

Research Development at PUIs: It's What We Do

By Mickie Kreidler and Sally J. Southwick

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“Research development” has been getting a fair bit of press lately as being a new profession and an innovative way of increasing the competitiveness of faculty research grant proposals. Last year the **National Organization of Research Development Professionals (NORDP)** was created, and earlier this year its current president contributed an article to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in which he called research developers “a new breed of academic.”ⁱ While we don’t doubt that it may indeed be a newly distinct role and staff position at large academic institutions, the article inspired us to reflect on the ways in which research development has long been an integral and necessary part of sponsored programs administration at **predominantly undergraduate institutions (PUIs)**.

According to NORDP, research development “includes a broad spectrum of activities that vary by institution, including: funding opportunity identification and targeted dissemination, grant/contract proposal development, budget preparation, forms and submission assistance, research team building, interaction with funding agencies and institutional research administration and leadership, and outreach activities and training.”ⁱⁱ Several elements in this list of activities may sound familiar to many of our colleagues in pre-award and departmental positions, but for those of us at PUIs these assorted duties encompass our role on our campuses.

Research development lies at the heart of our work, both by necessity and by design.

Research administrators at PUIs have a wide range of responsibilities and need to be both generalists and specialists. Job postings for director of **sponsored programs at PUIs reflect both the breadth of responsibilities** and the central importance of research development. The following excerpts from recent job postings are **illustrative examples**:

- **Identify faculty who have related research interests and facilitate communication of funding possibilities among them; work with faculty and academic departments in the development, implementation, and evaluation of sponsored projects related to the priorities of the institution.**
- **Work with faculty and academic departments to identify fundable research and program ideas and to locate sources of funding for these activities.**
- **Provide university-wide leadership in the development**

of sponsored program activities; work closely with faculty, staff and senior administrators in shaping the effort to build a more robust program of grants and sponsored research.

- Work with the dean of the college and the professional development committee and oversee administration of the college's support of faculty professional development; serve as resource for faculty concerning funding agencies, applications and deadlines and assist faculty in seeking and obtaining external funding.

For many of us, the broad scope of activities and the opportunity to work intensively with faculty are why we choose to be at PUIs. We support individuals and teams in all academic disciplines and at all stages, from the conceptual, pre-proposal phase through the entire process of developing and submitting the application, and we are often involved in post-award non-financial compliance. Typically our offices report directly to our institution's provost or vice president of academic affairs, and we collaborate closely with or participate in our campus's committee on faculty scholarship. At PUIs sponsored programs administrators also tend to know all or most members of the faculty and their research areas which leads to more pre-emptive and effective outreach, including personalized funding searches and emails, newsletters, and workshops. In addition, we have a key role in helping make faculty proposals competitive – we discuss their ideas with them often long before they plan to apply for grants, assist them in developing competitive proposals by reading and editing drafts and making suggestions, secure examples of successful proposals, and assist with budget preparation and institutional approval processes.

Other typical ways in which PUI research administrators serve as research developers on their campuses include recruiting successful faculty grantees to serve as mentors for others; attending departmental, chairs', and divisional meetings; conveying information about changes at funding agencies and updates on regulations; and meeting with individual faculty to discuss professional development plans and where research and external funding fit into their scholarly goals. Due to the nature of their positions and the mission of their institutions, research administrators at PUIs are also active in supporting faculty teams working together on cross-disciplinary collaborative projects and proposals, both on and beyond campus. Faculty development lies at the heart of our jobs every bit as much as coordinating the grant application process does.

Research development at predominantly undergraduate institutions requires both deliberate action and long-term planning. With limited

resources and high teaching loads, our faculty have long needed external grant support, often in order to conduct research with colleagues at other institutions and frequently to include undergraduate students as team members in scholarly projects. Over the past three decades PUI research administrators and their faculty have actively participated in academic alliances such as the Council on Undergraduate Research, the Independent Colleges Office, and Project Kaleidoscope, which foster inter-institutional collaborative efforts among faculty committed to strengthening undergraduate research while also supporting their professional growth and longterm grant competitiveness. ^{iii,iv}

Sponsored programs administrators at PUIs are typically well integrated into the larger research development mission of their institutions. For instance, Dakota State University has undertaken a formal, campus-wide initiative to build a culture of research as part of the Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). In the fall of 2010, the University Research Committee at Dakota State received approval to implement an AQIP action project, "'Building A Research Culture at DSU.'" Action projects are approved by the University Planning Council which is composed of the deans of each of the three colleges, the dean of graduate studies and research, the president, and the three administrative vice presidents (academic affairs, student affairs, and finance and administration). The AQIP research action project's goal is to create an environment in which research, scholarship, and creative activities are respected, rewarded, and reported to internal and external stakeholders. The project has the leadership support of the dean of graduate studies and research and the University Research Committee. Not surprisingly, the director of sponsored programs is integral to the project and provides both project management expertise and administrative direction.

At PUIs the sponsored programs offices also have less formalized or publicly visible roles, such as being the primary source for information about research interests and recent grants and contracts. We communicate regularly with offices of media relations to assist them in publicizing faculty scholarship and grant activities. Our offices are also frequently involved in government relations by providing information for local, state, and federal legislators and drafting white papers for university administrators detailing institutional needs and articulating requests.

And we communicate with each other –

at national and regional meetings, through the PUI email list, and offline. Because of the broad involvement of research administrators within and beyond our institutions, we can reach out to our counterparts at other institutions about scholarly expertise on their campuses and assist faculty in connecting with colleagues elsewhere. Whether it's across disciplines or across time zones, PUI research administrators are active in building supportive infrastructure, facilitating partnerships, and enhancing scholarly and creative excellence. For anyone interested in learning more about how we go about our work or for ideas on expanding the role of research development on their campuses, the PUI Neighborhood library on NCURA's website offers articles on some aspects of the work we do, including "Strategies for Stimulating Growth," "Encouraging Faculty Participation," and "The Role of External Grants in Faculty Development at Predominantly Undergraduate Institutions." NCURA's site also offers the DVD of "Building A Culture for Scholarship at a PUI: The Role of Research Administration" by our colleagues Stephen Hansen, Jerry Pogatshnik, and Cindy White, all long-time leaders in research development at PUIs. Our community is committed to our profession at predominantly undergraduate institutions because the focus here is research development: working closely with faculty, doggedly trying to support their full range of scholarly and creative activities, and eagerly seeking to develop collaborations with other institutions.

Mickie Kreidler, Ph.D., *director of sponsored programs at Dakota State University in Madison, SD, began her career in research administration at West Virginia University Health Sciences Center. She also served as director of research and sponsored programs at Frostburg State University, Frostburg, MD; associate director for research Office of Geriatrics and Gerontology at The Ohio State University, and director of development for Ohio Retired Teachers Association, Columbus, OH. At Dakota State she is a one-person office responsible for research development and pre-award services.*

Sally J. Southwick *is the associate director of the Office of Sponsored Projects and Research at Keene State College in Keene, NH. She began her PUI research administration career in 2001 at Carleton College after completing her doctorate in American history from the University of Arizona. She specializes in working with faculty to think strategically about external grant applications to federal, state, and private agencies and in providing support to faculty in research and proposal development*