Reaping the *Rewards* of Stellar Collaborations

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*A*hhh, a good collaboration! The pleasure of partnering with likeminded people who add their expertise, creativity, and ideas with the intent on making a project better, a study stronger, the outcomes reach further.

There are few things as satisfying as transforming ideas into concrete results with colleagues and peers. Taking inspiration and turning it into a tangible project takes a lot of energy and focus. In a good collaboration the participants challenge each other and build upon one another's expertise and successes. These are the easy collaborations; the participants go together like peas and carrots.

Unfortunately, not all collaborations are easy. However, sustaining the shared passion that brings people together on a project can be enhanced by some proactive planning and discussion. This will prevent little issues from snow balling into full-fledged problems that can shatter focus and derail a great collaboration.

For example, make sure everyone who needs to be in the communication loop on a project is in that loop from the beginning. This can be challenging within your own institution or unit; the confusion is exponentially increased when you consider collaborations that include different organizations with divergent missions, policies, and processes.

Research Administrators are experts at navigating processes and procedures. They have to have a working knowledge of everything from procurement and human resources, to facilities and student services. They often make sure there is a point of contact for each institution collaborating on the project. This frees up the researchers to work on the science or the technical aspects of the project while their administrative support handles the administrative details. When collaborating with another institution identify your counterpart at the partnering organization. This should be someone you can work with to move the administrative pieces of the project along smoothly.

Discuss Resources

It is important to hold a conversation comparing and contrasting available resources can help get you organized from the start. Note that the collaborating organization, research institute, or college may not have the same resources available that your institution has. Creative collaborations should be based on communication and relationship building because successful projects are not just built by a principal investigator but with all the collaborating partners.

Remember, project resources can include the stakeholders within and outside the university setting. Community members, representatives from local government agencies, and councils will have first- hand knowledge of whether a project will be accepted by a community and ultimately benefit that community. Including community members, especially in rural areas, will enhance the project as collaborators often listen to one another and share and give constructive feedback for proposal ideas. It is the community which will have first-hand knowledge of sustainability of a project and its goals.

In Alaska, for example, working with various tribal governments is essential for making a project a success. Letters of collaboration from the local chief and tribal government will demonstrate to the funding agency that the project meets with community approval and community values. Several funding agencies will not recommend a project for funding if the project lacks letters of collaboration from the local tribal government or area Alaska Native Corporation.

Resources also include the tools (often electronic) used to compile the proposal. Make sure all parties have the correct versions of the software being utilized so that you can easily share work during proposal development and, if the project is successful, in the post award period. Ensure that electronic authorizations and signatures are supported by trusted software.

Adobe products fully support security of each electronic signature where other products may not.

Talk about Deadlines

If your collaboration includes the work of multiple teams be sure to review the deadlines for each team working on the project. Strong and enforced deadlines will allow the project to come together in a timely fashion and allow the institutions to apply their internal processes and procedures to the proposal. This applies to both pre-award and post-award. When determining deadlines, discuss how long certain processes will take at each organization and build those expectations into the deadlines.

Consider working backwards through the process. You'll want to consider moving from the proposal due date, as listed on the Request for Funding Announcement (RFA) (allowing time for the institution's final review and audit), through to any internal unit's approval process and the actual development of the proposal components themselves. In practice, after establishing the due dates subtract five days to allow for your central office to review and approve. An additional five days should be allowed for the project's research administrator to compile all components of the proposal, including all necessary uploads to agency software. We find that our best practice is to allocate 10 days of lead time in order to submit a strong, competitive proposal. It's important that communication be maintained throughout the project development process.

Build a Communication Plan

Never underestimate the power of strong communication and associated resources. Have you considered how the participants will communicate with one another? Is everyone co-located or are they in vastly different time zones which may necessitate reliance on other means of communication such as email as a primary form of communication? Are the partners in remote locations with poor internet service? In such a case scheduled phone check-ins (with consideration given to time-zone differences) may be more realistic.

Is the proposed collaboration complex enough that you need a "mission control" point person to track communications? This is much easier to implement at the beginning of a collaboration and exchanging this type of information can assure that all players know who does what and when it needs to get done.

Own Your Expertise

As Research Administrators, sometimes we need to advocate for our role as a critical collaborating partner in the proposal development process. We have to establish a trusting relationship with the principal investigator. An initial meeting or conversation, between the research administrator and principal investigator can set the stage for a successful collaboration. Through a dialogue of sharing experiences and a clear articulation of what you can do for the PI, will put your PI at ease. As noted earlier this allows them to focus on their expertise and you on yours. This is especially important to junior faculty.

Consider a recent success where Dr. First Year Political Scientist was tasked with coordinating a major international conference and series of workshops. This included securing funding from multiple sources to convene hundreds of scholars and students in Fairbanks, Alaska and the Arctic regions across the globe. Collaborating partners for just the project development phase included junior and senior faculty, several college and program deans, international programs, support staff, and one research administrator. The project was ultimately funded, in part by the National Science Foundation, the University's foundation and alumni donors. The results included multiple journal publications for the principal investigator,

an invitation to hold a future conference, and the global recognition of this university and the principal investigator.

The proposal process can be a daunting task to the new researcher and in the example above demonstrated that mutual trust was key in this collaborative relationship. Once the project researchers understand that the RA is a collaborating partner in the proposal development process, the path becomes a smooth one. Consider that additional attention may be needed with new faculty members to share institutional processes. When the new researcher understands that you are a resource to their success, they will be more likely to seek support for future endeavors. The benefits of building these relationships extend beyond the initial collaboration. A trusted research administrator can even help build the curriculum vita of a junior faculty member by suggesting project outcome dissemination opportunities such as national presentations and peer reviewed journal articles. Your suggestions can help support their promotion and tenure.

Positive connections with others builds a strong collaborating relationship that confirm the foundation for future successful work together. In a collaborative relationship, when we respect each other's ideas and concerns, a positive connection is formed.

When others feel affirmed and understood they are more likely to actively collaborate through the completion of the project. Fostering relationships with your counterpart at a participating institution allows you to share your expertise as well as your resources and creates a cohesive team which will produce a better project. Knowing the resources available at the various collaborating organizations allows you to build a clean plan with little duplication and expresses your team's expertise to the funding agency. Intentionally keeping the lines of communication open allows collaboration to blossom and helps you avoid the panic and stress of last minute changes. Every project is an opportunity for the Research Administrator to demonstrate expertise in holding the reins of the administrative details of the project. Navigating a team through a difficult submission or project adds another level to your expertise and leadership.

Good collaboration starts with shared inspiration. Turning inspiration into successful research takes focus, intentioned communication, and organization. With a shared vision and mutual respect everyone can reach their professional goals and reap the rewards of stellar collaborations. N
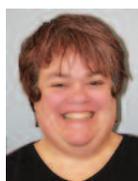
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