

IN HINDSIGHT

The Vision of D&I in Research Administration Where We Were, Where We Could Have Been, and Where We Are Going

By Theresa Caban, Saiqa Anne Quresbi, and Marianne Woods

Thinking about the saying, “Hindsight is 20/20” allows members of NCURA to take a moment of pause to think about how the organization has grown and changed. We have grown in membership numbers, as well as the volume, depth and breadth of programs, and expanded to cover the United States, U.S. territories, and global membership.

While those achievements are of great merit, there is some reflection needed on the sheer lack of diversity in research administration as a profession. In the first in depth reflective presentation of this data, Jennifer Shambrook, Celeste Rivera-Nunez and Tameria Mace, of the University of Central Florida, presented the results of the Research Administrator Stress Perception Survey (RASPerS) Survey history from 2007-2020, with survey points in 2007, 2010, 2015, and 2020, at AM62. At the highest level, they found that the workforce in research administration is not representative of the ethnic distribution of the workforce age population of the United States. Additionally, there is a high risk of the exodus of valuable, highly-trained, Research Administrators (RAs) who identify as members of a minority group. While there is no current data to demonstrate an association between race and perceived levels of workplace stress, there is an association with bullying, lack of social support, and experiences of workload support during absence (Shambrook et al., 2020).

The RASPerS survey confirmed that while there was a slight decrease in white RAs and a statistically significant increase in Hispanic RAs, there was only a slight increase in African American RAs and none in other groups such as Native Americans, from 2007-2020. The 2020 survey results also determined that compared to the working age population in the United States, white RAs are overrepresented, while, Hispanic and African Americans are underrepresented and Asians are slightly underrepresented. There is, furthermore, a significant retention threat in those underrepresented minority groups, specifically that African American, Hawaiian, Native American and Asian identifying respondents were more likely to state that they would look for another role within two years.

Results of the survey additionally found salary disparity in which a significantly higher percentage of African American RAs hold a salary below \$35K, while white RAs are significantly more likely than African American RAs to be in the \$35-\$50K salary range. This data seems to suggest that a larger percentage of African-American RAs are in entry-level positions, though without cohort longitudinal data, we do not know if they enter and remain or leave the field or if they enter and promote at the same or differing rates than other ethnic groups.

The RASPerS survey also highlights bullying encountered in the workplace for many minorities, with African Americans experiencing bullying to a greater degree than others. African Americans reported experiencing bullying on a “regular basis,” and on a “daily basis,” at the highest rate of any ethnicity,



however by contrast, Hispanic and Asian RAs were more likely to indicate they were “never bullied.”

In the area of workload support, where one is supported by having other employees provide work coverage during absence, Asian and African American respondents were more likely to report “little to no” workload support during absence, while White respondents were more likely to respond that “virtually all” work was done during absence.

These results are disheartening, and it begs the questions – why is there such a lack of diversity in the research administration workforce, are there opportunities to expand the membership that were not harnessed, and what do we need to do to move the needle to grow a profession more reflective of the U.S. workforce. Looking back over the last years of exceptional growth and forward movement within NCURA, one area of consistent struggle for engagement has been in uniting through Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Tribal Nations and Hispanic Serving Institutions, collectively known as Minority Serving Institutions (MSI).

In a retrospective look at NCURA, we found that 20 years ago there was an attempt to engage these communities in NCURA, with the support of funding from The United Negro College Fund’s Special Programs (UNCFSP) and the Department of Defense. This established training with HBCUs, Tribal Nations and MSIs via a series of NCURA faculty-led traveling workshops designed to build capacity at those institutions, by focusing on the fundamentals of research administration and grant writing. They were held between 1999-2003, but in the following two decades these stand-alone programs do not appear to have driven diverse membership. The relationships with the HBCUs, Tribal Nations and MSIs, other than Puerto Rico, were not sustained and this leads one to question: why not?

NCURA had an opportunity, beyond the initially funded training, to build deeper relationships with these communities. Where would we be if we would have had a “second phase,” and an intentional next step to continue to engage these communities, to bring in and grow a generation of minority leaders? What did we miss out on by not continuing to engage them? The loss of perspective, experience, understanding and comradery will never truly be known, it cannot be measured.

What we do know is that moving forward we cannot miss any further “second phases.” We cannot in fact consider Diversity and Inclusion as separate training or engagement, nor can we see it as anything less than integral to all educational, training, and development programs within NCURA. It is only in hearing the diverse voices of our organization that we can continue to develop, change and inspire our membership for the future. It is this tapestry of our membership, woven together to create and support our future leaders that makes us powerful, unique and HEARD.

You may be asking yourself, how do I do that? Perhaps it is as simple as starting the work at your home institutions. Many organizations are now developing their own D&I committees, task forces, and boards to which all voices should be welcome. To that end, Culture Amp provides helpful questions to help engagement (Huang, 2020). The top five questions will help you start thinking about D&I at your organization and can facilitate discussion in your office or team:

1. Do I feel like I belong?
2. Am I able to voice my opinion without reprisal?
3. Can I ensure my perspective and those like mine are included in decision making?
4. Does my company believe in the talents and abilities of all staff?

We cannot miss any further “second phases”

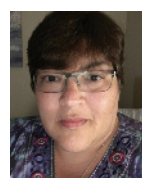
5. Are administrative tasks that don’t require specific ownership fairly divided across the organization?

At many institutions, there is still plenty of work to do, and many steps that can be taken personally, organizationally, and as a volunteer member of NCURA. Perhaps start with defining your own personalized D&I statement. Work within your organization to ensure questions are answered with a DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) lens. Ensure you have equal representation on committees, work groups, teams, and boards to ensure a strong diverse perspective. Allow for those difficult discussions to take place and be committed to face the truth head on, no matter what that truth is.

Within NCURA, the D&I Task Force has requested status as a select committee, to better ensure that NCURA is able to apply the DEI lens to the diverse work of the organization. Additionally, we will continue to encourage all standing and select committees be reflective of the NCURA membership. ■

References

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