WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

Best Practices for Interaction between a Central Office and a Departmental Office

By Amy M. Brusk and Debra Werth

A positive and productive relationship can occur when a departmental research administrator (DRA) and a central administration research administrator (CRA) team up. This article provides some best practices for creating and maintaining this relationship.

Respect Individual Roles

Successful interaction between central and departmental offices requires respect for each individual's role to allow complementation between the two. The role of the central office is to facilitate the submission of grants and the review and negotiation of sponsored research agreements, serve as the contact point for negotiations, assist with challenging conversations, and house the signatory official for sponsored projects for the university. The role of the departmental office is to serve research faculty on a more individual and personal level while complying with sponsor and university policies, and to be a liaison between the faculty and central administration. Because DRAs work with their researchers on an individual basis, they are familiar with faculty's research interests and needs and can advocate for them when processing proposals and sponsored research contracts with central administration. DRAs handle faculty's research from cradle to grave, which gives them a knowledgeable and unique perspective that central administration may not have. Conversely, CRAs are well versed in the policies of the university and most sponsors, which enable them to work toward mitigating any potential liabilities. While both of these roles work together hand-in-hand to foster a successful research environment, work flow and efficiency is disrupted when DRAs inadvertently attempt to take on the roles and responsibilities of CRAs (and vice versa). For example, if an individual faculty member contacts the central office regarding proposal preparation, the CRA receiving the request should respectfully redirect them back to their departmental contact. This allows the CRA to focus their time and energy on their role and their strengths instead of taking on the DRA's role. In contrast, if a DRA attempts to negotiate the intellectual property language of a contract with a potential sponsor and does so incorrectly, this not only creates more work for the CRA during the review and approval process, but could also damage the working relationship between the university and the sponsor. Thus it is to the university's advantage for DRAs and CRAs to play to each other's strengths.

The importance of this positive and well-defined relationship should not be underestimated. The amount of time and effort saved by these individuals working in sync with each other is very valuable to the institution. The resulting efficiencies, transparency, and time gains are valuable and lead to a strong proposal. Having a DRA in a department is invaluable to CRAs because of the in-depth knowledge the DRAs have regarding their researcher's specific interests. At times, questions from CRAs can be answered much more quickly by a DRA and if the DRA can't answer the question, they may have faster access to the researcher than the CRA would simply because of their proximity to faculty. The CRA can also be a resource/partner for a DRA when engaging in a challenging conversation with faculty.

Remember the Common Goal

DRAs face the challenge of maintaining the delicate balance between advocating for their faculty and ensuring their sponsored activities are in compliance with university and sponsor policies. CRAs are tasked with protecting the university's legal well-being while cultivating productive research collaborations. DRAs could easily fall under the misapprehension that they are "for" faculty while CRAs are "against." It is essential that both the DRA and the CRA remember the common goal: to provide a full range of assistance to faculty in obtaining and administering funding to support the university's creative and scholarly activities. The administration of sponsored activities will operate at peak performance when both DRAs and CRAs jointly focus their efforts on a unified mission.

Establish a Protocol for Flow of Agreements

There are a myriad of working parts in the sponsored activities office, which is why it is crucial to have an established and transparent system for the flow of proposals and research agreements. Creating a protocol for how sponsored activities are processed will provide consistency and promote efficient work flow. Below is an example of how a research agreement might flow through a DRA and CRA.

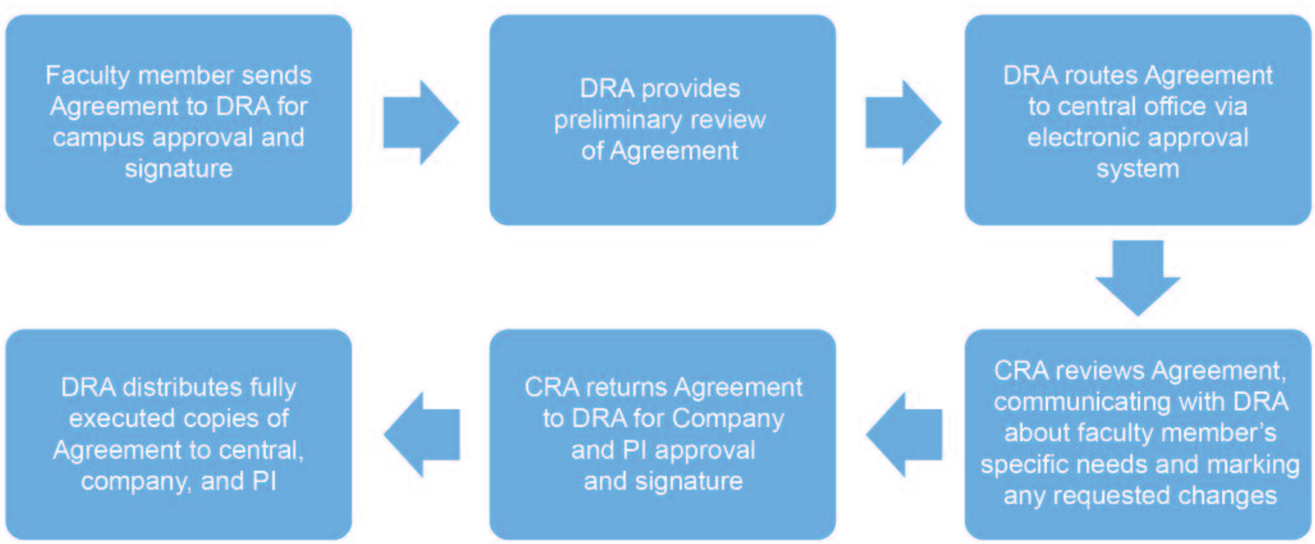
Maintain Communication

While establishing standard operating procedures is important, research administration is constantly changing, which makes adaptation crucial. Changes in regulations, compliance, and/or faculty needs may require changes in protocols or processes. Proactive communication between the DRA and CRA is essential for effective problem solving and can prevent unnecessary debates so that the real issue or challenge can be overcome. It is also crucial for the central office to work toward consistent information flow—i.e., the CRAs will give consistent answers or work together to agree on an answer regardless of whom you speak with, thereby eliminating the potential for faculty to surf for the answer they want rather than the correct answer they need.

Communication can also play an important role in mitigating the challenges faced when working with a non-compliant researcher. Utilizing the strengths and expertise of the DRA and CRA as a unit can, at times, bring the non-compliant researcher into compliance using team-delivered negotiation tactics . All players should be encouraged to indicate when they may need to research an answer, set a time limit for this investigation, and then follow up. It is better to pause and make sure answers are solid and coordinated, especially when dealing with a difficult faculty member or complicated issue.

Apologize and Mean It

Although this article is discussing the interactions of a professional relationship between a DRA and CRA, there are still personal relationship aspects that must be considered purely due to the fact that both are human. Mistakes are inevitable in any field of work, but especially in research administration due to its complex nature. If one side of the team makes an error, the offending side should make the effort to apologize and move forward to correct the error. In response, the other side should accept the apology and also move forward toward a resolution. If the team has a high trust factor because of the positive relationship built, this happens easily and quickly. Contrite behavior can reduce retaliation, initiate forgiveness and empathy for wrongdoers, and help repair broken trust. Sincere apologies also have the



physiological effect of lowering blood pressure more quickly than if someone doesn't receive an apology, particularly among those who are prone to hold on to anger.

Avoid the "Dump and Run"

Research administrators all experience this phenomenon, usually as a result of faculty attempting to get out the door to a conference or other event and hoping their research administrators can magically finalize a proposal or agreement in their absence. Fortunately the DRA-CRA team can often make this happen; however, this problematic behavior should be avoided in interactions between the DRA and CRA. Establish a "the buck stops with me" mentality. In other words, both should take responsibility for a situation or problem. If one or both can't resolve a problem with either's available expertise, create a plan to attempt to resolve it using other resources. It isn't helpful to "dump and run" on the other half if a solution isn't easily seen. Many times this situation comes back to haunt the dumper and is more problematic the next time. The CRA and DRA should also partner around pending deadlines to try and create back-up timelines to allow for the required review time. This will allow planning and the ability to account for all factors that could impact a proposal beyond just the deadline. The DRA should also have an established communication methodology so when the researcher is traveling, they can still maintain contact for emergent questions.

Celebrate Accomplishments

Each individual should be proud of who they are and respect the other's gifts and talents. Celebrate the working relationship with reciprocal praise. Research administration is not for the faint of heart and can be a difficult field to work in. Research shows it takes three years to create a well-trained research administrator. Those who have taken the Certified Research Administrator's exam administered by the Research Administrators Certification Council know that the amount of expertise and knowledge required to pass is almost overwhelming. Make an effort to celebrate with colleagues the successes that have been achieved individually and as a team and also let the faculty know of these successes as they demonstrate the competency of the staff supporting them. This field can be very thankless at times, which makes it even more important to recognize each other's capabilities. A colleague recently said, "I celebrate the small victories." Simply adding please and thank you to requests is important. DRAs should encourage their faculty to thank the CRA at least once a year and/or after an especially difficult deadline.

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Do Not Be Afraid

A favorite leadership book of one of the authors is *The Coalwood Way.* It's based on the philosophy of the inhabitants of the town of Coalwood, West Virginia, whose men worked in dangerous coal mines every day. Although these families faced possible disaster and death daily, they "were not afraid." While the research administration work environment certainly doesn't involve life or death situations such as those of Coalwood, it is helpful to remember this frame of mind when confronted with a difficult researcher or unpleasant situation. Focus on the problem, remove the emotions from the situation, and make a plan to overcome the problem. Together, both individuals can move forward with confidence, causing positive interactions and solutions, while keeping fear at bay. Once the team has performed their best, no one can reasonably ask for more.

In Conclusion

Working as a team, the departmental office and central office can provide effective and efficient research administration by applying the practices discussed above. A positive interaction between the two is crucial not only for the individual research administrators involved, but for the faculty as well. A successful collaboration between a DRA and CRA initiates a ripple effect that trickles down through an institution's research, resulting in benefits to society. N

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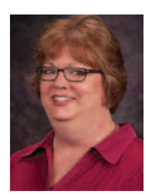

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