty with a deeper understanding of a specific facet of research administration and arrives at the establishment of bona fide expertise. The specialty does not blot out the prior experience - it builds upon it. These are steps to building your body of knowledge.

Our body of knowledge is the one thing that we take from one position to the next. Our professional reputation is directly related to our expertise so it makes developmental sense to intentionally build diverse areas of expertise into our professional narrative.

Take advantage of opportunities that cross your path to aide in building a diverse knowledge base. Volunteer for professional organizations, present at conferences and workshops, subscribe to professional publications, or volunteer to be a beta tester for new processes being developed by funding agencies.

Each of these suggestions allows you to experience a different facet of research administration. Through professional organizations such as NCURA you can participate in the policy-building that governs our industry. Presenting on your specialty at a conference gives you the opportunity to solidify your expertise and shows how knowledgeable you are on that topic. It also has the potential to pinpoint areas in which you could know more, where your knowledge is lacking. Working with funding agencies to test their processes gives you access to their motivations and an understanding of the why behind their sometimes cumbersome processes. All of these increase your understanding of research administration from a different perspective.

Another way to intentionally build diversity into your body of knowledge is to take a moment to reflect on your career and identify the transferable skills you've acquired during your professional life. Most likely you have transferable skills that have been with you a very long time that you may have discounted.

Everyone has work history that on the surface may not seem to be pertinent to their current positions. If we shift the paradigm a bit we see the connection between the experience gained at that summer job scooping ice cream that has provided you with the time management skills to prioritize urgent requests from several funding agencies, internal departments, and PI's. Perhaps an internship at a law firm while in college taught you how to write and format formal letters and memos making it easy for you to generate these kinds of communications today. Identifying your accumulated transferable skills deepens your body of knowledge and opens you up to utilizing hard won skills you may not know you have. This will diversify your perspective on how to solve problems and communicate with varied people.

Workplace Diversification

Workplace diversification is seated in a managers' ability to develop a team from different backgrounds, experiences, and skills. Providing increased benefits to the department. By understanding the benefits and dynamics of workplace diversity, a manager is able to construct a team with a competitive edge creating a diverse workforce that drives innovation by its very nature.

A work environment rich in diversity increases morale in employees and instills a desire to be more effective and efficient in their work. This results in an increase of creativity amongst the group as new ideas and solutions are brought to the collaborative effort. Morale is increased through diverse interactions between the different research

administrators which increases individual knowledge, and cultural exposure. Individuals are challenged to perform to the best of their ability, and increase their creativity by questioning the status quo through diverse collaboration.

A diverse work environment will attract desirable employees who appreciate an environment where they can grow personally and be challenged professionally. These employees are enticed by the morals of a company that obviously places credence in equality amongst its employees. Every potential employee desires to be treated with fairness and wants to know that their opinions have the same weight as their co-workers. A manager needs to consider what strengths and attributes a new team member can contribute to the growth of the team when questioning viable candidates. With careful cultivation and attention to detail, a manager can create a team that is diverse, dynamic, and engaged in the tasks at hand.

Portfolio Diversification

Managers who value productivity and effectiveness embrace labor diversification for their employees. This same practice is also best applied to portfolio management for research administrators. One could convincingly argue that through portfolio segregation, the opportunity for a research administrator to achieve the level of subject matter expert with that portfolio would be exponentially faster than compared to a research administrator who has a diverse portfolio. This argument is narrow in focus and shortsighted for long term gain. While there is an inherent benefit to having subject matter experts in specific areas, it proves more effective to have subject matter experts in all areas of portfolio management.

Employees are challenged and encouraged to learn more in their roles, have greater job and personal satisfaction than those that are allowed to remain stagnant. Portfolio diversification provides an opportunity for research administrators to increase their own skill set and to share their knowledge base through training with other research administrators. An additional benefit to portfolio diversification is that with research administrators having increased knowledge and familiarity with different agencies there is the opportunity for administrators to act as backup for each other. This allows for continued productivity; meeting the needs for both agencies and departments in the absence of the assigned research administrator. Research administrators are able to support each other in times where one administrator's work load increases more than another.

Through portfolio diversification amongst research administrators, managers foster an environment that is dedicated to learning rather than remaining stagnant, encouraging workplace communication rather than seclusion, boosting administrator morale rather than accepting the status quo, and propagating collaboration between departments. With portfolio diversification, research administrators, agencies and departments stand to gain more than they would lose.

Diversity in the types of projects your institution pursues

Each fully funded research project at any given institution is a victory and a success. It provides that institution with a purpose, recognizes the expertise of their researchers, and invites all involved into a national or sometimes global conversation about how this particular piece of science can move mankind forward in its quest for knowledge with the potential to benefit all of us.

There are a slew of professional organizations and listservs that can be utilized to keep abreast of trends in the field of research administration. Reading your sponsoring agencies updates and familiarizing yourself with

their regulations and policies can give you a diverse perspective of what the research community is focusing on at any given time. Instantaneous access to all this information is certainly helpful but it takes action to transform it into a useful tool to germinate diverse projects within your institution.

The monetary benefit of a lush and vibrant research community is secondary to the potential impact some of our funded projects can have on mankind but many institutions value the money (almost) as much as the prestige of a successful project. For this reason competition for research money is fierce and as our research institutions experience budgetary cuts and drops in other forms of funding the competition for research dollars increase.

If you are a departmental research administrator communicate with your central office, let them know that your researchers are interested in collaborating on cross discipline opportunities with other researchers in your community. Research administrators who work in central offices see all the proposals that are submitted and funded. They may be able to help your researchers make connections with other researchers on campus that possess the expertise they need to develop a particular proposal.

Foment a collaborative environment for your PI's. Work on ways to bring faculty together that may not cross paths in their day to day lives but whose areas of expertise may complement each other. Sponsor a faculty lounge with monthly brainstorming parties; ask successful senior PI's to share their proposal writing experience with new faculty. PI's are people who are passionate about their subject matter, get them in a room together and the creativity they bring to it will astound you.

Cross discipline collaborations bring different types of thinkers together diversifying the types of opportunities your institution can pursue. The resulting proposals have a depth of understanding that explores varied and complementary characteristics of the research subject. This can be intriguing to funding agencies and may give your institution an edge during review.

Research administrators have the opportunity and potential to be the driving force for diversity at an institution. An office of grants and contracts whose mission addresses creating a diverse workforce with individuals dedicated to increasing the diversity of their knowledge base functions collaboratively and innovatively. This establishes a firm foundation which can be used to support a climate that embraces diversity within all facets of research administration. From here an office utilizes knowledge and expertise to encourage research diversification and proactively fosters new research relationships. In order to support research with the potential to improve the quality of life for our global population, the driving force supporting this research must be diverse. ■



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