



SRA INTERNATIONAL  
ANNUAL MEETING  
**SEATTLE 2023**  
OCTOBER 14-18

# Effective Project Support for International Research Collaboration

Philip A. Cola, PhD and Helen Coskeran, PhD  
October 17, 2023  
9:00 am – 10:00 am

# Introductions

# Today's Co-Presenters

## PHILIP COLA

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- + **Dr Phil Cola** is a Professor of Management and Associate Professor of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU). He has more than 20 years of experience leading research administration in an Academic Medical Center where he was instrumental in designing and developing reliant IRB review mechanisms. Presently, he is also the Director of the Regulatory Knowledge and Support component of the CWRU Clinical Translational Science Award. He is the inaugural holder of the Chris Winkle Professorship in Healthcare Management at the Weatherhead School of Management at CWRU.

## HELEN COSKERAN

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- + **Dr Helen Coskeran** is a research development manager at the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. She works with scientists on proposal development in the areas of biodiversity, atmospheric chemistry and water resources and liaises with funders and other strategic partners on collaboration and knowledge-sharing. She was previously based at the University of Leeds as programme manager of the GCRF-AFRICAP project which was a major initiative to make agriculture and food production in Sub-Saharan Africa more productive, sustainable and resilient to climate change with partners in Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, the UK and Zambia.

# JRA Author Fellowship Program

- Goal is *“to increase the confidence, capacity, and willingness of research administrators to serve the field and share their expertise as peer-reviewed or refereed journal authors”*
- Fellows are paired with published Peer Advisors for a nine-month supportive fellowship
- Also advertised through other international associations, including the UK’s Association of Research Managers and Administrators
- Phil and Helen have worked on two papers together, the other paper was presented at last year’s SRAI Annual Meeting

# Session Agenda

- Problem of Practice
- Brief Review of Literature
- Methodology
- Results & Recommendations
- Conclusion & Further Research

# Problem of Practice

# Global Challenges Research

- Investigating opportunities for Research Administrator's to contribute toward increased international research collaborations.
  - Research In the US - The Fogarty International Center which is part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH)
  - In the UK - The Global Challenges Research Fund (2016-2021 – extended to 2022 due to COVID)
  - Case study: Growing research capability call

# For this Project - We Asked the Following Research Questions:

- What are the key factors that indicate effective project support for international research collaborations?
- What can individuals and organisations do during the project design, set-up and implementation phases to ensure those factors facilitate rather than hinder the management and sustainability of such partnerships?



# Methodology

# Mixed Methods Approach

- Survey distributed to all 37 GCRF Grow Project Managers and detailed responses received from 14 of those
- Nine semi-structured qualitative interviews with researchers, programme managers and colleagues working with civil society and advocacy organisations in the GCRF AFRICAP Program
- Constructivist grounded theory allowed us to gather lived experience and code them for emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014)

# Brief Review of the Literature

# Five Factors for Managing Successful International Research Collaborations

**1. Equitable Partnerships:** building reciprocity and trust in order to establish social networks of mutual understanding amongst collaborative teams (Zakaria, Amelinckx, & Wlemon, 2004)

**2. Capacity Strengthening:** building relational capacity as a precursor to positive impact on teamwork and organizational support (Cola & Wang, 2022)

**3. Global Networks:** rely on success in people and relationships, common goals, the ability to achieve results, a sense of urgency, and organizational support (Cola & Wang, 2022; Kanter, 1994; Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010)

# Five Factors for Managing Successful International Research Collaborations (continued)

**4. Interdisciplinarity:** involvement with collaborators results in rich multi-voiced interdisciplinary theoretical and practical research projects (James 2016)

**5. Relevant Global Challenges:** ‘wicked’ real-world problems of practice foster a sense of design and innovation (Boland & Colopy, 2004)

# Results & Recommendations

# Organizational Capacity & Capabilities

- Skills, knowledge and experience in research management and administration varied considerably across different countries
- Some organizations relied on researchers rather than having dedicated project support teams. Administrative tasks were added to existing workloads which left staff overburdened
- Challenges around hierarchical organizational structures and in maintaining equitable partnerships, particularly in contractual and financial management

# Building & Maintaining Partnerships

- Tight timeline for proposal submission meant limited interactions on research questions and approach
- Governance and reporting structures were key influencing factors in equitable partnership dynamics
- Institutions with existing links to the UK funding and academic systems were better-placed to deal with project requirements
- Communication systems were important, particularly regular use of online tools and opportunities to meet face-to-face



# Project Management Teams & Roles

- Full-time UK-based project managers were mandatory in the call but not overseas project managers (though many projects appointed the latter)
- The structure of project management teams was largely designed by academics instead of professional services experts
- Many projects required additional or different project support as time went on in specialist areas such as monitoring and evaluation, finance and communications
- Assigning project management as a separate work package proved effective in some instances

# Recommendations by Project Phase

- **In project design:** Engage early with all partners and with colleagues with project management expertise
- **During project set-up:** Use the inception phase to set expectations on communication structures and tools; specialist knowledge required; and to understand each other's strengths and limitations
- **During project implementation:** Include project support staff in meetings on research activities and build in moments of reflection

# Recommendations by Role

## External to Project

- **Funder:** Ensure the design of calls always caters for the strategic element of project support, both within the lead institution and partner organisations.
- **University/organizational leadership:** Invest in housing project support teams within other strategic departments at your institution; build their capacity and capability; and do not see them as an 'add-on' to projects.
- **Project/Research Support Office:** Support the academic team developing a project plan by regularly asking and advising where project support is needed. Consider yourself as part of the project team, rather than an outsider.

# Recommendations by Role

## Project Team

- **Principal investigator/academic lead:** Engage with experts in project support as you design your proposal and include sufficient funds for these activities within the project budget.
- **Other researchers:** Connect with your support team as an equal peer and get involved with project discussions and decision-making.
- **Project Manager:** Be proactive in engaging with academics and wider institutional strategic plans for research funding – offer your services to structure resourcing on new proposals.

# Conclusions & Future Research

# What Can Research Institutions Do?

- Talk about project support as a key component of international collaborative research
- Take time to consider the specialist support roles required for projects
- Engage with funders and leadership teams on how project support roles are funded

# Future Research

- Further investigation of the various competencies that are required from project teams when engaging in international collaborative research
- Understanding the extent to which project support teams increase the impact achieved by interdisciplinary international collaborative projects
- Engaging across international research administrator networks to understand the latter's potential role in providing knowledge exchange and networking opportunities that could bolster the provision of project support in international contexts

# Questions