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# A Case Study in Research Administration Staffing and Retention: A Grassroots Approach

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**Melissa Karby**

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- Lifecycle centralized Research Administration Support
- Sit right in between the schools/colleges/units and the central offices
- Support research centers across all disciplines

# Heather Kraus

## Director of Research Administration, College of LSA, University of Michigan

- College Level
- Centralized Structure - Pre, Post and Non Sponsored Management
- Pool Program - RA Training for New Staff

**Lauren Orleman**  
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- School-level: Dean's Office Research Admin Support
- Decentralized Structure

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- Program level within research center
- Decentralized Structure focused on research excellence for faculty through a “white glove” service model

# Learning Objectives

1. Gain an understanding of what actions can be taken at the local and institutional level to improve employee staffing and retention
2. Examine real-life examples of ways in which research administrators have impacted staffing and retention at their institution

# Questions for the Audience?

1. What is your current structure?
  - a. Centralized
  - b. Departmental
  - c. Both
2. What staffing challenges are you experiencing?
3. Does your institution have any network (or network type) groups for RAs?

# University of Michigan Research Administrative Structure

# Michigan Research Administration

- Institutionally decentralized and all 3 campuses/schools/units set up their own operations
- Centralized pre-award and non-financial post-award: Office of Research and Sponsored Projects under the VP for Research
- Centralized financial post-award: Sponsored Programs under the VP for Finance
- Decentralization can lead to silos and lack of community as well as disparate work processes/systems/procedures
- A group of RAs on campus came together and brought forward a solution

# The Research Administration Advisory Council (RAAC)

- Through a grassroots movement the Research Administration Advisory Council (RAAC) was formed
- Started in 2012 and consists of a main Executive Committee and various subcommittees (see next slide)
- This organization is staffed by volunteers from across campus to be the Research Administration voice on campus
- Through the RAAC, system implementations are reviewed, new trainings are developed, and current system processes are improved
- For more information: <https://orsp.umich.edu/research-administration-advisory-council-raac>

# Research Administration Advisory Council (RAAC)

Committee	Purpose
<b>1. Executive Committee</b>	Establishes the framework and sets the tone for RAAC.
<b>2. Faculty Advisory Council</b>	Faculty voice on issues affecting research administration.
<b>3. Communications Subcommittee</b>	Recommends best practices for effective communication.
<b>4. Metrics Subcommittee</b>	Assists with research administration data.
<b>5. Process Subcommittee</b>	Identifies and promotes changes to improve RA processes.
<b>6. Training Subcommittee</b>	Recommends and develops new training.
<b>7. Committee-at-Large</b>	Serves as an advisory forum under the direction of the RAAC EC.
<b>8. DEI Workgroup</b>	Focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion within research administration.

# The Problem at Hand

The research administration career family is experiencing significant instability due to an insufficient number of qualified candidates in the field. A pathway to bring new talent into the market does not currently exist, which further compounds these challenges. As a growing number of UM units and institutions nationwide now offer remote work opportunities and increasingly better pay, we are faced with competing internally and externally in these areas or losing talented staff.

Additionally, we must develop new staff to fill the growing need for research administrators as the University's research activity continues to expand. These key staff members require training and development which is difficult in our current structure.

# Current Staffing Case Studies

# Pool Program - College of LSA

- Background
  - \$229+ research expenditures per year
  - ~45 dedicated Research Administrators in 75 departments across school
  - Centralized staffing structure
- College Level Challenges
  - Challenges in directly placing a new hire into a opening
  - Overburdened staff and managers
  - New staff - little to no research administration experience
  - Faculty were feeling they had to train new staff
- Pool consists of 3 staff members (Established 2018)
  - Pool staff - onboarded and trained - Minimum 3 months
  - Assigned to a functional lead / mentor
  - Perform work behind the scenes
  - Not assigned to a team or faculty until onboarding is complete
  - Shadowing other research administrators

# Pool Program - College of LSA

- Assessment and Transition to Team
  - Assessments performed to identify progress
  - Manager of team chooses pool staff based on knowledge, completion of training/onboarding and fit for their team and faculty
  - Transitions staff onto team
  - Workload is progressively given over 9-12 months
  - Established core areas of responsibility are focused on quarterly
- Challenges of Pool
  - Each pool candidate learns at differently
    - Establish reasonable expectations
    - Adapt to the needs of the staff member
  - Having volunteers readily available to hold trainings
    - Had to establish a training calendar
  - Staff turn over sometimes faster than the time you have to train up pool staff
    - Set a minimum number of months to keep pool staff in pool program

# School of Public Health

- Background
  - \$100M+ research expenditures per year
  - ~25 dedicated Research Administrators in 6 departments across school
  - Many research centers with staff in RA-adjacent roles
  - Decentralized staffing structure
  - Prior to Fall 2022 Sr. Assoc. Dean for Research only individual overseeing RA at school-level
- Unit level problems/challenges
  - Significant growth in research activity; staffing structure did not grow to adequately support it
  - Overburdened staff, turnover, inconsistent training
  - Siloed operations
  - Inconsistency across board: policy communication, service level, best practices, RA training
  - No promotion strategy for RA staff

# Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR)

- Centralized RA support for centers and institutes part of the Business Operations Team
- Cradle to grave RA services akin to typical departmental level support
  - We have published a guidance document for what we support vs what is the responsibility of project teams
- Unit requires senior level RAs due to the complexity of the workload
- OVPR RA submits 40+ proposals a year averaging around \$100m total
- Research expenditures managed by team average \$9m+

# Institute for Social Research (ISR)

- 140 million annually in sponsored research
- Entire institute is “soft money” funded - entrepreneurial environment
- Broken down to Centers, then the largest (SRC) by programs
- Programs are managed individually plus “shared” structure like Nick’s
- Yearly research volume - approximately \$14 million

# Institutional Retention Strategies - to date

# Institutional Retention Activities

- Talent Acquisition
- Equity Process
- [Career Pathway for Research Administrator Advancement](#)
- Various bonus programs in schools and colleges
- RAAC Virtual Networking and webinars
- RAMP-Up Mentorship Program
- Professional Development (break it down - internal opportunities & ability to attend externally)

# Grassroots Retention Strategies

# Proposed University-Wide RA Staffing Program

- Formation of Institutional Workgroup to address common staffing challenges
  - Insufficient number of qualified candidates leading to long-term vacancies and/or small, unqualified candidate pools
  - A lack of organized, asynchronous training to quickly orient individuals placing burden on unit staff
  - Research administrators often move internally between schools/colleges for more pay and benefits, causing instability at the unit level
  - Staff burnout
  - Increased turnover
  - The research administration staffing infrastructure will not be able to adequately support the existing and projected growth in activity
- Proposed the creation of a pilot program that aims to strengthen the infrastructure surrounding the research administration job series by improving the candidate pool, increasing training opportunities and addressing chronic vacancies, understaffing and burnout

# Proposed University-Wide Pilot Program



# LSA Retention

- Career Advancement Program - Promotion
  - Allows staff to advance to the next level based on competencies
  - Does not require staff to have to wait for an opening
  - Increases retention rate
  - Assessment process - rating competencies
- Annual Compensation review - Equity
  - Performed annually to compare salaries across University and externally
  - Increases given based on review process
  - Increases retention rate

# School of Public Health - Local Solutions

- 2022: Listening sessions held by Dean's Office
- Result: RA staff leadership position created in Dean's Office
  - Operational cohesion, build RA community and support, develop centralized resources, best practices for faculty and staff
- Initiatives implemented:
  - Research Communications and Best Practices
    - Internal Research Resources site, research newsletter
  - RA Community building and support
    - Monthly SPH RA Community of Practice meetings
    - RA Mentorship program, Networking and Special Topic sessions
    - G-chat groups, Slack
  - School-wide programming
    - Partnering with campus units, Research Manager and Staff CoP
  - Addition of RA Program Manager - focus on training, building community
- RA staffing strategy:
  - Regular equity reviews and adjustments, addition of new staff
  - Workload review

# Other Impacts on Retention

- Remote work
- Reclassifications & equity reviews
- Work breaks / lunches
- Lots of individual touchpoints
- Culture
- Coffee hours and individual huddles
- Focus time
- Walking meetings / shortened meetings
- Don't do anything after working hours
- Giving yourself grace
- Social committee (in person or virtual)
- Meeting free Fridays / Quiet days around holidays / August meeting free
- What other areas impact retention that we haven't mentioned?

## In Closing.....

- Empower RA staff to be creative/solutions oriented
- Don't let the barriers prevent you from attempting to start an initiative
- You can make small incremental changes on the local level
- Not everything has to be financial!
- Network institutionally as well as externally
- Use IT tools to your advantage in creating community

# Thank you for attending today!

Any questions? Tips or tricks on your end?

Please contact us for more information!

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