

Research Administration – The Starting Point for Integrating Diversity

By Sarah Brown Goetz and Tapiana Wray

One can approach integrating diversity in research administration from several angles, each of which will promote diversification and contribute to the end goal of incorporating diversity into your mission. Creating a holistic plan to increase diversity across the board within your expertise, your workplace, your portfolio and within your institution gives form to that intention and will provide a pathway to create a community of colleagues that are engaged in increasing diversity in their professional skillset, within their workgroups, and across the institution.

Building diversity in your expertise

A typical career path for a research administrator may start in a department at a research university, advance to a position in a centralized office working primarily on NIH proposal preparation and then transition to a privately funded laboratory managing the funding for clinical trials. This pathway starts with the development of a broad understanding of research administration then moving into a specialty with a deeper understanding of a specific facet of research administration and arrives at the establishment of bona fide expertise in that specialty. This specialty does not blot out the prior experience - it builds upon it. Steps to building your body of knowledge.

Our body of knowledge is the one thing that we take from one position to the next. Our professional reputation is directly related to our expertise so it makes developmental sense to intentionally build diverse expertise into our professional narrative.

Take advantage of opportunities that cross your path to aid in building a diverse knowledge base. Volunteer for professional organizations, present at conferences and workshops, subscribe to professional publications, or volunteer to be a beta tester for new processes being developed by funding agencies.

Each of these suggestions allows you to experience a different facet of research administration. Through professional organizations such as the IACR you can participate in the policy-building that governs our industry. Presenting on your specialty at a conference gives you the opportunity to show your expertise and shows how knowledgeable you are on that topic. It also has the potential to pinpoint areas in which you could know more, where your knowledge is lacking. Working with funding agencies to test their proposals gives you access to their motivations and an understanding of the why behind their sometimes cumbersome processes. All of these increase your understanding of research administration from a different perspective.

Another way to intentionally build diversity into your body of knowledge is to take a moment to reflect on your career and identify the transferable skills you've acquired during your professional life. Most likely you have transferable skills that have been with you a very long time that you have not recognized as such.

Development has work history that on the surface may not seem to be related to your current positions. If we shift the paradigm a bit we see connections between the experience gained at that summer job so you can utilize these skills. The time management skills that you have gained from several funding agencies, internal departments and PI's. Perhaps an internship at a law firm while in college taught you how to write and format formal letters and memos making it easy for you to expect these kinds of communications today. Identifying your transferable skills deepens your body of knowledge and allows you up to utilizing hard won skills you may not know you have. This provides a different perspective on how to solve problems and communicate with others.

Developed Diversification

Workplace diversification is seated in a manager's ability to develop a diverse workforce. Different backgrounds, experiences, and skills. Providing a diverse workforce benefits the department. By understanding the benefits of workplace diversity, a manager is able to construct a team that is more effective and efficient. Creating a diverse workforce that drives innovation by having a diverse workforce has the potential to increase morale in employees. A diverse environment rich in diversity increases morale in employees and gives them the opportunity to be more effective and efficient in their work. This leads to an increase of creativity amongst the group as different perspectives are brought to the collaborative effort. Morale is increased through diverse interactions between the different researchers.

administrators which increases individual knowledge, and cultural exposure. Individuals are challenged to perform to the best of their ability, and increase their creativity by questioning the status quo through diverse collaboration.

A diverse work environment will attract desirable employees who appreciate an environment where they can grow personally and be challenged professionally. These employees are enticed by the morals of a company that obviously places credence in equality amongst its employees. Every potential employee desires to be treated with fairness and wants to know that their opinions have the same weight as their co-workers. A manager needs to consider what strengths and attributes a new team member can contribute to the growth of the team when questioning viable candidates. With careful cultivation and attention to detail, a manager can create a team that is diverse, dynamic, and engaged in the tasks at hand.

Portfolio Diversification

Managers who value productivity and effectiveness embrace labor diversification for their employees. This same practice is also best applied to portfolio management for research administrators. One could convincingly argue that through portfolio segregation, the opportunity for a research administrator to achieve the level of subject matter expert with that portfolio would be exponentially faster than compared to a research administrator who has a diverse portfolio. This argument is narrow in focus and shortsighted for long term gain. While there is an inherent benefit to having subject matter experts in specific areas, it proves more effective to have subject matter experts in all areas of portfolio management.

Employees are challenged and encouraged to learn more in their roles, have greater job and personal satisfaction than those that are allowed to remain stagnant. Portfolio diversification provides an opportunity for research administrators to increase their own skill set and to share their knowledge base through training with other research administrators. An additional benefit to portfolio diversification is that with research administrators having increased knowledge and familiarity with different agencies there is the opportunity for administrators to act as backup for each other. This allows for continued productivity; meeting the needs for both agencies and departments in the absence of the assigned research administrator. Research administrators are able to support each other in times where one administrator's work load increases more than another.

Through portfolio diversification amongst research administrators, managers foster an environment that is dedicated to learning rather than remaining stagnant, encouraging workplace communication rather than seclusion, boosting administrator morale rather than accepting the status quo, and propagating collaboration between departments. With portfolio diversification, research administrators, agencies and departments stand to gain more than they would lose.

Diversity in the types of projects your institution pursues

Each fully funded research project at any given institution is a victory