

Fostering Collaboration Between Research Administrators and Senior Leadership:

A Model for Success



By Camilo Medina

The foundation of every Institution of Higher Education's (IHEs) successful research enterprise is a community of highly dedicated and resilient research administrators. Collectively, these communities enable stability and growth in an environment that is ever changing and requires greater time and resources from its stakeholders. Yet somehow, at many IHEs, a paradigm exists in which their respective research administration communities are routinely overlooked regarding matters of strategic planning, institution-wide initiatives, and large-scale policies or projects. This can lead to research administrators experiencing low morale, feeling underappreciated, and desiring to look elsewhere in search of these values. Recognition of these issues is half the battle; the question is, what can be done to resolve these matters?

To be clear, there is no singular approach or answer that can effectively address this complex issue. However, I do believe that fostering collaboration between research administrators, responsible for day-to-day pre- and post-award tasks, and an institution's senior leadership is a necessity that can pave the way for significant strides. At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), we have been very intentional in this space over the past year and have begun to see improvement. One of our primary initiatives began with a task and an idea that blossomed into something greater. Early in 2022, senior leadership at our institution was considering changing a key process that would have a significant and far-reaching impact. Before making an

executive decision, the input of our research administrators was solicited. What resulted was the coming together of a unique and highly effective group of 13 staff ranging from entry-level to middle management that produced a valuable assessment of the pros, cons, and potential unintended consequences of pursuing the proposed initiative.

After our work was completed, we saw the potential of this group. And although it was initiated to address a one-time task, we understood the benefits that a continued relationship between this group and senior leadership could have for our university. For our research administrators, it presented an opportunity for professional development in the form of exposure to new ideas, critical analysis, and collaboration across the university. It also produced a feeling of being heard and valued. For our leadership, by bringing employees into the decision-making process they traditionally wouldn't be, this was an avenue for expressing trust and genuine appreciation. And perhaps most importantly, the collective output created by the cognitive diversity this group offered, was a benefit to the entire university, particularly our research enterprise. So how did we set about establishing this group and accruing the resulting benefits?

The first step was to identify senior leaders who would support such an initiative. Those who would embrace the group, see its value, and use their position to provide the group a voice. Thankfully, we found three outstanding executives within the offices of the University Controller and the Vice President of Research & Innovation who were willing to do so.

Pre-existing relationships with these individuals allowed us to initiate a meeting to pitch our vision for this partnership and seek their counsel on how best to proceed. Prior to the meeting, we prepared a charter, identified potential group members (13 individuals representing each component of the VCU research enterprise), and outlined a timeframe for completing the work. Once we made our pitch, we found our sponsors to be extremely supportive and appreciative of the initiative. They provided us with some initial ideas and projects to consider and tasked us with consulting our group to see what issues they felt needed to be addressed within VCU research administration. In turn, they agreed to use their platform and visibility to ensure the output of our group would be heard and seen by the right people. Finally, we collectively decided to name the group the VCU Research Administration (RA) Advisory Board, emphasizing its importance and role as a partner and advisor to the collective VCU research enterprise.

It is important to note that our RA Advisory Board began with collaboration at its foundation, and we've continued in that vein. Everyone on the board has a voice and shares credit for our work. Our value comes not in one person's ideas, but in the diversity of thought, perspective, and collective output that the Board produces. Although we've only been around for a brief time, the mere fact that a space has been created for our research administrators to be seen, heard, and valued at this level has had a positive impact on morale. We're advising and contributing to long-term solutions that have the potential to transform our institution for the better. With time, passion, and continued commitment, we feel certain that this model will lead to great gains for VCU.

In closing, there are a few important points that I'd like to emphasize. Initiatives like these take time, investment, and willingness to contribute from everyone involved; in our experience, the payoff is worth it. I know that many institutions are currently struggling to fill positions and complete day-to-day operations, and creating an advisory board takes time away from

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these responsibilities. I would argue, however, that it is important to focus on long-term strategy and resist the temptation to rely on short-term solutions that alleviate pressure only in the present. Creating lasting partnerships, meaningful avenues for professional development, and mechanisms for process improvement will help build a foundation for lasting success.

Every institution is unique and has its own culture, but I encourage you to consider how you can create something similar to a Research Administration Advisory Board at your organization. Whether you are a senior leader or an entry-level employee, be assured that you add value and have a role to play. The sharing of information and ideas is only the beginning. I encourage you to invest the effort necessary to turn ideas into reality. The growth and benefits to be realized by you and your institution will not be in vain. ■



Camilo N. Medina, MPA, CRA, serves as the Assistant Director for Grants & Contracts Accounting at Virginia Commonwealth University. With a background in internal audit and financial post-award, Camilo's current role focuses on financial post-award compliance, project management, and process improvement. He also serves as the Co-Chair of the VCU Research Administrator Advisory Board. He can be reached at medinacn@vcu.edu.

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