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It's All in the Asking

By Julie Castro

The responsibility of Research Administrators (RAs) is to provide faculty and departments with the best customer service in order for them to achieve their respective research goals. RAs can serve faculty and departments with their pre- and post-award needs by performing their jobs at the highest level of accuracy and efficiency. However, there are additional services that are not considered "job related" duties that can serve faculty and departments with sponsored research. Whether working for a professor, the department or a collaborative effort, it's the RAs "above and beyond" attitude that will take faculty, departments and ultimately the university to the next level of excellence and sponsored projects funding.

Departmental

Create a cohesive atmosphere. Introductions of RAs, especially those new to the department, to faculty and department heads will allow the job-related duties to be personalized to the individual Principal Investigator (PI). This basic premise of establishing relationships allows the RA to become familiar with the professors and their area of investigation and research. Relationships can be established in the following ways: Collaborations (within and outside the institution), individual faculty/staff meetings, and group faculty/staff meetings.

An individual faculty/ staff meeting refers to those times when an RA meets with a specific professor one-on-one to get to know the researcher and their needs as well as the type of research conducted. This type of meeting enables the RA to increase their knowledge of the PIs interests, goals and ongoing projects, which can lead to assistance with funding searches, proposal development, and proofreading proposals.

Group faculty/staff meetings that are organized by areas of interest give RAs the opportunity to learn about research in specific areas, which can lead to more focused funding searches and possibly to interdisciplinary or interdepartmental collaborations. Other ideas: keep all parties apprised of funding shifts, interests and policy updates by hosting an annual or sponsor-specific faculty/RA meeting(s). Occasionally personalize the information with an office visit, as emails can get lost or may not be read and this face-to-face interaction may aid in the retention of information and follow through.

Ideas that save time are always welcomed and they should benefit RAs, faculty and/or the department. Within the department, create an internal list of RAs and the sponsored accounts and faculty they serve. A simple spreadsheet that is accessible to all departmental RAs that contains faculty NSF IDs and NIH eRA Commons login, for example, can not only save time, but can alleviate any extra requests to the PI, allowing them to focus their time and effort on grant writing. This information should be kept in a common, yet secured folder accessible to all departmental specific RAs. Include areas of research interest and other items and information that may be relevant to the re-
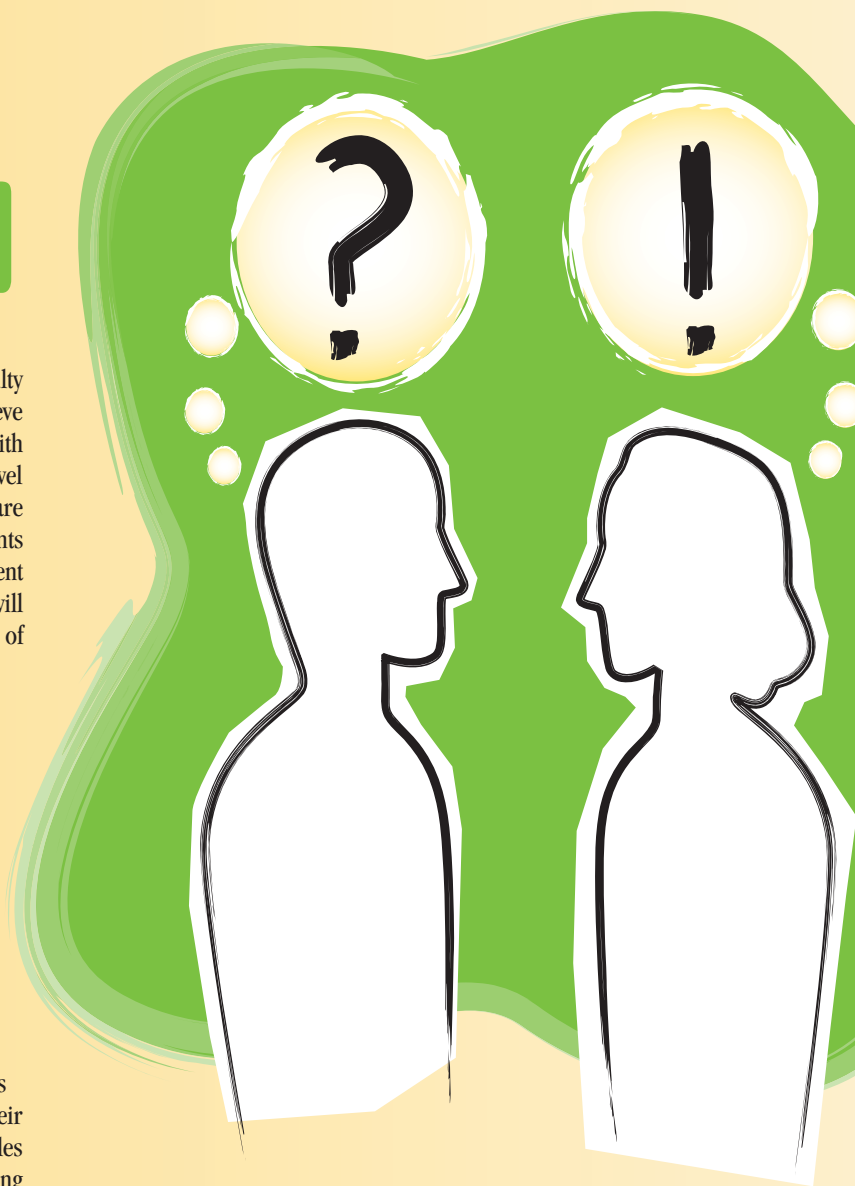
Collaborations

Collaborations can be created when RAs attend local, regional or national professional development workshops and conferences. Meeting RAs, within or outside the institution, who work with researchers with the same general or specific areas of interest, could lead to introductions and possible future proposal partnerships. Also, keeping abreast of significant sponsor awards and funding priorities by watching webinars, viewing PowerPoint presentations, and reviewing sponsor websites on a regular basis can lead to introductions for future partnerships. These developing relationships can grow into collaborations on multi-institutional or multi-disciplinary proposals that tend to be favored by federal sponsors. The RA can be a conduit to bringing together faculty and institutions.

University

Whether it is proposal preparation, award management or answering departmental inquiries, the RA is the resource for pre- and post-award knowledge and support for faculty and colleagues. Developing policies and procedures and creating systems that make an RA's workload simpler will

allow more time for meeting personal, departmental and university goals. Consider consolidating information into one document for easy access, implementing reporting systems that meet specific needs, or identifying *experts* in a particular area.

When an answer is needed, look within the organization for seasoned professionals who are knowledgeable in the area for which expertise is sought. By asking a colleague who is skilled in a respective area, answers can be found with minimal effort. Implementing new systems within the organization will usually result in a few individuals who become specialists in the system. Tap into their proficiency and learn the "ins and outs" of the program to make the workload and systems user friendly and as uncomplicated as possible. Share the names and areas of expertise of these *skilled professionals* with all university stakeholders. By creating a university-wide document that provides contact and knowledge-based information for all RAs to access, the success of sponsored projects can be improved as this simple list can save time and provide valuable information to everyone in the university. At university-wide staff meetings, introduce those individuals with specific knowledge that is related to research advancement, both in the pre- and post-award areas. Working as a team can create a sense of unity and purpose for achieving departmental and university research goals.

Take advantage of specialized units within the department and/or university to better understand a specific subject. Invite representatives to participate or present at staff meetings to provide explanations of their services; this will build a relationship between the unit and staff, as having a contact person often makes future inquiries easy. In many instances, the same information is used by different departments in different ways. Understanding how other departments use and disseminate the same or similar unit specific information can open doors that were never thought of previously by the RA or department.

Although policies and procedures are standard throughout the university, it is not uncommon for college or departmental procedures, systems and best practices to vary. Departmental leadership often creates certain systems/documents specific to their area(s), which is used to track or maintain information for the success of that department. Share ideas and documents with other departments to streamline the workload. This leads to the university being consistent with its best practices.

As an institution's research advancement needs evolve, so does its need to update, improve or create new systems, procedures and documents. Ask people from various departments that have different types of RA-related experience to participate in round table meetings so they can share the best practices from their respective departments using the best ideas to implement the appropriate action. Varying levels of skills and knowledge can be helpful to a successful implementation.

The best way for RAs to help each other and their institution is to actively participate in the various events and meetings offered at the department, college or university level. Problems can be identified and solutions generated by sharing experiences and ideas with one another. Tap into the knowledge base of colleagues and faculty. Current and past situations can be the best learning experiences for providing the best customer service. To serve faculty with the best customer service, the RA needs to begin to tap into the resources available – each other, fellow Research Administrators. **N**

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Research Administration... By the
NUMBERS

$21,314,000,000...
the NIH total budget amount for Research Grants in FY11.

108...
The current Carnegie classification for RU/VH's lists this many institutions – there are...

33...
different classifications.

$115,268,000...
Total *Social Science* R&D expenditures at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, number...

1...
on the NSF FY10 HERD Survey.

29%...
Sub-Saharan African countries received this percentage of United States foreign economic assistance.

19...
U.S. government agencies funded foreign assistance activities in FY11.

$57,000,000,000...
According to a AAAS analysis, the amount budget sequestration would cut R&D by through 2017.

7...
Number of Universities Patrick Green *(Vanderbilt University, being the current)* has worked at, all in Region 3.

Want to share numbers? Email Derek Brown at derekbrown@wsu.edu