

Embracing the Body

Marie F. Smith, CRA
Institute of Ecosystem Studies

A Case Study of Research Administration in a Small Research Institute

Abstract

Research organizations come in many sizes, and the path to becoming a Research Administrator can be as different as the institutions that employ them. Fifty years ago, it was not unusual for an administrator with unrelated duties to “grow” into the position by assuming an increasing number of grant related tasks. Today this model is rare. A person can enter the field either directly or circuitously and can become a specialist in a particular aspect of Research Administration or a generalist who is responsible for most, if not all, aspects of Research Administration. This paper will give the reader some insight on how a neophyte became a generalist in a small research institute.

Introduction

Working as a Research Administrator in a small institutional setting offers some unique and challenging opportunities, experiences and demands. The environment of a small institution can give an individual with little grants experience the opportunity to enter the field, since the small institution can often look beyond the obvious qualifications when seeking candidates for the position. A small institution with few grants may recognize a candidate’s common sense, desire to learn, willingness to work hard, comfort level in being involved in the entire grants process, and readiness to be a hands-on administrator when seeking someone to oversee sponsored projects. These qualities can serve an individual well in a one- or two-person Grant’s office.

Five and a half years ago, I entered the wonderful and wacky world of Research Administration as a generalist. While raising four children, I went back to college and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in accounting. During my “college years,” I worked in a library system where my duties included grant accounting, web design, administrative assistance, statistical analysis and software instruction. Research administration, OMB (Office of Management and Budget) Circulars, IACUC (Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee), IRB (Institutional Review Board) and a myriad of other terms that I commonly use today, were totally foreign to me. A \$35,000 grant from the State of New York was the highlight of my year; contracts were two paragraphs long including the addresses of both parties, and a PI (private investigator) wore a trench coat, followed people around and took clandestine pictures for an impending court case.

My husband had a chance meeting with the Administrator of the Institute of Ecosystem Studies (IES), Joseph S. Warner, and he indicated they were looking for a replacement for the Institute’s experienced grant administrator who had announced her retirement. After a short discussion in

Marie F. Smith, CRA, Manager of Grants Administration, Institute of Ecosystem Studies, PO Box AB, 65 Sharon Turnpike, Millbrook, N.Y. 12545; telephone: 845-677-7600 x202; e-mail: smithm@ecostudies.org; website: <http://www.ecostudies.org/grants.html>

which my husband highlighted my good points and downplayed my shortcomings, he was encouraged to have me send in a resume. Although I knew very little about the position, I sent in a resume just before the deadline and was interviewed.

To my utter amazement, I was offered the position of Manager of Grants Administration at the Institution of Ecosystem Studies. With my new job the number of awards I was dealing with went from two to well over two hundred (which constitute over 50% of the Institute's \$10M budget); contracts and agreements were several pages long, contained legal terms and conditions and currently number around 55; and a PI became a Principal Investigator on a research project. What possessed my boss to hire me, I still don't know, but I was determined to prove that he had made the right choice.

During my first year at IES, I attended a Society of Research Administrator's (SRA) Conference and learned about the certification exam for research administrators. Belief that taking this exam was important coupled with my enjoyment of learning and prompted me to spend the next year and a half learning all I could about the "Body of Knowledge." Much of my spare time was devoted to gathering the resources and learning the information necessary to pass the exam.

Three years after working at the Institute of Ecosystem Studies as a Research Administrator, I passed the certification exam and became a Certified Research Administrator. The most memorable part of announcing that I had passed the certification exam, aside from sheer joy, pride and astonishment, was the speechless shock of my boss, a man who has been in the field of Research Administration for over thirty years and who is never at a loss for words.

From Novice to Generalist

Being a research administrator in a small research institute is a blend of central office and departmental administration. It offers a unique opportunity to gain experience in the many functional aspects of research administration. From preaward to post award, grant accounting to A-133 audits, contract negotiation, compliance issues, electronic and/or paper proposal submission, I am involved in it all. When I am not surfing the Internet for possible funding sources, I am maintaining the Grants' Intranet and Internet pages, helping the scientific staff structure a project budget, reviewing a proposal, negotiating the terms of an award, reviewing grant expense reports, or handling any of a number of duties associated with pre and post award. My job is to handle an award from the idea in need of funding stage through the final closeout and audit. Grant-related issues are discussed, handled and resolved in my office, hallways and parking lots.

Taking charge of an office that had been occupied by an experienced manager who had the confidence and the trust of the scientific staff was a daunting experience, especially for someone with limited experience. I felt a little like I did as a little girl when I played "dress up" in my mom's clothing. Nothing seemed to fit quite right and, at times, the challenges seemed monumental. Everything was so new and unfamiliar. I was afraid I would not measure up to the task at hand while being even more determined not to fail. In addition to learning the many details of grants administration, my first real task was to gain the trust and respect of the scientific staff followed by the pressing need to introduce the new, NSF FASTLANE proposal

submission within six months of accepting the position. It was a distinct advantage to have inherited systems that were chosen with care and records that were very well organized.

My first priority was accomplished by my making a concerted effort to get to know the scientific staff. This was made easy by the fact that in a small institution we are in very close proximity to each other. I read and re-read the OMB circulars and the grant guidelines of the major federal agencies that we were dealing with and asked questions – many, many questions. My supervisor, an old hand at grants administration, was a wealth of information and patiently answered all my questions and made me the beneficiary of his past experience. His sage advice will be with me always. On my first day at the Institute he told me, “There is nothing wrong with saying I don’t know but I will find out. It is important that you do find out the right answer and get the information back to the staff member as soon as possible.”¹ The candy jar in my office didn’t hurt either, and I encouraged the members of the scientific staff to stop by my office just to chat and enjoy a treat. In a relatively short time I had gained their respect by showing them that their proposals and awards were as important to me as they were to them and by always remembering the advice that Joseph Warner had given me. The second hurdle was a little easier for me to overcome. Among the duties of my previous profession was giving Internet workshops for library directors and other staff members. Surfing the Internet and using online forms was a matter of routine for me. When the scientific staff realized that I was comfortable with electronic submission of proposals, they relaxed and began to accept the inevitability of electronic proposal submission. In addition, I arranged with a counterpart in a local college² to have NSF come and give a workshop on FASTLANE. Once I managed to overcome these two challenges, my profession became a more “comfortable fit.”

A Generalist at IES

Given my choice, I prefer to have broad responsibility rather than tackle narrow repetitive tasks. By having the overview of the Institute’s research needs and seeing the entire process unfold, it is easier for me to solve problems before they emerge. I know how all the pieces should fit together and am able to have a firm grip on integrating the pieces of the puzzle so that there is a seamless transition from one stage to another. It is imperative to have a good working relationship with the other offices involved in the grants process – Comptroller’s office, Human Resources, Payroll, and Development. This is made easier by the fact that our offices are within a few steps of each other. The Director and the Institute Administrator, my supervisor, also occupy offices that are only steps away.

I am on a first name basis with all IES employees including the scientific staff who generate proposals. IES has fifteen staff scientists, including the Director, who conduct research and are PIs and co-PIs on proposals. Although the number varies, there are usually five Postdoctoral Associates who work at IES, Visiting Scientists, and outside collaborators who are co-PIs on research projects. Principal investigators spend a lot of time in my office. Problems often diminish in magnitude after they have had an opportunity to come to my office, shut the door, discuss the possible solutions, and, of course, eat a handful of sweets. The nature of my duties at

¹ Joseph S. Warner, IES Administrator and former Director of Grant and Contract Administration at Yale University. Mr. Warner entered research administration in 1966.

² Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York.

the Institute also permits me to be on a first name basis with program officers at awarding agencies. Having this type of “easy” relationship with all the collaborating partners removes a layer of bureaucracy and helps me get answers swiftly.

The Comptroller and I work very closely together. The Comptroller’s office handles the financial aspects of the Institute, including financial statements, operating accounts, endowment, payroll, accounts payable, purchasing and financial audit. I handle the grant accounting, including journal entries, indirect costs on incoming awards, invoicing on subcontracts, loading budgets, entering new awards into the accounting system, answering questions regarding the coding of grant expenses, closing accounts in the accounting system and handling the A-133 audit. It is important that the Comptroller and I work as a team; that the lines of communication are always kept open and that there is a mutual respect and understanding of our respective roles and how they interrelate.

Being a generalist at IES gives me the advantage of having an overview of the entire grants process. The scientific staff appreciates having a “point” person that they can go to get answer to a question or to resolve a problem. They don’t need to spend a lot of time or go very far to find the appropriate contact person since I have the tools to find the answer and the authority to give the answer on any grants related issue.

Working with the scientific staff at IES has been extremely rewarding and, at times, a lot of fun. IES is a research institution and its primary function is ecological research and education. When hired, each new employee is told that no matter what their assignment, service to the scientific community is extremely important. This is something that I take very seriously and work very hard at, but I also have, believe it or not, fun! The scientists at IES are very appreciative of the measures I take to make their projects run smoothly and show their appreciation. I have received flowers, bottles of wine, cookies, homemade jams and breads, candies and always a sincere, “Thank You.” The greatest compliment I received was in response to an e-mail that I sent to one of the members of the scientific staff asking him to come to my office as soon as he had a moment. Two minutes later he was at my door stating, “Only for you would I respond so quickly.”

Lest you think that I function in nirvana, there are down sides to being a generalist. My office is often a hub of activity, and my stress level is usually elevated. If it is not a proposal deadline, then it is working with a state, local or federal agency on a grant, agreement or contract that is not familiar with the process or closing out an award with an agency that has “not received” the forms that I sent. One agency representative told me quite calmly that I was the hundredth person to say that the paperwork had been sent but not received, and I was waiting with bated breathe to hear what my prize would be. You guessed it. I got to send the entire packet again via snail mail, e-mail and facsimile.

I get to juggle many problems at once and need to be able to switch roles on a second’s notice. The monthly grant expense reports need to be reviewed and checked before the month can be closed, project budgets need to be entered into the accounting system and the invoices to our subcontractors need to go out even during proposal deadlines. In my position if you cannot prioritize and multitask, you are doomed to a career of aggravation and frustration.

Conclusion

Three elements are essential to a successful career as a generalist – the person, the employing institution and those who run the institution. I have found that it is important for me to be flexible, detail oriented, firm, a good communicator, effective problem solver and knowledgeable - all qualities that help in any employment setting. The most important quality for me to possess, however, is a good sense of humor – a quality I have called on many times and that has gotten me through many rough moments.

My role at IES is to facilitate the research programs of the institution while ensuring that deadlines are met, that all the rules, regulations and terms and conditions of the awards are adhered to correctly so that the researcher can conduct the project in a supportive climate. My job is an administrator for research not of research, a distinction made years ago by one of the original research administrators.³ Working in a small institution has given me the opportunity to be part of the entire grants process and work in near proximity to all the internal players. Those at the top of IES understand fully the importance of the work that I do. The Director, Dr. Gene E. Likens, has been a PI throughout his long research career. He and Joseph S. Warner, Administrator of IES, give me the support necessary for me to get the job done in a manner that enables researchers to pursue their creative endeavors and achieve their goals within the compliance structure of the institution and the awarding agency. The Institute is a marvelous place to work – a place that cares about its mission and its employees. Finally, the Institute's mission statement is clear and fully embraced by the employees – research is the heart of the enterprise.

Knowing what I know now, would I take the job and the challenge again? The answer is simple – yes, in a heartbeat. I have definitely “Embraced the Body (of Knowledge)!”

³ Raymond J. Woodrow is the author of *Management for Research in U.S. Universities*, NACUBO, 1978 and recipient of the Distinguished Contribution to Research Award from the Society of Research Administrators on October 12, 1977. He was principal author for the *Report of the Committee on Contractual and Administrative Procedures for Research and Development in the Department of the Army*, forerunner of the Armed Services Procurement Regulations and the Federal Procurement Regulations. Mr. Woodrow worked at Princeton University.