

By Joanna Kentolall

Aspects of life are impermanent, incomplete, and imperfect – but still beautiful. The appreciation of that beauty has come to be known as the Japanese aesthetic wabi-sabi. Difficult to truly define, a Westernized view of wabi-sabi is often associated with celebrating the organic transformations and simple variety that can be found everywhere.

Through art and design, wabi-sabi is in the weathered look of a stone lantern as it's reshaped by the elements over the years. The lantern becomes more unique and interesting as time passes. Any blemishes that might appear only lend it character. Although it may not look the same as it did years ago, that doesn't diminish its value.

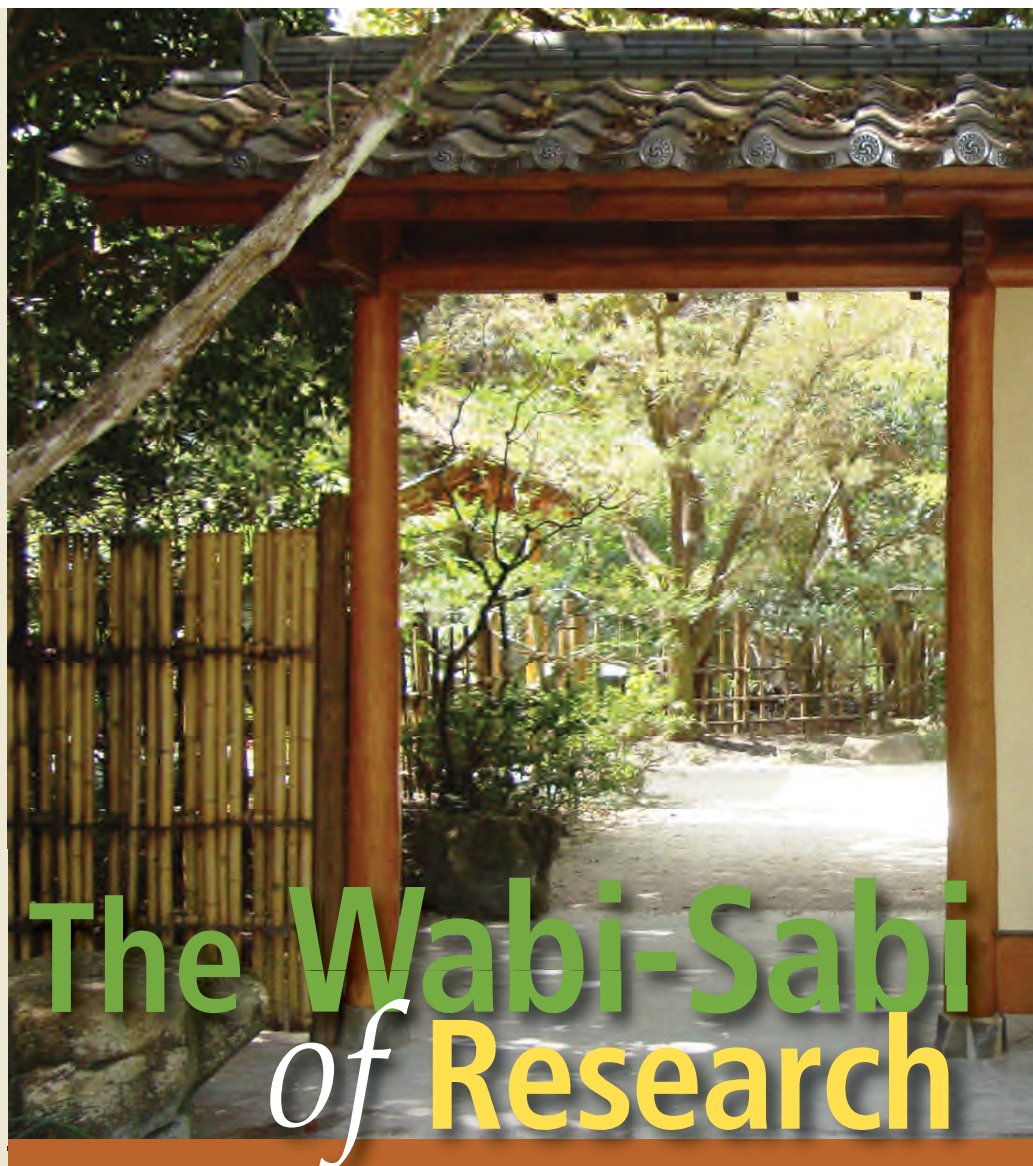
In a tea house, wabi-sabi is in the simple shape of a rustic tea cup with an asymmetrical bend or small crack. The cup represents the care that comes from being handcrafted, as opposed to something mass produced for identical structure. The imperfections and basic form give it a personality that modern technology can't reproduce. There is no need for an opulent or complex structure to give it significance. It's one-of-a-kind, and as it continues to change with use, its irregularities become part of its realistic charm.

Even in our youth-obsessed culture, wabi-sabi can be found in an individual who greets aging with grace, rather than clinging to the appearance of youth. Our bodies simply can't stay the same over time and are never done transforming. This doesn't mean we give up on staying healthy or feeling beautiful; only to accept that we all have imperfections and will continue to mature. It's a part of what makes us distinctly who we are.

Whether it's a physical object, a process, or a person, though it's not permanent, not complete, and not perfect, it should still be valued and even celebrated. Viewed through the lens of our profession, this translation of wabi-sabi can reflect the evolving, diverse, and beautifully flawed nature of research administration.

Nothing is Permanent

In university research offices, whether departmental or central, change seems to be the only constant. Staff members come and go, new SOPs are introduced, and updated computer systems are implemented. Revised sponsoring agency requirements and guidance documents are released. The profession itself continues to adjust as



technologies emerge and funding priorities shift.

These challenges may initially be awkward, but ultimately they can be opportunities for professional and personal growth. Coworkers who join the team may bring unique knowledge and energy to support the office. New systems and procedures can make processes easier as they encourage us to grow and learn. And if those procedures turn out not to be beneficial, they can always be changed again.

Without transformation, the workplace would be a stagnant environment that could become tedious. Just as a stone lantern can become more interesting as it changes, research administration can too. And learning to embrace those changes can work to sustain the profession, while also helping it evolve.

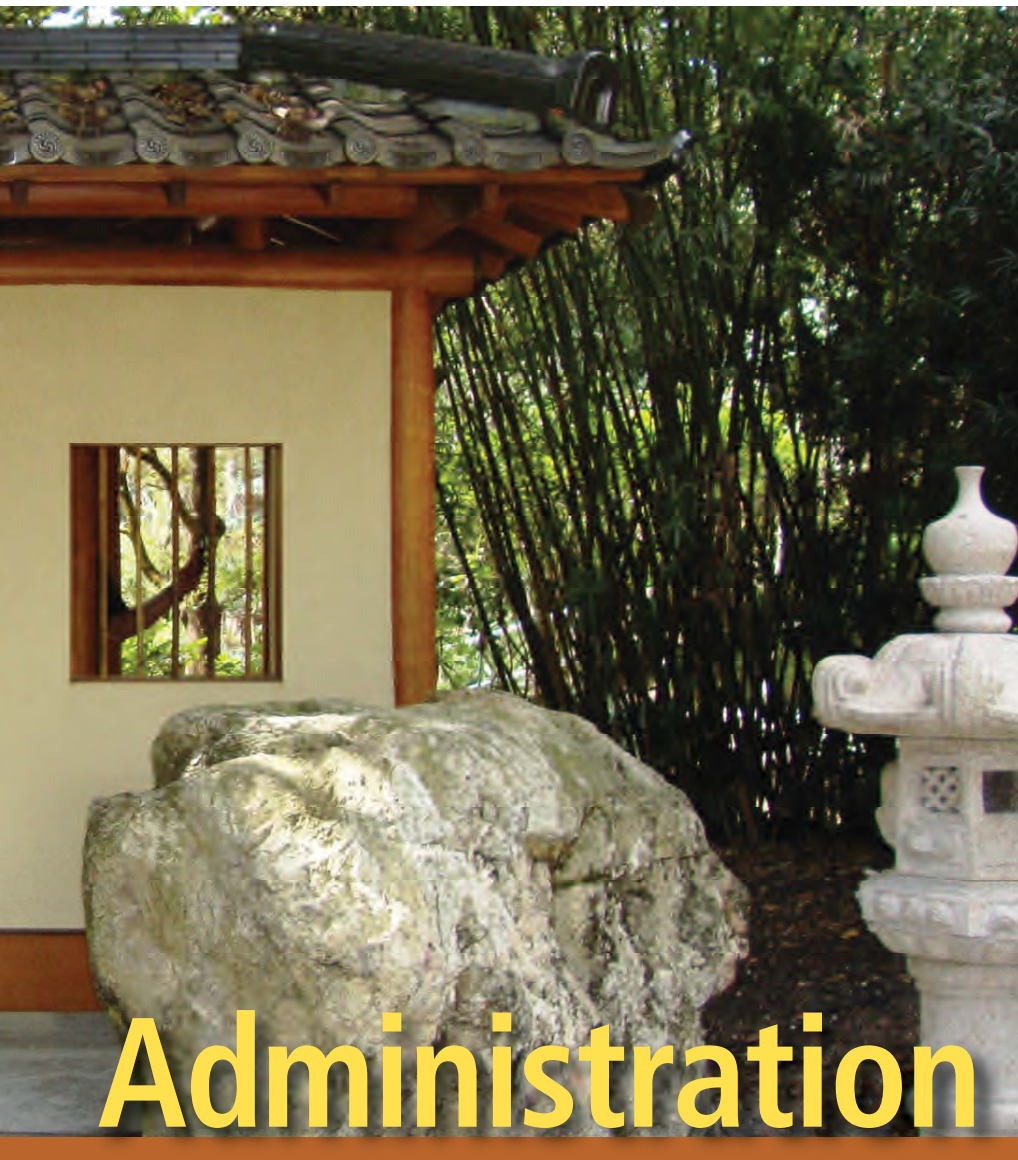
Nothing is Complete

Learning never ends. Not in research administration and not in life. Thanks to the never ending

changing state of affairs, our skill set is never complete. The need and success of NCURA conferences and ongoing trainings are a testament to that. In order to be knowledgeable and to stay current and versatile, training is ongoing.

Not only is education never complete, but is the preparation for a grant submission ever really complete? No matter how seasoned the professional, things can always go wrong at the last minute that no amount of preparation could have foreseen. From a technological or system problem, to the last minute discovery of a missing piece, there is always the potential for an error. Significant proposal content may even need tweaks at the last minute if the PI decides it's not really finalized. Even after the submit button is pushed, doubts can linger as to if the proposal was as thorough as possible. We just have to acknowledge this and move on.

The same can be said through the context of wabi-sabi and the acceptance that our physical



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appearance is never really through evolving. No matter how we prepare for aging, the changes will persist. While every effort can be made to freeze time, we will never be physically complete and certainly will never be perfect.

Nothing is Perfect

Research administration is made up of a wide range of individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives – and none of them is perfect. Each person has strengths and weaknesses. The beauty is that what one colleague lacks is what another colleague might bring to the table. Our specific experiences mold us into who we are - and we all have some cracks around the edges.

Considering the unique nature of each individual's contributions will make the most of partnerships and generate more comprehensive proposals. What may not seem to make sense initially is what may ultimately lead to a nonlinear way of thinking that drives us down avenues we

might not have ventured down before. This diversity is especially important today with the emphasis placed on Team Science and collaborations between fields and with other universities. The potential for exciting discoveries may be just around the corner, or on the other side of the globe.

What makes us all the same, no matter where we are, is that we all share in our differences and imperfections. In the end they can be beneficial and build more rounded work environments and new initiatives. A cracked tea cup may not be an ideal vessel, but the imperfections are what bring it to life. The wabi-sabi principle can be seen as the balance and contentment to accept and appreciate the flaws that are inevitable. We should prize those cracks in ourselves, in others, and even in our profession.

Conclusion

This narrow view of the complex philosophy of wabi-sabi is a long way from its origins in Zen

Buddhism. But I believe it can be applied to individual lives and careers to help bring them into focus. Using a new perspective to accept and enjoy the quirks and characters that make up research administration can make the everyday twists and turns of the work journey more enjoyable.

Wabi-sabi is not about straight lines. It's about the curved path that ebbs and flows along the way. Many people have followed a winding road to research administration as a profession. Most of us working today probably never thought this would be our destination. My own career path came by way of "the road less traveled" and I'm sure many others share a similar story. The truth is I wasn't certain how I'd fit into this world. But everyone is one-of-a-kind and has perhaps found a niche that seems to fit just fine. Cracks and all.

Nothing is permanent, nothing is complete, and nothing is perfect. My translation of the spirit of wabi-sabi in research administration seeks to celebrate the diversity that comes from all of that. I'm no expert in any of these realms and that somehow makes me ideal to write about their impermanence, incompleteness, and imperfection. ■

References

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