

WE ARE THE PRISM: It's All about Perspective

By Jeanne M. Viviani & Sarah BrownGoetz

As research administrators we need to be subject matter experts, institutional protectors, counselors, investigators, data analysts, and project managers. Our jobs revolve around all manner of institutional data, policies, and processes, not to mention having a clear understanding of the same from those agencies – public and private, small to large – that are outside our institutions. Contracts, compliance, and regulations are complex and require us to be vigilant and stay current on changes and trends. However, all Research Administrators (RA) eventually become the locus of knowledge for all processes that intersect with the administration of grants and contracts.

In large centralized offices that manage heavy workloads, administrators need to focus on sponsored research policies and procedures. They are expert resources for sponsored research operations but not particularly helpful when asked by a novice PI how to purchase items on their grants. The RA may quote Uniform Guidance information, but then refer that PI to procurement or to their department or college level coordinator to get the actual answer on how to make a purchase.

While it is important for us to be the sponsored research experts, part of that expertise is understanding why it works the way it works at our institutions. As a research administrator who works with proposal development I need to know how our Human

Resources (HR) system works, what institutional policies direct our hiring practices, where one can find salary schedules, and how one accounts for projected rate increases. This micro expertise is required for travel, procurement, and student funding as well (just to name a few).

From Subject Matter Experts to Institutional Gurus

Since RAs are distribution centers for institutional knowledge it is sometimes surprising to find ourselves working with colleagues across all functions with a profound lack of knowledge about how our institutions work. A common response seen when working with someone who doesn't have (what we would consider to be) a basic understanding of how our institution works is to shrug it off, absorb that work, and do what needs to get done in order to complete the task at hand. In particular those of us who work in smaller organizations respond this way. It often falls on us to hold this organizational knowledge because our institutions typically lack the kind of campus-wide training where these policies and procedures would be taught. When we do this, we miss perfect opportunities to educate and build allies of our colleagues as well as ensuring the work they do is most effective. If one's range of experience is limited by the job they are tasked to do on a daily basis, we can't always expect them to be one hundred percent effective in their job but we can certainly help them move towards this.

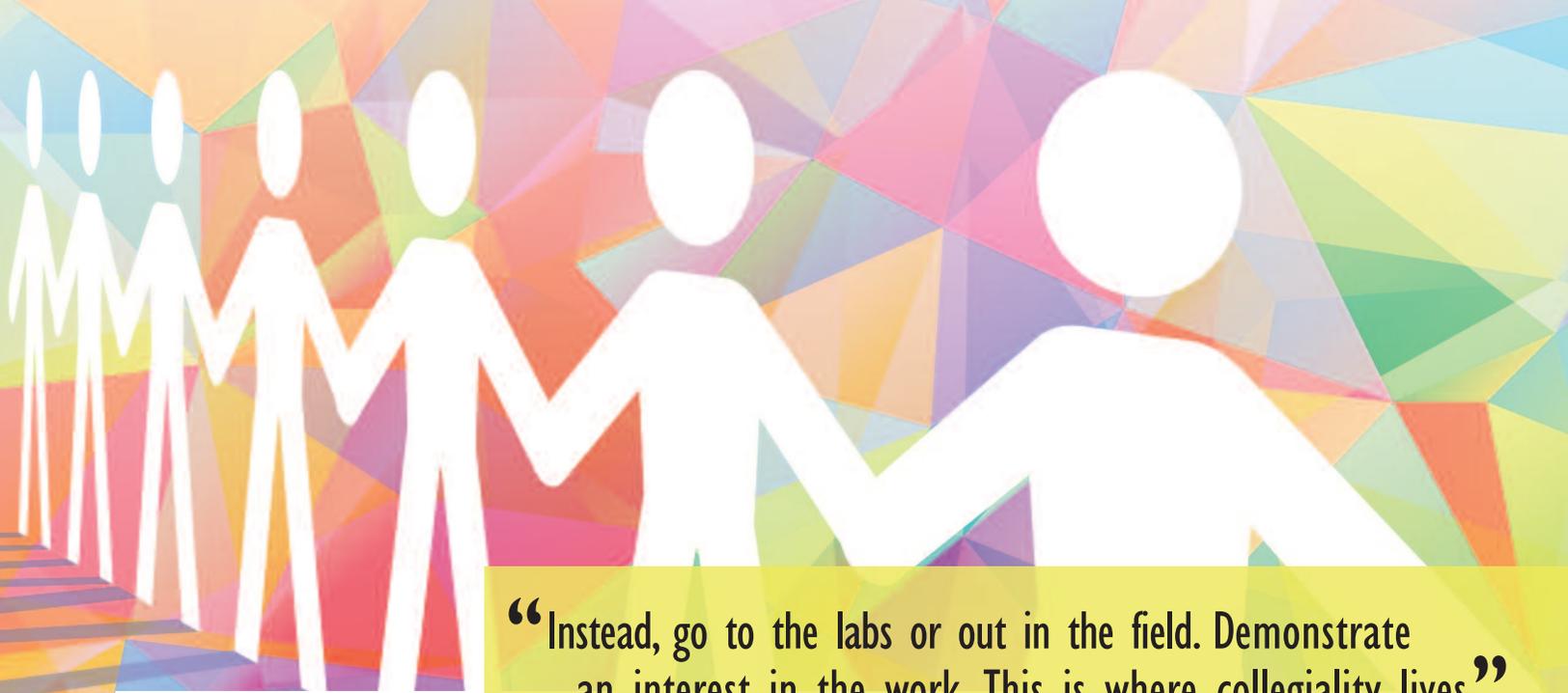
Consider these individuals for example: the travel coordinator for the Institute of Health

Information Technology who does not know how a contract is negotiated with a vendor; the PI with an 8 million dollar sea slug grant who does not need (or want) to know how the institution calculates fringe benefits for its research assistants; the HR consultant who does not know what export control means. When we shift our viewpoint we can see that we hold this knowledge for them so that they can focus their time and energy on their area of expertise. We may not know every single nuanced detail of travel, sea slugs, or HR, but we know enough to communicate our needs and to educate them on contract negotiations, fringe rate calculations and export control compliance.

It goes without saying that research administration is complex. In a perfect partnership the PI will trust the RA to manage the business end of a project while she focuses on the science. This is ideal and can be difficult to achieve because of the different perspectives brought to the relationship.

The pathway to that perfect partnership is through mutual education.

Learning about our institutions is critical but reading outdated webpages and policies does little to help. Spend time getting out of the office and visit faculty labs and departments. The lab is where you experience the passion our researchers have for their projects. All that they do and all that they are is wrapped up in that specific project but to the office bound RA that project is only one of the many awards in their portfolio needing management. Is it any wonder that the PI



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approaches our involvement in her lifework as cumbersome? Particularly if we show no interest in it other than how it impacts the bottom line for our institution.

Instead, go to the labs or out in the field. Demonstrate an interest in the work. This is where collegiality lives. This is the environment in which real change can happen. This is the starting point for changing your reputation from the annoying bureaucrat impeding the research to the partner who is trusted to guide PIs through the bureaucracy, ensuring smooth management and compliance. Indeed, a little perspective and with your understanding of research administration, you might find opportunities for management improvement that were not considered before by the PI. Our jobs are to be of service just as much as it is to be gatekeepers.

You must build trust. Nurture relationships with your researchers in such a way that they have the opportunity to experience and benefit from your expertise. Own the narrative of what you do for your researchers. This can be as easy as guiding a new researcher through their first application for funding or as difficult as hammering out a negotiation that has been confounding your institution for several months (dare we say years). Researchers appreciate data and find comfort in it, particularly if that data helps them understand a bureaucratic process. Fix a problem and tell them how

you fixed it. This creates an expectation that you can help. When you use your knowledge to help a PI navigate a tricky purchase or justify a change in the scope of work you are educating them to regard you as a valuable resource.

Listen to your researchers. Give them the opportunity to teach you about their process. This can be very revealing. As they talk about their project, notice what they choose to share with you. This is where your expertise really shines. Your multifaceted understanding of how research is funded and how those funds are administered will make it easy for you to determine areas of uncertainty for that particular researcher. This points an arrow at the areas where you may be able to clarify the process for him. If a researcher will talk your ear off about a project plan but gives a one word answer when you ask about their budget you might surmise that they could use some help with their budget planning. Your expertise is hard won; be willing to share it with your PI's and colleagues.

We can help PI's to understand work flow and provide insight or helpful suggestions on better and efficient methods for ordering supplies or hiring students. We hold this knowledge so that our faculty doesn't have too. Our faculty can educate us about why their research is so important and what kind

of impact it will have on our communities, within our country and around the world.

True impact comes from forming partnerships not only with those we serve and those we are responsible to but by reaching out to areas that are not traditionally in the research administration domain. Assisting a PI complete a travel form saves her time, conveys your expertise and reinforces your status as a partner in her pursuit of research funding. It builds confidence in you and showcases your project management skills. Most importantly, it builds your professional capacity and allows you to gather experience to suit your career goals. **N**



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