

Tips

For New And Seasoned Research Administrators In An Evolving Research Environment

By Kim Frazer and Samantha Aleshire

Becoming a research administrator requires extensive training. Not only must one learn the requirements of the profession, we must also be on top of the evolving sponsor requirements and master the software development tools used for supporting research administration. The goal of this article is to provide different perspectives on professional development, plus tips for mastering leadership skills for new and seasoned research administrators.

Advice for the New Research Administrator

Unless you have a background in research at a university, stepping into a position as a research administrator may seem overwhelming. Research administration is an evolving profession, governed by complex and ever-changing rules and regulations. That's why research administrators find it helpful to have what's referred to as a "toolbox". For those new to the profession, a research administrator's toolbox may simply be a list of links to important websites, used to help manage the many resources required to become proficient. Throughout this article you will find tips for building your toolbox.

The position you have been hired to fill will determine the area of research administration you need to learn first. If your position is on the pre-award side of the grant life cycle, perhaps your training will start with an overview of the many types of sponsors you will be working with, and the unique requirements for each agency. If instead you are working on the post-award side, initial training might include finance and accounting. Wherever you begin your journey, with each step you will gain knowledge and valuable experience.

When you're first starting out, you can count on your supervisor to provide training materials with sources for government and institutional policies

and regulations. Other "tools of the trade" may be included, such as forms, templates and checklists. Categorize these resources and put them in one place. This collection of materials is your basic toolbox. As you progress in your career, you will continue to add resources, based on what you decide is most helpful.

Don't get discouraged if after a few months you don't completely understand everything contained in your toolbox. Experienced research administrators will tell you that it may take a year, or more, before you feel comfortable with all of the new knowledge you acquire.

Many institutions offer training opportunities. For example, the Office of Research at my institution recently held an all-day orientation. It included sessions about sponsored projects, research protections, export control, and conflict of interest. If your institution offers similar training, make sure you take it!

Don't expect to retain all the information that is presented. If you receive handouts, it is a good idea to add them to your toolbox. Review the applicable material prior to your next training session. This is a technique known by educators as "activating prior knowledge." It is a method that one can use to help make sense of new ideas. Eventually, as you gain experience and attend subsequent training, you will understand more about your chosen career.

One of the research administrator's most important resources is NCURA, the National Council of University Research Administrators. NCURA tutorials and webinars offer in-depth training. Workshops and seminars, as well as reference materials like the "Uniform Guidance Desk Reference" can be added to your toolbox. Ask your institution about becoming an NCURA member, and visit their website at www.ncura.edu.

There is always something new to learn when it comes to software development tools for research administration, because the electronic process is constantly evolving. Institutions that have an electronic process

in place may upgrade to newer software as it becomes available, while other institutions may decide to switch to a different software solution, in an effort to reduce administrative burden. As a research administrator, you may be asked to perform testing prior to the launch of a software update. Participating in software testing gives you a chance to learn about the new system, and provides you the opportunity to give input that may someday make your job easier.

Sometimes when there is a change from a manual to an electronic process, it requires learning how to use new software, as well as understanding the procedures connected with the process. A good example of this is the transition from paper to electronic forms for financial disclosure that is in progress at University of California, Irvine (UCI). When UCI launches the new software, there will be a substantial process change, and that's why it will be very important to attend the training.

In an evolving research environment, there is always a lot to learn. The best advice for new research administrators is to take advantage of every training opportunity that comes along.

Advice for the Seasoned Research Administrator

Once you've developed a strong foundation in research administration, your skills and interests may lead you to managing a team. This is a fantastic way to validate the body of knowledge you've placed in your toolbox, and a great opportunity to share that knowledge with research administrators who are just starting out.

In the seven months I have been a supervisor, I have been using my toolbox of information more than ever. When asked a question by a staff member, I try not to just answer the question. I lead them to the answer.

I ask them the same questions I was asked, such as "Did you review the agreement? What did the agreement state? What is your interpretation of the situation?" Asking these questions helps me grow.

I encourage my staff to practice critical thinking by asking questions they should be asking themselves. When they realize that they know the answer, their confidence grows along with their expertise. That way, I help them build their own toolboxes.

Decide what type of manager/supervisor/mentor you would like to be. For me there have always been three types of managers.

1. The "hovering" manager gives you something to do and sits on your shoulder while you attempt the assignment.
2. The "hands off" manager gives you the task, expects it to be completed, but doesn't give you enough information.
3. The "try it" manager gives you the assignment, provides the information, and allows you to give it your best shot. This type of manager is likely to say it's okay to fail because you learn the most when you get it wrong.

I do not want to be the "hovering" or the "hands off" type of manager. I prefer to allow my staff do their jobs. They can come to me with issues they don't know how to handle, or let me know when they need a second opinion.

When you transition into a management position, you must learn all of the inner workings of your institution. As you learn, you begin to see how research administration fits into the global vision of your institution. You can use this information to help your staff understand how to negotiate obstacles that come up in their daily work.

For instance, as a supervisor I needed to know about sabbaticals, and how they affect research funding. Sharing this knowledge with my staff makes it easier for them when it comes up in specific awards. This helps us transition from a reactive service center to a proactive service center. My staff have more opportunity for growth in a proactive environment.

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When given the opportunity to become a manager, I was more than a little nervous. When I considered the path I wanted to take within the research administration field, I realized that I wanted to mentor, and help new research administrators find their path. This can be a daunting task, and these are the questions I have been asking myself in the past seven months:

1. How do I lead a group of strong-minded adults?
2. Why oh, why did I think I could do this?
3. How does anyone actually become an effective manager?

Although the answers to these questions have come slowly, they are coming. The answer to, "How do I lead a group of strong-minded adults?" becomes clearer to me every day. I try to get everyone to understand the goal we are working towards. If my staff can perceive the benefit of what they are doing and how it fits into the bigger picture, then they can see how their jobs affect the university.

Just as I became more accustomed to using the tools in my toolbox, I want my staff to use the tools they have to get them through difficult interactions. It is my job to show them the skills they possess, and to build up those skills in others who do not yet possess them.

I am still trying to figure out the answers to remaining questions, and I know that if I can help my staff uncover their own expertise and use their body of knowledge, while letting them know I appreciate everything they do, then I count the day as a win.

In summary, you need a robust toolbox, whether you are a new or seasoned research administrator. Hopefully, this will help you as you move forward in your career. ■



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