Reframing Research Administration

Sharon Stewart Cole, PhD, MBA
Program Manager, XL, Inc.
McLean, VA 22102
Tel: (702) 238-2844
E-mail: cole.sharon51@yahoo.com

Author's Note

The results of a Delphi study are summarized that involved faculty researchers from various major research universities that were previously reported in an article entitled "Research Administration as a Living System" (Cole, 2007). For this manuscript, the same Delphi survey was administered to research administrators in an attempt to obtain their expert opinions. This was necessary to obtain comparative data. This article was originally submitted for the 2008 SRA Symposium, appeared in the Symposium Proceedings, and subsequently was presented at the 2008 SRA International meeting in National Harbor, Maryland.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to inform administrators and organizational leaders that a change in the support offered to faculty and the environment of research administration is desirable. This recommendation is supported by the results of a Delphi study that was undertaken to gather expert opinions and recommendations from research faculty and research administrators who were asked to respond to focus group-type questions based upon their experiences. Surprisingly, faculty participated at a remarkably high level and offered many constructive suggestions for improvement while research administrations participated at a lower rate but offered valuable recommendations. This paper compares the views received and discusses methods for reframing or restructuring research administration.

Keywords: Research administration, re-organizing, grants, Delphi study, universities, research faculty, administrators

Introduction

This paper expands a Delphi study previously reported in an article entitled "Research Administration as a Living System" that was published by the *Journal of Research Administration* (Cole, 2007). A second Delphi study was undertaken to obtain the perspective of research administrators in an attempt to identify the future direction of research administration and to identify ways for building stronger working relationships between research faculty and research administrators. In this way viewpoints were compared and a determination made as to collective concerns, points of agreement, and disagreement. Also, by obtaining an understanding of the nature of research administration, adding theories of change, and identifying methods of implementing organizational change, a model for reframing or restructuring research administration into a living system is created.

The Research Administration Process

The research administration system includes the people and organizations that supply research products, services, and knowledge. Research administration is essentially a service-delivery system. This system interacts with the federal, state, and private sponsors; the academic community and school systems; the employees of all these organizations and the communities they serve; the environment; and the nation as a whole.

The processes involved in research administration could be classified as the decision process, the research process, the evaluation process, and the control process. These processes are all interdependent. A system can be defined as a network of interdependent processes that work together to accomplish an aim, purpose, or goal. The system converts dollars and other inputs into value (service) that helps project and research effectiveness. The quality of a system's output can be defined as the perception of consumers and stakeholders about the value of those services. Perceptions (feedback) about that value are used to govern future resource allocations and changes to system processes. The efficiency of these processes, federal agencies and recipients, directly affect the cost, timeliness, and productivity of the programs being sponsored (Kirby, 1996).

Over $200 billion is awarded by the federal government in grants to carry out a variety of public programs and research projects. Up to 95% of some federal agencies' appropriated budgets may be passed on to universities through grants (Kirby, 1996). Sponsors have a strong, vested interest in the quality of management and production of grant recipients. Yet federal interest in the management of research programs has focused on financial standards, compliance, and internal control. Improvements will require systematic and highly integrated efforts along with a holistic view of the role administrators play in the larger system of sponsored programs. Some issues involve political and other variables that are simply outside one's control. Actions to address many issues are being handicapped by outdated assumptions about the role of research administration and the nature of management (Kirby, 1996). Some views Kirby notes as worthy of consideration:

1. There are some assumptions about the role of research administration:
   Assumption #1: The organization follows a typical hierarchal chart.
   Assumption #2: The primary focus and role of research administration is to assure that rules are followed, regardless of where one is in the organization.
   Assumption #3: The person in the organization box above or below is the problem.

2. Research administration is viewed as a system to provide value and is an essential service-delivery system.

3. Research administration is interdependent on the actions of sponsors and performers (faculty). Neither sponsor nor performers can achieve its purpose without the other.

Social, economic, and technological changes have made the traditional assumptions and functional organizational model of administration insufficient for the way we work today.

The Delphi Study

The Delphi study was performed to bring about growth and collaboration for the next generation of researchers and administrators. As Cole (2007) notes:

> The Delphi research method [is] not designed to determine statistical significance but involves experts in a discussion similar to a focus group to determine future direction. Unlike a focus group, the Delphi participants [do] not meet physically. An online survey was prepared by the researcher and distributed through email to individual participants. (p.19)

The survey consisted of four open-ended discussion questions, which are listed in the Research Administrators' Viewpoint section below. The results of the study that was offered first to research faculty are summarized below in the Faculty Viewpoint section. To expand this research, the study was repeated with senior research administrators at various major research universities as the target population in an attempt to obtain comparative data.

Faculty Viewpoint

The 32 faculty experts who participated in the previously reported Delphi study (Cole, 2007) offered 40 distinct opinions or recommendations for change. The Delphi study concluded that change was required by faculty and research administrators to realize a more unified organization. The major concerns voiced by the faculty participants were: (1) the system of research administration should address processes to streamline proposal submission and review; (2) administrators should focus more on service and less on regulations; (3) the paperwork burden should be reduced; (4) more financial assistance to faculty research is desired such as the return of indirect cost, or matching funds; (5) better communication between research administration and faculty; and (6) faculty could show more respect and understanding to research administrators (Cole, 2007).

Grant funding provides one of the main avenues for faculty scholarly growth in higher education. The technical know-how needed to write proposals, the lack of institutional reward, and the negative reinforcement of having projects denied discourage many would-be researchers from even trying to prepare an application. In an environment where scholarly growth provides one of the main avenues for promotion and tenure, many faculty in today's institutions of higher education recognize the need to add new skills, such as proposal writing, to their portfolio. Colleges and universities stand to gain financially from active grant writers. Many institutions "invest in faculty research by providing funding for start-up costs, research grants, travel support, sabbaticals, and pre-tenure leaves [of absence]" (McMillin, 2004, p. 2). Ebong (1999) noted that previous experience with funding programs is directly related to getting federal funds. Also, research performed by Porter (2004) showed that junior faculty often have little awareness of how to apply for and get federal funds. Porter (2004) explained that junior faculty are overwhelmed by their teaching responsibilities, informing students, adjusting to a new environment, and the need to publish to get tenure.

Articles

Easter and Shultz (1998) surveyed eight New Jersey state colleges and found that fewer than 20% of the faculty members were engaged in sponsored research activities. Eighty-nine percent of New Jersey's state college faculty members cited heavy teaching loads as a major obstacle. Few colleges and universities financially support the pursuit of grant funds. The Easter and Shultz study suggested that, when colleges and universities supported grant activity, they used incentives that avoided the spending of institutional resources. For example, these institutions sometimes reduced teaching duties, advising responsibilities, or committee assignments to faculty who prepared proposals or got grant awards. Many institutions not only failed to support grant seeking, but 45% either never or only sometimes returned even a part of the indirect costs awarded through the grant to the individual or department responsible for successfully winning an externally funded project. With large barriers such as these, many faculty members tend to forgo proposal writing activity and retreat to their primary roles as teachers. The study clarifies that "One should not assume that this means that all faculty understand fully the mechanics of grant writing, only that the other barriers are great enough to cause the potential grant writer to make a decision not to write the grant" (Easter & Schultz, 1998, p. 25).

Support activities have been established at some institutions to help faculty overcome these barriers. Research administration helps with such functions as providing listings of grant opportunities, offering technical assistance, sharing of indirect costs recovered through the grant, offering training opportunities, facilitating data collection by maintaining statistical data, advising on federal regulations and policies, offering internal awards for proposal development, and offering clerical support. Some institutions have helped faculty by establishing grant writing support committees to develop and review proposals and to serve as a resource or facilitator of faculty grant writing efforts (Ester & Schultz, 1998).

Research Administrators' Viewpoint

Nine research administrators of 110 contacted to offer their opinions participated in the second Delphi study. Three attempts were made to obtain a greater number of participants. Because the Delphi method is not intended to support statistical significance, and the nine respondents are highly qualified research administrators, their opinions were deemed worthy of reporting and satisfy the Delphi study requirements. Because the study involves experts, it is assumed that information of some reasonable quality will be given. The areas of concurrence among the respondents are summarized below:

Question 1: What support should research administrators give faculty that is not currently offered?

(a) To provide periodic educational sessions on emerging issues such as regulations and electronic proposal submission to new faculty and post docs.
(b) To give consistent support in proposal writing.
(c) To increase types of administrative support such as budget management.
(d) To give support based on the individual needs of the faculty member.
(e) To assist with internal funds for seed money.

Question 2: What should be the future organizational goals and objectives of research administration?

(a) To keep the same goals and objectives as they have now, to promote research and assist faculty in complying with sponsor requirements and maintaining a viable research effort.

(b) To keep abreast of trends in funded research and fiscal reporting requirements.

(c) To make the post award process less cumbersome.

(d) To address compliance issues in a cost effective and comprehensive manner.

(e) To increase collaborative proposal submissions with other institutions.

Question 3: What change is needed in faculty attitudes towards working with research administrators and how should the change be implemented?

(a) Faculty will mostly have a positive attitude though they would prefer NO bureaucracy.

(b) Faculty and research administrators have different roles, but they share the same goal of managing the resources available to achieve the research purpose. However, the role of the administrator is often one of "policing" the funds and other paperwork.

(c) Research administrators should take the time to form relationships with the faculty and keep communication open. This will go a long way toward developing a mindset of working together.

(d) Faculty members should understand the need to adhere to reasonable internal controls and deadlines.

(e) University administration establishes the institutional environment that the faculty and researchers must adapt.

Question 4: What change is needed in research administrators' attitudes towards working with faculty and how should the change be implemented?

(a) Developing on-going communication or interaction between the research centers and the research administrators to understand the issues and constraints of the academic units and the expectations of the research administrators.

(b) Increasing awareness of regulations governing what researchers do and providing in-service workshops for researchers about regulations.

(c) Staffing the research administration office with program developers who are colleagues with experience in conducting research and publishing.

(d) Understanding what motivates the research faculty, their capabilities, and what is at stake for them.

(e) Assuming that faculty are knowingly breaking the rules is incorrect. Most are doing the best they can to abide, but don't understand the rules or have never been told.

(f) Research administrators should be able to tell faculty "NO" and faculty should respect the answer.

(g) Research administrators should look at faculty as partners and not as dictators.

(h) Research administrators should be able to help solve problems.

Articles

Considering the results of the Delphi study, we conclude that both research faculty and research administrators share some of the same opinions about how research administration can be improved. Some organizations may have already incorporated some of these suggestions into their systems. However, faculty and research administrators participating in the Delphi studies identified the following themes for suggested improvement:

1. Administrators believe faculty need more understanding of regulations and electronic proposal submission and faculty felt that administrators should not focus so much on regulations.
2. Faculty expressed a need for more administrative support, more financial support, less paperwork, and help with budget preparation.
3. Both faculty and administrators believe that communication and collaboration could be improved.
4. Both faculty and administrators believe that administrators should understand what motivates research faculty, and to know their capabilities and limitations.
5. Both faculty and administrators understand the need for regulations and the researchers' need to manage the project, but both should work in a more cooperative manner to accomplish goals.

Those who have been involved in research administration for the past 15 to 20 years can confirm that these themes have been an inherent part of research administration for many years. However, these areas of distress continue to persist and seemingly have not been addressed systematically. To assist in developing methods of change for reframing or restructuring research administration, we must first provide a framework for change. To provide such a framework, the remainder of this paper will consider the following discussions: (a) the research administration process; (b) theories of change; and (c) methods for implementing organizational change.

Theories of Change

There have been attempts to make changes to help research administration work better. Managers have this hope in mind every day, and some hire consultants to supply new answers and solutions. Policy makers develop laws and regulations to guide organizations. In the passage below, Bolman & Deal (1997) described why managers could become ineffective in implementing change.

Managers are supposed to have the big picture and be responsible for their organization's health and productivity. Unfortunately, they have not always been equal to the task, even when armed with computers, information systems flowcharts, quality programs and panoply of other tools and techniques. They go forth with this arsenal and try to tame our wild and primitive workplaces. Yet in the end irrational forces often prevail. (p. 8)

To be effective at organizational change, companies must organize around processes. The internal organizational activities designed to promote cooperation and action that will improve policies and processes that support administration of research projects need to be considered. There are some fundamental questions that need to be addressed:

1. What is the purpose of the system?
2. What are the key processes of the system?
3. What are the customer's requirements?
4. What results are being produced by the system?

Answering these questions will help provide a shared understanding of the system, its key components, and performance requirements. Then, improved goals and priorities for the system can be addressed (Kirby, 1996). Any solution to this problem will involve change to the present system at an organizational level. The Bolman and Deal (1997) theory, depicted in Figure 1, stated that organizations must be examined from multiple frames of reference such as political, structural, cultural and symbolic, and human resource to develop a holistic picture. The structural frame looks at the content of work such as rules and regulations and bureaucracy. Organizations are places of internal politics and persons with their own agendas, resources, and strategies. The cultural and symbolic frames depict organizational myths and stores; provide drama, cohesiveness, clarity, and direction in the presence of confusion and mystery. Cultural frames and symbols provide some meaning to organizational events and activities. The human resources frame identifies the association between people and organizations. Organizations need people for their work, and talent and people need organizations for personal and financial rewards. The key is a good fit between people and organizations (Bolman & Deal, 1997).
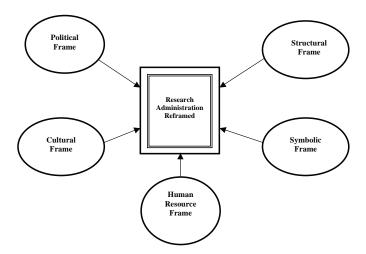

Figure 1. Organizational frames (an interpretation of Bolman and Deal's [1997] theory of change as seen through frames of reference to form a holistic picture of research administration).

A second theory of change is found in the research methods. The participating action research approach (PAR) is a widely practiced theory that underscores the political aspects of knowledge creation by participating. It is the theory of "enlightenment and awakening of common peoples" (Reason, 2000, p. 327). Given this proposition, the PAR tradition is concerned with power and powerlessness, and challenges the way in which the established and power-holding bodies of societies are favored because they control

knowledge. The PAR theory has a dual purpose. The first is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people. The second purpose is to empower people at a deeper level through using their own knowledge to see through the ways in which authority controls the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members (Reason, 2000).

The PAR theory is not the most effective means for this study simply because it does not employ the orthodox research methods of research design, data gathering, and data analysis. These methods take a sideline to the processes of collaboration and dialogue that empower, motivate, increase self-esteem, and develop community solidarity (Reason, 2000). In cases when the goals of supporting the outcomes or duplicating the results are needed, PAR becomes less effective for the study of change.

A third approach to change is established by the co-operative inquiry method and is based on the idea that people choose how they live their lives and can be free of the distress of earlier restrictive conditions. Working in a group with open, authentic communication will facilitate this change (Reason, 2000). This method does have some barriers for change. A concern is that people do not always cooperate. Changing the assumptions of the reality for their life choices would be a major barrier in getting such cooperation. People taken from their comfort zone experience more distress, and an unwillingness to accept change might take place. Inquiring carefully and critically into those things people care about is an anxiety-provoking situation that awakens emotional defenses (Reason, 2000).

Methods for Implementing Organizational Change

Organizations typically find themselves puzzling over the designs of their innovations and the best approach to gathering support and commitment from among their colleagues for putting the changes in place. Curry, 1992, describes three stages of organizational change: (a) mobilization, preparing a system for change; (b) implementation, introducing change into the system; and (c) institutionalization, stabilizing organization in its changed state. A successful innovation is one that has achieved its goals — whatever those goals might be. As a project achieves success, it can serve as a catalyst for subsequent innovations, and members of an organization are able to create and put in place other innovations that further change their community (Curry, 1992).
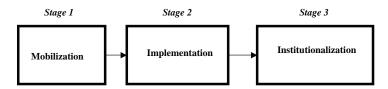
Stage 1		*Stage 2*		*Stage 3*
Mobilization	→	**Implementation**	→	**Institutionalization**

Figure 2. Stages of organizational change (s a graphic representation of Curry's three stages of organizational change [1992]).

One of the most critical components to consider in the process of planned change and transformation is the culture of the organization. An organization's culture can be described as all of the assumptions, beliefs, and values that members of an organization share

and that is expressed through "what is done, how it is done and who is doing it" (Farmer, 1990, p. 82). Members of an organization often take its culture for granted and do not truly evaluate its impact on decisions, behaviors, and communication or consider the symbolic and structural boundaries of organizational culture until external forces test it. According to Farmer (1990), "failure to understand the way in which an organization's culture will interact with various contemplated change strategies may mean the failure of the strategies themselves" (p. 82). To overcome the difficulties in changing an organization culture, the co-operative approach to establishing the transformation as discussed above is suggested as the best method. The co-operative inquiry method is a strategy more likely to be successful with a group of people who see themselves as empowered and who wish to explore and develop their practice together. It is also a process that a group of disempowered people may join to explore their world (Reason, 2000). Working in a group with open, authentic communication will facilitate this change (Reason). Therefore, the co-operative inquiry approach, even with certain limitations, is the best method for an organization and causes less stress because of the knowledge gained by participating in the inquiry and in developing the strategy for change to be employed.

Change in the expectations of faculty in grant-related activities may develop, and the acceptance of the changes would depend on contributions made by faculty during the planning stages. Their input and participation into reporting, developing action plans, and participating in the implementation process is vital. The programs that are institutionalized must be seen as required for their personal development.
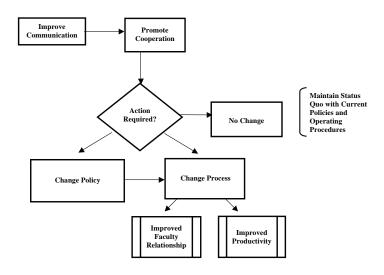

Figure 3. Process of change. To be effective at organizational change, companies must organize around processes. Improved processes designed to promote cooperation and action will improve productivity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Both research faculty and research administrators basically support the need for improvement in the organizational structure of research administration. The general themes for improvements are: (a) more administrative support such as reduction in paper work, education on emerging issues and regulations, and electronic proposal preparation, (b) improved systems for financial status reporting and budget management; (c) improved communication and interaction between faculty and research administrators; (e) better understanding of motivators of faculty and research administrators; and (f) university administration participation in establishing a better working environment that foster collaboration and partnership.

A great deal of work is required to bring about these desired changes. To overcome the difficulties in changing organizational culture, the co-operative approach to establish the transformation is recommended as the best method to effect change in this environment. This method is deemed effective because the co-operative inquiry method is a strategy more likely to be successful with a group of people who see themselves as empowered and who wish to explore and develop their practice together (Reason, 2000).

Members of an organization often take its culture for granted and do not truly evaluate its impact on decisions, behaviors, and communication or consider the symbolic and structural boundaries of organizational culture until external forces test it. The process of change identified by Bolman and Deal (1997) as achieving a holistic picture by accessing the influences of the political, structural, cultural and symbolic, and human resources brings all aspects of the organization into view.

The acceptance of the changes would depend on contributions of faculty during the planning stages. The cooperative inquiry method would allow this to occur. Their input and participation into reporting, developing action plans, and participating in the implementation process is vital. The programs that are institutionalized must be seen as required for their personal development. Also, the institution can and should support faculty in their efforts to get grant funding. This can take place in the form of release time from teaching loads, professional development opportunities, associating grant writing with tenure, return of indirect costs, writing assistance, and the services offered through a research programs office. For change to be effective the structure must be realigned and personnel trained for new processes. Change is not without conflict or a feeling of loss. These feelings are understandable and training people to master new skills is needed for changes in working patterns or communication skills. The Delphi study supports areas needing improvement that have been attributed to research administration for a great number of years and we hope that this research will inspire institutions to implement this action plan as it is essential to the future well being of research administrators and faculty at universities and research institution.

References

Bolman, L.G., & Deal, T.E. (1997). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Cole, S. S. (2007). Research administration as a living system. *Journal of Research Administration, 38*(2), 12-27.

Curry, B. K. (Ed.). (1992). *Instituting enduring innovations: Achieving continuity of change in higher education, ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education.* Washington, DC: George Washington University.

Easter, L. M., & Shultz, E. L. (1998.). Ten heads work better than one: An innovative model for collaborative, college-wide grant writing. *Research Management Review, 24-32.*

Ebong, I. D. (1999). Relating capacity to a faculty funding persistence profile. *Journal of Research Administration, 31*(1). 23-34.

Farmer, D. W. (1990). *Strategies for change: Managing change in higher education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Kirby, W. S. (1996). Understanding and managing sponsored research administration as a system. *Journal of Research Administration, 27*(34): 25.

McMillin, L. (2004). Creating the "complete scholar:"Academic professionalism in the 21st century. *Liberal Education, 90*(2).

Porter, R. (2004). Off the launching pad: Stimulating proposal development by junior faculty. *The Journal of Research Administration, 31*(1), 6-11

Reason, P. (2000). Three approaches to participative inquiry. In N. Denzin (Ed.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 324-338). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.