Research Administration 101:
A Top Ten List of Lessons Learned
By Robyn Remotigue and Anthony Ventimiglia

Introduction
The field of research administration is a diverse and often misunderstood profession. In many cases, people have “stumbled” into their positions after pursuing other careers — often with great stories about how they entered the field. However, many Research Administrators, after finding themselves employed in the field, remain loyal to this unique profession despite the numerous challenges faced on a daily basis. For some, the most frustrating aspect of the job is the fact that every challenge seems to have a new “twist” (although for some of us, this may be why we love research administration!). With almost thirty years of cumulative experience, we have compiled a top ten list - in no particular order - of lessons learned that we hope will: (1) provide some guidance for those new to the field; and (2) provide a chuckle for those more “seasoned” professionals who have seen it all before!

1. Building a rapport with sponsors, as well as with other offices on campus, can go a long way!
Tony: I am sure everyone has had “that” experience where a question you needed answered immediately was not responded to or the negotiation that may have veered toward “contentious.” However, one lesson that I have learned in this regard (thanks to the profound wisdom of Depeche Mode) is that “people are people so why should it be, you and I should get along so awfully?” How can we turn these interactions around? One tool I have utilized is the regional connection. Whether speaking to a new faculty member or a sponsor, if they are from and/or located in the northeast — even better if New York or Long Island (where I spent the first thirty years of my life) — I will always start a conversation about the area, ask about the weather and how much things have changed over the years, etc. I am also not above referencing areas where I have relatives or have visited. It is just a simple opportunity to develop a connection — even a limited one — that will help when the “work” needs to be addressed. It may not always be applicable, but it is a great start when the opportunity is available.

2. Be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it...
Tony: I cannot begin to tell you how quickly my blood runs cold when someone says, “It’s only a proposal; the chances that it will be funded anyway are not that great, so let’s just leave it as-is.” Guess what Murphy’s Law will often dictate? Yep, an award gets made with some bizarre commitment, budgetary line item, or proposed deliverable that is going to require an act of Congress and/or approval of the Vatican to move forward at the award stage. Recommendation? Treat every proposal as if the award is anticipated and expected.

3. Communication — how a team approach during negotiations can be a benefit.
Tony: Depending on your institution, negotiations will generally be handled by a contract administrator/negotiator within the central pre-award office. This is how it is handled at my institution. However, a negotiation should not start with a sponsor until all parties “internal” to the arrangement are on the same page. This may (should) include the pre-award individual (or team), the Principal Investigator (PI), department or college-level administrator, technology transfer officer, and post-award representative (if specific issues to be negotiated are related to post-award activities and/or responsibilities). It is detrimental to a negotiation to draw a line in the sand related to certain terms and conditions, only to find out that someone else on the “team” had informed the sponsor that this would not be a problem. It is equally troubling to hear the phrase, “Well, our understanding is that the investigator has already started work and we want to make sure that we are able to cover his expenses.” I’ve experienced both scenarios in the past, and I can tell you that the amount of tap dancing I had to do would have qualified me for Dancing with the Stars!

4. Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime!
Tony: This is one area where I still have to learn to take my own advice. When I served as a contract administrator, I had some faculty who preferred to work through me to submit their final reports through Fastlane — not at all necessary (since the module for reports was an investigator function), but something they preferred to do. For some, this may be within your job description; for our office, it is nice to do, just above and beyond the normal call of duty. The problem? The investigators would send me a word document containing all the wonderful information that needed to be put into the report and them come to my office to sit with me and watch as I uploaded each component. This was great except for the fact that these investigators never actually gained the experience of submitting the report, and when I was promoted, the incoming contract administrator inherited a few “needy” individuals. I am proud to say, he has been teaching them to fish!

5. Education, Education, Education (and the importance of…).
Tony: This is one that I have touted for a long time, and clearly after years of stating that we needed to be much more proactive in our education programs, I became tasked with doing just that (re-
member, be careful what you ask for – see #2 above…). However, it is a topic and area that I feel does get overlooked because of all the other deadlines, compliance requirements and emergencies that consume any given day. Even if it is as simple as a monthly “tip” or article that you can make available or quarterly brown bag session (or better yet, providing snacks is always a great draw), my advice is to start small but be relevant. Determine the high priority areas that need attention immediately and move forward from there. Some of the programs/activities that we have initiated at Auburn include a departmental certification course and (COMPASS); a number of brown bag sessions, proposal development workshops (held in conjunction with new faculty orientation and an annual research week event); and monthly informal lunches with new faculty.

The tenuous balance between customer service and institutional responsibility.

Robyn: When you talk with any university sponsored programs administrator, a common theme seems to be providing the best customer service for their PIs. It is more comfortable to be liked and respected by our PIs than to be considered “the police.” More importantly, administrators need to develop a balance between providing great customer service and providing information to PIs about their responsibilities. I always remember that when I am a customer, I don’t want to be told what I can’t do. Instead, I want to be told what I can do. I strive to live by this daily in working with PIs, keeping in mind that compliance is necessary but, at the same time, letting them know what I can do for them. This helps to strike a balance between customer service and being responsible.

Who signs what? Understanding the hierarchy of signature authority.

Robyn: An administrator should understand who has signature authority at their institution as well as the chain of signatures that might be required. Educating your PI about this signature “chain of command” is also important so they know what is required. It is also critical to educate your PI that with signing comes a certain amount of responsibility. Educating your PI will help avoid any major problems they might encounter should they decide to sign on behalf of the institution; it will also go a long way toward helping to prevent them from signing on behalf of the institution in the first place.

3 If you don’t understand something during a negotiation process, DO NOT be afraid to ask the contract negotiator (or discuss with a colleague).

Robyn: Reviewing the plethora of documentation that comes with a contract can be overwhelming. It is important to remember that, no matter how long you have been in this business, when in doubt you should always ask the contracting officer (CO). Asking for points of clarification during the process can also help strengthen your relationship with the CO. In most cases, you will gain their respect because they will know you are trying to do the right thing. Remember, you also need to be able to explain to your PI, or others on campus, any compliance issues so it would be prudent to obtain clarification on the front end.
Get involved if a PI/faculty member tells you that they are getting a no-cost extension on a project that is about to expire.

Robyn: If a PI’s project is about to expire and they tell you the sponsor is granting them a no-cost extension to continue their work, get involved—especially when the PI also requests that the project account remain open. Ask the PI to provide you with any documentation or email as evidence that the sponsor is granting a no-cost extension. It would also be prudent for you to email the sponsor asking for any current updates on the project. You want to trust the PI, but you also don’t want them getting into a bind with their project.

Do not dodge or avoid that troublesome PI or the one that you consider to be a pain in your day. Be proactive…

Robyn: Every research administrator has a PI they would like to avoid because they either don’t follow the instructions, desire to be a “Lone Ranger,” or they are quite frankly a “pain” to work with during the proposal process. It may be a PI who never seems to be grateful for administrative assistance. There may be times that you would like to send your phone directly to voice mail, or wish that you were experiencing email problems. You simply want to avoid this person because they seem to wreck your day. In reality, it is much easier to be proactive and reach out to assist those “difficult” PIs who are working on proposals. When you are proactive, you are seeking to prevent any potential problems or hurdles before they arise or become a greater problem. Sometimes it may be necessary to step out of your comfort zone or go out of your way to get involved in helping the PI. It really takes more energy to avoid a PI than it does to be proactive. A proactive administrator reflects a positive attitude. Perhaps your positive attitude and energy will rub off on your PI and help to reverse what would otherwise have been an unpleasant situation.

Summary

It is our hope that this list of lessons learned provides you with some useful information that you can apply to your daily routine—or at the very least, provide a moment of levity during a hectic day! You might even consider keeping this list handy as a reminder of lessons learned by two research administrators who, though they may not have seen it all, have experienced enough to share this advice with you.

Robyn Remotigue is Research Manager, Dean of the School of Public Health at University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth. She has been in the field of research administration since 1994. She is a graduate of the 2012 NCURA Executive Leadership Program and 2010 NCURA Leadership Development Institute. She is actively involved with NCURA, serving on the Professional Development Committee and is Chair of the PDC Social Media Subcommittee. In addition, she has volunteered in various capacities at the regional level. Robyn can be reached at robyn.remo@unthsc.edu

Anthony (Tony) F. Ventimiglia is the Associate Director for Education and Communication in the Auburn University Office of Sponsored Programs where his responsibilities include the development and implementation of education programs for both faculty and staff. Tony has been working in research administration since 1999 and has volunteered in various capacities at both the regional and national level. He is a graduate of the 2005 class of the NCURA Leadership Development Institute and currently serves on the NCURA Board of Directors. Tony can be reached at ventiaf@auburn.edu

It’s all about American funding at the moment – DoD, NIH, Templeton, you name it. Notably, one of our first NIH proposals is about to go out so we are tying up lots of loose ends. I remember when I first entered into this “new world” of calls, having already had extensive experience with European ones, I thought: What additional things could we be asked to handle that we have not already managed? Well, it turns out - a lot. FCOI, sub-awards, ERA Commons, A133-audit requirements, are just a few of our new discoveries. It is fitting that I should bring up these things here since it is in large part NCURA’s “fault” that I’m now facing these issues! Attending one of your NIH-101 courses in New Orleans this March really helped us get active in this area. But we’re getting there and hopefully these typical “growing pains” will go away once we have a few more proposals behind us.

Stewe Bekk is the International Project Manager for ICFO – The Institute of Photonic Sciences in Barcelona, Spain.