Catalyst

BY THE SOCIETY OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATORS INTERNATIONAL

Offering the latest updates, member experiences and achievements, and expert perspectives in research management and administration.

OCTOBER 2026

VOLUME 02 | ISSUE 03



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ABOUT SRAI

The Society of Research Administrators International (SRAI) empowers research administrators with professional development, networking, and resources to enhance their expertise and drive impactful research.

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Society of Research Administrators International
1530 Wilson Blvd., Suite 650
Arlington VA 22209
Phone: +1 703-741-0140
www.srai.org

Catalyst

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Introduction

The Society of Research Administrators International proudly presents the *Catalyst Quarterly*: a specially recurring magazine edition of our digital newsletter, *Catalyst*. This publication features timely new content alongside standout pieces from the past quarter, offering the latest updates, member experiences and achievements, and expert perspectives in research management and administration.

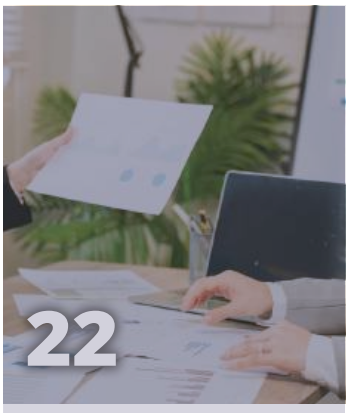
With each issue, we strive to advance SRAI's mission to empower research administrators with the knowledge, resources, and community needed to excel, collaborate, and drive impactful research worldwide. We encouirage our global community to always continue innovating—driving excellence and discovery, together.

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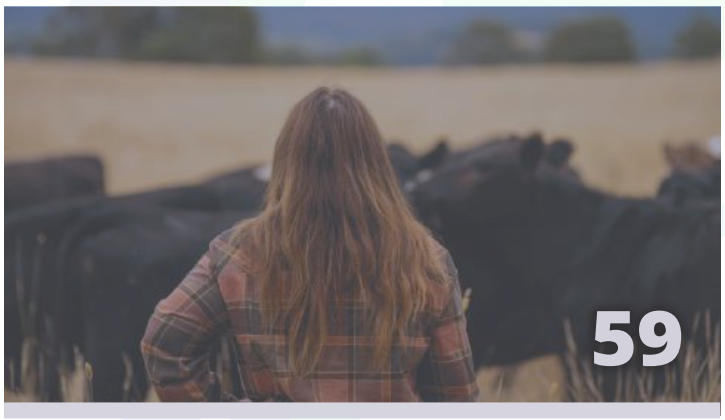
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> Progress doesn't have to be all at once. Leverage the resources you do have and hire staff that are mission-oriented and comfortable working in ambiguity. Flexibility, curiosity, and a willingness to iterate are far more valuable than perfection out of the gate.



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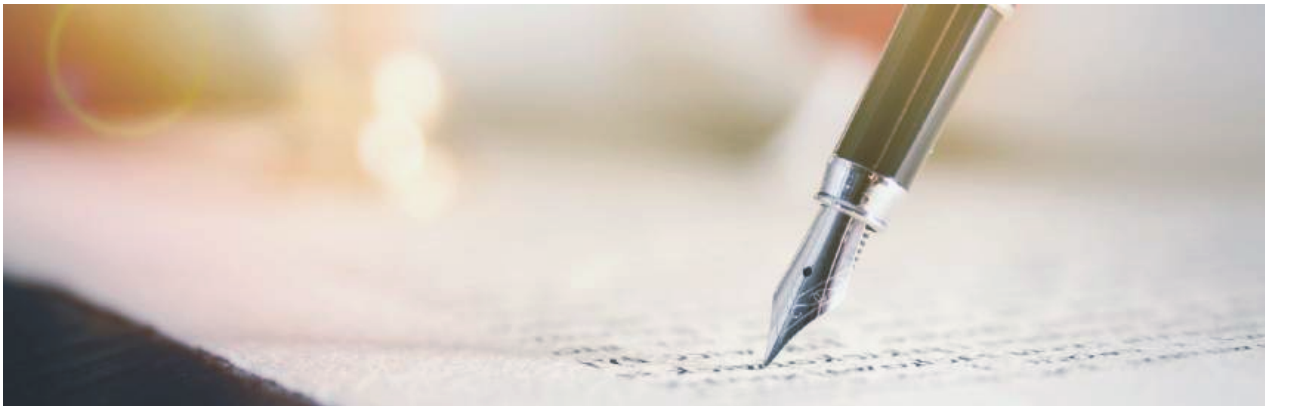
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Editor's Note



Dear Readers,

Research Administration as a profession can often feel like a long, onerous hike—through dense forest, shallow rivers, rolling hills—a journey with rare scenic outlooks and no perceivable finish line. In this issue of the *Catalyst*, we sought out to determine how progress comes to fruition.

Beyond the existing frameworks and cyclical budgets, the training modules and three-ring binders full of SOPs that keep us compliant and on schedule, how do we keep marching onward? How exactly do we monitor and evaluate success, and when is it time to rethink things and adjust the process without falling too far behind?

Whether it's keeping up with rapidly evolving technology, developing new workflows, or finding new and creative avenues to secure funding, the research administrator's job is truly never done. Our contributors draw on their knowledge and experiences to redraw boundaries and innovate, while keeping one foot in front of the other and a peripheral eye on the rearview. When we tap into our peers, we discover new ways to evaluate programs, build portfolios, review performance, and cultivate positive culture within our teams and institutions.

I hope this publication serves as a map for advancement: look back and acknowledge all you've accomplished, reflect on the lessons learned and data gathered, then take the road less traveled—towards discovery, growth, and transformation.

As always, I commend the Catalyst editorial board for their tireless efforts to amplify the voices of research administrators around the globe. We sincerely appreciate this community's continued interest, support, and thought leadership. Thank you for sharing your stories and expertise—together, we're cultivating SRAI's vision: a connected world of research administrators driving excellence, collaboration, and discovery across borders and disciplines.

Finally, I invite all of you to share your unique perspectives with the Catalyst, so that we can continue to be a resource, reprieve, and sounding board for each other. For more details on how to get in touch with us, visit srai.org/catalyst/submit. Thank you for reading.

Farida Lada
Editor, *Catalyst*



Farida Lada, PhD, MBA

Chief Campus Compliance Officer
University of California San Francisco

Farida previously served as Associate University Provost for Research Administration and Compliance at the City University of New York (CUNY). Farida was also the Founding Academic Director of the Master's and Advanced Certificate Programs in Research Administration and Compliance programs at CUNY School of Professional Studies. Prior to that, Farida was the Director of Research Compliance at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. Farida has a PhD in Governance and Policy Analysis and an MBA.

Meet the Editorial Team

feature editors





Grant Development & Strategy

Jose G. Alcaine, PhD, MBA, CRA

SRAI Distinguished Faculty

Director of Research Services & Affiliate and Adjunct faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University

Jose brings extensive experience in higher education, research administration, and research development and has been a long time member of SRAI.

Kimberly Read, PhD, MBA, CRA

SRAI Distinguished Faculty

Assistant Chair of Operations for Child & Family Studies, University of South Florida

Kimberly has 35 years of experience in business, finance, and research administration. She has extensive professional writing and copyediting experience, which she is excited to bring to the *Catalyst.* She has been an SRAI member since 2010.

Grant Management & Financial Oversight





Linda Dement, CRA

Grant and Finance Program Manager, Benaroya Research Institute at Virginia Mason

With 29 years in grants management and 15+ years in research administration, Linda uses her accounting degree to provide grant and fiscal management to her department at BRI. As a long-standing member of SRAI, she volunteers in various ways to support the SRAI community.

Tamara Ginter, CFRA

Director of Finance, College of STEM, Eastern Washington University

Tamara has over 20 years of higher education experience. In her current role, she oversees all college budgets, including post award activities for sponsored projects. She received her CFRA in 2024. She has been a member of SRAI since 2023 and has been a co-editor of the *Catalyst* since 2025.





Career Growth & Leadership

Olumide A. Odeyemi, PhD

Pre-Award Research Funding Officer, University of Tasmania, Australia

Olumide sources research funding opportunities, reviews research funding applications and obtains internal approvals. He serves as a mentor for SRAI's Odyssey Program and is passionate about generating new knowledge in research management.

Kimberly Pratt, MA, CRA

SRAI Distinguished Faculty

Director, Office of Research Development, Ohio University

Kimberly brings more than 15 years of expertise in research development and administration. She currently directs the Research Development Office at Ohio University, where she supports faculty in securing competitive funding and advancing the institution's research strategy.

Community & Member Engagement





Crina Gandila,* MS, CRA

Research Administrator, Southern California University of Health Sciences

Crina supports the full life-cycle of sponsored research at SCU, specializing in grant development and compliance. She believes that education and health are two of the most important pillars of society and holds graduate degrees in business analytics and marketing.

Kimberly McKoy, Ed.D., CRA

Associate Director of Contracts and Grants, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Kimberly has over 23 years of higher education experience. She has served on the Editorial Board for SRAI's *Journal of Research Administration* since 2015. She is also a Co-Chair for the Sponsors and Agencies Track.

**Additionally assisted with copyediting for this issue.*







Regulatory & Compliance Oversight

Shipra Mittal, MS, MBA

Senior Grants Manager, New York University

Shipra brings extensive experience in pre-award research administration. Apart from her role in SRAI's *Catalyst*, she is a member of the NCURA Collaborate Working Group and the Leadership Development and Nominating Committee.

Rani Muthukrishnan, PhD

Director of Research Compliance at Texas A&M University–San Antonio

In her role, Rani manages IACUC, IBC, IRB, export controls, research security, RCR, research integrity and more. She holds doctoral degrees in both Education and Ecology, and is the current Deputy Editor of SRAI's *Journal of Research Administration.*

Anita Trupiano, MS

Program Development Analyst & Regulatory Affairs Specialist, Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey.

Anita oversees regulatory documentation and compliance activities supporting clinical research studies. She holds a Master of Science from the University of Bridgeport and a Bachelor of Science from Farmingdale State College, SUNY, and is dedicated to mentoring colleagues and emerging research professionals.

Operations & Workflow Management





Mark Lucas, CRA

SRAI Distinguished Faculty

Chief Administrative Officer, Neurobiology and Computational Medicine, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA

With 35 years of experience in research administration, Mark has served on the SRAI *Catalyst* Committee for the past six years. He is President for the SRAI Western Section.

Anita Sharma, PhD

Director, Research Services, Office of the VP Research, Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, BC, Canada

Anita oversees the Research Services portfolio, including federal institutional programs, capacity building, research development, and faculty engagement. Passionate about advancing the field, she serves on multiple SRAI committees, has published work in Catalyst and the Journal of Research Administration, and an SRAI Future of the Field honoree.

copyeditors









Happiness Eric Aigbogun

Research Project Assistant, UPMC Biofluid Biomarker Laboratory, University of Pittsburgh

Happiness supports Alzheimer's biomarker research at the UPMC Karikari Biofluid Biomarker Laboratory, University of Pittsburgh, where she also manages grants, procurement, and lab operations. She is the creator and lead of ResurchIn, a free mentorship initiative for early-career scientists.

Aynoka Bender, MS

Senior Sponsored Programs Specialist, Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Aynoka is a Senior Sponsored Programs Specialist in Vanderbilt University Medical Center's Office of Sponsored Programs and previously worked as an Adminstrative Officer in Pediatrics. She began her transition into higher education as a Case Jupiter Fellow after working in public relations and publishing.

Carly Pigg, CRA, CPRA, CFRA

Research Fiscal Analyst, LSU Health Sciences Center, New Orleans

Carly is located in the School of Medicine (SOM) Dean's Office, where she currently oversees the Core Services business operations, the lead data analyst for the SOM Office of Research, and manages the Louisiana Clinical and Translational Sciences Center (U54) program.

Sripriya Rangarajan, PhD

Research Administration Manager, Office of Research & Project Administration, Princeton University

Priya is responsible for implementing strategic recommendations to enhance research collaborations between Princeton University and thePrinceton Plasma Physics Laboratory (PPPL). She manage the PU/PPPL joint appointment programs, and serve as an administrative point of contact for research collaborations between the University and the Lab.

CAREER GROWTH AND LEADERSHIP

The Rider, The Elephant, & The Path: Managing Change with Wisdom & Composure

By Heather Darling, MEd, PMP, & Mark D. Cannon, PhD



The secret to navigating change effectively lies in the mastery of visualizing three key elements working in harmony: the Rider, the Elephant, and the Path.

Change is an inevitable part of the research administrator's daily reality. Efforts to enact change are often weak or unsuccessful for a multitude of reasons. They may lack bottom-up support, not adjust plans along the way, or have a leader engaging in "us and them" dialogue. Chip and Dan Heath's book, "Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard," illustrates a simple yet powerful allegory that captures three key predictors of effective change: the Rider, the Elephant, and the Path. Prospects for effective change improve greatly when all three are addressed, but most change efforts suffer from neglecting one or more of them.

The Rider

Within this model, the Rider represents the rational mind, representing thought, planning, and analysis. The logical mind wants to steer us in the direction of change. To get there, it scripts the critical moves required to arrive at the desired destination. The rider is, however, a careful planner and potential overthinker, can be slow to act.

The Elephant

The Elephant, on the other hand, represents the emotional mind. It encompasses feelings, emotions, and instincts. It pursues instant gratification and takes the course of least resistance. The rider may guide the elephant but can be easily overpowered if the elephant is not aligned with the rider's goals. The elephant usually wins when in conflict with the rational mind because of its ability to wear down the rider.

The Path for Change

The Path in this model represents the environment and context that facilitate or hinder change. It can also represent the strategies and steps taken to achieve change. A well-defined path can help keep the elephant on track while the rider directs. Changes to the environment may aid in the progress towards effective change.

Case Study on Checklists

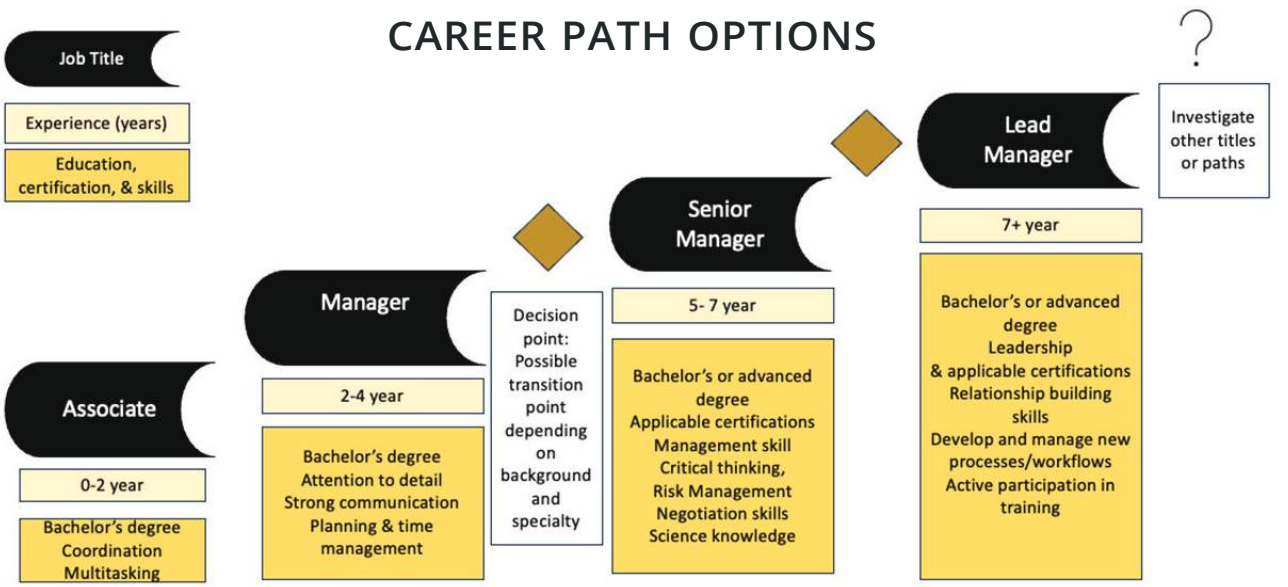
To best describe an ideal situation for change using the Rider, Elephant, Path framework, we will explore a case study on checklists. Checklists can be simple yet effective tools for organizing tasks, ensuring thoroughness, and reducing the likelihood of forgetting important steps in various processes. By outlining specific actions in a clear, sequential format, checklists provide a straightforward roadmap for completion. They can be used in a variety of ways, such as tracking routine administrative tasks, supporting project management, or supplementing more complex research workflows. A primary advantage of using checklists is that they reduce the cognitive load of remembering every detail of every stage of a workflow, which, in turn, helps minimize stress and uncertainty on both the analytical and intuitive sides of decision-making.

As research administrators, we manage competing responsibilities daily. It is common to feel pressure about missing a critical step or making a costly error, which can quickly add to stress and anxiety. A checklist is a tool in our toolbox, serving as an external reference point that allows the user to focus on carrying out the work rather than holding all the details in their mind. As items are completed, documented, and checked off, the checklist reinforces progress. It supports a greater sense of control, momentum, and follow-through. In this way, checklists are more than a planning tool; they support effective workflow management, improve consistency, and provide a clear, step-by-step path from start to finish.

Many of us research administrators have submitted grants countless times in varying capacities. The process can be stressful, and it is easy to forget a specific document until final checks are verified at submission. An option is to create a recipe for success and prepare the team from the beginning. This can help reduce anxiety for grant managers, principal investigators (PIs), and others involved.

Years ago, a former colleague serving as a grant manager developed a checklist for NIH proposals. It included simple elements such as grant title, project period, project summary, and project narrative. It listed the budget, letters of support, biosketches, aims, resource-sharing plan, equipment, and all other documents. This would be sent to the PI when a new proposal was mentioned, with the receipt dates specified for when documents would be needed. Often, the PI would turn in many administrative documents as early as possible so that they could focus on the science. It was a successful tool that lessened anxiety for everyone involved.

Figure 1.
Generic career path visual example, which could be adapted to fit current needs



Along the way, there was a personnel change. Although the checklist tool was developed and effective, the new grants manager chose not to utilize it. Some people are naturally good at what they do and may feel they do not need a checklist. In this case, the person felt the checklist was an attack on them and their ability to do their job, but that was not the case at all. The grant submissions remained successful, but anxiety increased as time went by. Various people involved in the process questioned what, if anything, was being forgotten and missed until it was potentially too late to resolve. Using the simple checklist could have solved the problem by accounting for the elephant's emotions and the rider's logic in creating the path.

Case Study on Career Paths

We'd venture to say that most of us did not plan a career in research administration but fell into the profession along the way. That said, not all roles in research administration have a clear career progression path. Advising direct reports and colleagues about growth and professional development is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Having a simple framework can create a clearer path for setting goals. Within the past few years, it became apparent that a such a framework would be incredibly useful for a team of project managers.

The idea was sparked by researching two well-known corporate brands. Their public human resource (HR) websites contained various road maps to success for their specific companies, with options for customer service and managerial roles, to name a few. I thought, "Why don't I have this?" and, thus, my project began. I showed the example to my director to ensure I had his buy-in. He helped me get started by initiating contact with other departments so I could investigate what they were doing. I also reached out to our HR representatives. I was creating a clear path for the rider and the elephant and I developed a presentation with carefully-planned, well-researched visuals. It provided points with forks in the road, where individuals could forge their own path, depending on personal goals or preferences. Each role required various degrees, certifications, or skills to proceed. My final product resulted in full support from the director, and I was able to roll it out immediately. I presented it to my team so they could see the options. This simple path has helped clarify discussions around advancement. An example (Figure 1) can be adapted to fit the needs of a research administration office.

In research administration specifically, "forks in the road" are often even more pronounced because career growth can follow multiple, equally valid routes. For example, those with deeper specializations (i.e., contracts, proposals, compliance) to broader portfolio leadership (i.e., team lead, manager), or movement across the research lifecycle (i.e., pre-award to post-award, or into project management/operations). This is exactly why the rider-elephant-path idea resonates in this example. The rider might want a clear next step, while the elephant often knows what kind of work feels energizing or draining to them. Without a clear, visible path, individuals can stall out. This often has more to do with the path being hard to picture rather than a lack of ability.

When I started outlining project manager career paths, it became clear that many research administration competencies develop horizontally as much as vertically. Employees may advance by expanding scope, complexity, independence, and institutional impact rather than by simply changing titles. The path itself can branch in several directions, including, but not limited to, pre-award, post-award, contracts and subawards, compliance, and research operations and leadership. Early-career individuals may learn a broad set of tasks for each and then dive deeper into a specialty, while others who prefer broad oversight could gravitate towards research operations leadership. A simple framework gives the rider a map with clear direction, helps the elephant feel more comfortable by normalizing choice and momentum, and creates a clearer path for development conversations. It reinforces the idea that advancement comes in many forms. It might look like increased scope and influence, a shift in specialty, or a move into leadership. No matter the route, progress depends on deliberately building core skills such as communication, risk management, relationship-building, and process improvement.

Strategies for Successful Change

Aligning the rider and the elephant is vital. This can be done in a variety of ways, depending on what the situation demands. In the case of the grant submission checklist, we saw the elephant's emotions cloud their judgment. It was believed that using a checklist meant they were not good at their job, which was not the case at all. Perhaps all that was needed was a clearer explanation to motivate the elephant. In the case of the career path, all that was needed was a plan from the rider to guide the elephant forward.

To summarize, it is important to balance the rider and the elephant while clearing an ideal path for change. It helps to be agile and adjust strategies along the way to align all three components. One might consider implementing SMART goals, or defining the desired end state, then focusing on directing the rider and motivating the elephant. Change is hard, but the potential for positive outcomes can be amplified by aligning a calm and focused mind, a tempered disposition, and strategic direction.

References

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AI Statement

Grammarly was used to assist with grammar and refine overall tone.

AUTHORED BY:

Heather Darling, MEd, PMP
Manager of Research Programs
Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Mark D. Cannon, PhD
Professor of the Practice
Vanderbilt University

REGULATORY & COMPLIANCE OVERSIGHT

An Overview of Strategic Evaluations in Research Administration: Auditing, Monitoring, Analytics, Program Evaluations, and Beyond

By Rani Muthukrishnan, PhD; Shipra Mittal, MS, MBA, & Anita Trupiano, MS

Research administrators must prioritize moving beyond compliance—into a new, all-encompassing model of continuous improvement. The use of existing tools to gather information can inform strategic decision-making and provide valuable insights into the data being generated from these models.

Most research administrators are aware of the importance of compliance. However, there is a difference between performing a task correctly vs. doing it well. In order to embrace this distinction, every administrator must be able to use any data that is available to them—through third-party feedback, peer reviews, or self-evaluation—to ensure not only adherence to rules and regulations, but a commitment to progress and growth.

Research administrators approach any evaluation as an 'audit. Why? Until recently, the success of research administration was measured in terms of compliance. Due to the recent shake-up in the grant world, research administrators are now looking for a new central dogma of their work. They are looking for ways to use existing evaluation materials to inform their decisions, because, in reality, compliance does not operate in a vacuum. It is a complex set of institutional investments in infrastructure, training, support, and opportunities with the heady mix of skills, knowledge, and the field of specialty of the investigator.



Strategic Evaluation

Often, the first question research administrators ask is: Did we follow the rules? This is a compliance-centered question and unlikely to deliver the strategic information required for continuous improvement. If we pivot to question the system instead, we are likely to yield better results. For example: What is the system? Is the system actually delivering what we seek? How are we measuring outcomes, and how do we know for sure?

This set of questions expands the scope of compliance and brings in real-time monitoring, data analytics, and elements of program evaluation under one charge to provide more informed operational decisions. In the same way reviewing the budget is an indisputable part of the process, compliance is no longer a "necessary burden"—it has become a core part of management.

The strategic evaluation uses a collection of related activities, each answering a different kind of central question:

- **Auditing:** Are we in compliance with policies, regulations, and controls?
- **Monitoring:** How are we performing right now, on an ongoing basis?
- **Analytics:** What does the data tell us about trends, risks, and opportunities?
- **Program evaluation:** Did this specific initiative hit its goals?
- **Process improvement review:** Where are the bottlenecks, and how can we streamline the workflow?
- **Benchmarking:** How are we performing compared to peer institutions or our own past numbers?

In the world of Research administrators, these approaches might even complement one another. For instance, a routine audit might uncover a documentation issue, which might be confirmation from a process review that identified a workflow bottleneck.

A full program evaluation may be required when multiple bottlenecks are identified. Using a full suite of approaches, we can create a clear, actionable picture of how we can accelerate our research support.

A basic framework of a series of questions can guide the daunting process:

1. **Define the pain point or pressing question.** Start with a specific question: Are proposal timelines improving? Are faculty using the research development services we offer? Is our compliance training program changing behavior, or just generating completion certificates?
2. **Identify measures.** Gather only the data that directly answers your question, whether that's turnaround times, satisfaction scores, or error rates.
3. **Analyze and interpret.** This step is harder as we have to make meaning of the numbers: Is this trending? For how long? Is it seasonal? Is it consistent in one part of the process?
4. **Implement improvements.** The outputs should be clear, actionable items: Is a process redesign required? Do we need to reconsider resource allocation? Can it be fixed by a training initiative? Or does the policy need a change.
5. **Measure impact.** Change is only efficient if it solves the pain point. Did performance actually improve? Or did another metric improve? What lessons can inform us as we move forward?

Auditing: The Foundation of Accountability

Research administration functions on assigned responsibilities. These responsibilities create accountability across departments in an institution. For example, in the audit of a sponsored award, fiduciary compliance reviews, effort reporting assessments, subrecipient monitoring, cost-allowability reviews, and research compliance all provide the necessary information, as they are accountable in the areas of their responsibility. Further, Research administrators must be aware that under federal cost principles, charges above a certain expenditure threshold subject the institution to an annual Single Audit, which is then reviewed by a cognizant federal agency and posted publicly through the Federal Audit Clearinghouse (CASRAI, n.d.).

For Research administrators, the strategic opportunity for programmatic improvements comes with the post-audit findings. A finding of "documentation was incomplete for cost transfers" may lead to the question: why does that keep happening, and what would be the best fix? Should we provide training, enact a system change, chart a clearer policy, or employ additional staff? The most valuable audit findings aren't the problems identified; they're the improvements implemented afterwards.

The foundation of every audit is made up of regulatory references and grant requirements published by the FDA, eCFR, OHRP, NIH, and ICH/GCP. Most auditors use platforms such as Archeer, ServiceNow GRC, AuditBoard, or Onspring to track findings, assign corrective actions, and maintain audit trails.

Monitoring for Early Action

Monitoring provides an opportunity to take preventative measures against potential breakdowns. Through custom dashboards, administrators can track several parameters simultaneously. When used appropriately, this can serve as a detection system by turning operational data into information that provides Research administrators with precise data to act upon.

Examples of monitoring can be found in several universities. The University of Virginia's Office of Sponsored Programs maintains dashboards for proposal tracking, award setup, negotiation, and modification processes, alongside a separate dashboard built with institutional research and

> The strategic payoff comes from pushing into diagnostic and predictive territory, where data stops being a report and starts being a decision-support tool.

analytics for administrators and PIs (University of Virginia, Office of Sponsored Programs, n.d.). Meanwhile, Washington University in St. Louis utilizes dashboards covering funding trends and proposal submissions that support data-driven strategic planning rather than just after-the-fact reporting (Washington University in St. Louis, n.d.). Emory publishes monthly pre- and post-award performance metrics directly to its research community as part of its newsletter (Emory University, n.d.), and the University of Southern California partnered with its institutional research office to build public-facing dashboards on sponsored awards and expenditures (University of South Carolina, Office of the Vice President for Research, n.d.).

Since audit findings may lead to a costly fix and often come with a monitoring clause, dashboards are a proactive alternative, allowing administrators to monitor emerging issues such as proposal bottlenecks, closeout backlogs, spikes in COI disclosures, and clinical trial results in real time, as well as solutions to fix those potential issues.

Depending on the size and complexity of the programs, monitoring dashboards can be built using existing systems such as:

- **Power BI / Tableau:** General-purpose business-intelligence platforms most offices already licensed through IT; well suited for building proposal, award, and closeout dashboards on top of existing ERP or eRA data.
- **Cayuse Research Suite:** A research administration platform with built-in dashboards for proposal routing, award status, and compliance tracking.
- **InfoEd Global (Sponsored Programs Administration):** An eRA system offering configurable dashboards across the proposal-to-award lifecycle.
- **Kuali Research:** A cloud-based research administration system with reporting modules for monitoring proposal and award pipelines.
- **Smartsheet:** A lightweight option for offices without BI infrastructure to track workflow status and flag bottlenecks in near real time.

Analytics: Turning Data into Decisions

It helps to think about analytics in four increasingly sophisticated tiers for measuring funding success or strategic investment:

- **Descriptive:** What happened? Proposal volume, award trends, funding sources by sponsor.
- **Diagnostic:** Why did it happen? Bottlenecks in a particular approval step, staffing gaps, seasonal workload spikes.
- **Predictive:** What might happen? Forecasting workload ahead of a major deadline cycle, anticipating compliance risk in a portfolio of new awards.
- **Prescriptive:** What should we do about it? Reallocating staff, redesigning a process, adjusting internal deadlines.

Most research offices are comfortable at the descriptive level, and that's what most existing dashboards deliver. The strategic payoff comes from pushing into diagnostic and predictive territory,

where data stops being a report and starts being a decision-support tool.

Tools that help organizations progress from descriptive reporting to diagnostic and predictive analytics include:

- **Power BI / Tableau:** These platforms can do more than monitor performance through dashboards. They can also help research offices examine trends, compare groups, and identify patterns that may influence future results.
- **Elsevier SciVal:** Institutions can use SciVal to compare their research activity and funding performance with that of peer institutions, including comparisons at the departmental level.
- **Clarivate InCites:** Provides citation and funding data that can help research offices evaluate performance and understand how their institution compares with others.
- **Digital Science Dimensions:** By bringing together information about grants, publications, and research outcomes, Dimensions can help offices explore funding patterns and better understand the factors behind them.
- **Academic Analytics:** Many research offices use this platform to review faculty research activity, compare productivity, and support institutional planning.
- **R or Python (with institutional data):** Research offices with the appropriate staff and access to institutional data may choose to develop their own analytical models. For example, these tools can be used to anticipate workloads or future staffing and resource needs.

Program Evaluations: Measuring Impact

The program evaluation asks the question: is this specific initiative—a research development office, a faculty mentoring program, a limited-submission process, an internal seed-funding program, a shared research core—achieving what it was designed to achieve? Program Evaluation is a well-developed field and often uses the Context-Input-Process-Product (CIPP) model developed by Daniel Stufflebeam, which offers a useful framework to answer this question (Stufflebeam, 2003; Better Evaluation, n.d.).

Program evaluators examine the needs and goals that justified the program in the first place (context), the resources and approach chosen to meet them (input), how well the program was actually implemented (process), and what outcomes, both intended and unintended, resulted (product). IACUC, IBC, and IRB functions have federal checklists that support regular program evaluation. For programs under research administration programs (which are often funded on a yearly basis), it is important to posit: "Is this needed? Is this working?"

Program evaluation processes may use an array of products including: surveys of faculty and staff, interviews or focus groups, analysis of usage and outcome data, and, where feasible, a return-on-investment calculation comparing program cost to measurable benefit (additional proposals submitted, awards won, time saved). This approach is consistent with applications of the CIPP framework to higher-education programs more broadly (Zhang et al., 2011).

Many institutions have tools for surveys (e.g. Qualtrics, REDcap) that can be used for program evaluation. When interviews or focus groups are part of the evaluation, teams can use NVivo to organize transcripts and identify recurring themes. Basic financial measures, such as comparing program costs with measurable benefits, can often be calculated in Excel. Offices may also use logic models or CIPP-based templates, including resources available through BetterEvaluation, to apply a consistent evaluation process across programs.

It is often beneficial to build a culture of self-evaluation in every program. Research administrators can use some of the practical starting points for integrating self-evaluation in their programs:

- Start small, with one focused question. If the question is bigger, partner with institutional research, finance, and IT for data infrastructure and analytical expertise.
- Develop shared definitions that can be adopted across institutions so that "proposal cycle time" or "award turnaround" means the same thing across units.
- Build a culture of self-evaluation that everyone can do and share the professional-development resources such as those offered by the Society of Research Administrators International (SRAI, n.d.).
- Findings from self-evaluation can be used constructively for programmatic improvements.

Evaluations often localize the obstacles, which can show up as inconsistent or messy data, limited staff time, and resistance to change, while providing the space and resources for developing creative solutions to overcome said obstacles.

Process Improvement Scenario

Let us consider a common scenario: faculty let research administration know a week or less before the deadline that the proposal is due. Most would agree that this is not an ideal scenario. A well-defined policy with a clear timeline that is widely distributed among faculty could have prevented the lack of proactive communication. While t there are exceptions (for example, late funding opportunity announcements, a delayed notice of involvement from the collaborating lead PI at other institutes, etc.), if there is an 80-90% follow-through rate on standard timelines, then the process is working. Thus, a proposal intake form can help track timelines and help maintain cross-team communications.

Five Leading Questions Every RA Should Ask

- What are we trying to achieve?
- How do we know if we are successful?
- What data informs our decisions?
- What opportunities for improvement exist?
- How will we measure the impact of changes?

Future Directions: AI and Advanced Analytics

With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in research administration, newer tools are available to collect information. For example, AI can help staff review award data for patterns, estimate workload before a major deadline, and build dashboards programmed to track activity and capture unusual patterns. Depending on the AI tool, some can also help organize and review written comments from surveys or program feedback.

While these features can save time, AI is not a substitute for human input. Research offices will still need to know what data is being used, who has access to them, and how the results are produced. As technology continues to advance, responsibility for the final decision should remain on human shoulders, to ensure that responses and outcomes are ethical and compliant.

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AUTHORED BY:

Rani Muthukrishnan, PhD
Director of Research Compliance
Texas A&M University–San Antonio
SRAI Catalyst Feature Editor

Shipra Mittal, MS, MBA
Senior Grants Manager
New York University
SRAI Catalyst Feature Editor

Anita Trupiano, MS
Program Development Analyst
Cancer Institute of New Jersey Rutgers
SRAI Catalyst Feature Editor

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GRANT MANAGEMENT & FINANCIAL OVERSIGHT

⏮ FROM THE ARCHIVES

So Your PI Has Never Read a Ledger

A Pocket Guide to Optimizing Financial Reviews

By Laura W. Sheehan

How do you run financial review meetings that keep brilliant-but-budget-averse PIs engaged, compliant, and truly involved? As research administrators, it's our job to figure out what information is actually worth their time.

"So, what exactly is an encumbrance?"

This question took me aback, not because of the question itself, but rather because it was asked by a senior Principal Investigator (PI) who had been leading studies for over 30 years. This same PI had ostensibly been attending monthly financial review meetings for all that time. And yet, here we were, reviewing her ledgers, and she didn't know what an encumbrance was. For those not familiar with encumbrances, this is a way to reserve funding for a future expense on a financial ledger and serve as a placeholder to ensure that funds are not accidentally spent on something else.

And it got me thinking... Our PIs are brilliant. Most of them have an MD or PhD (and some have both) and have probably forgotten more about their research subject than most of us will ever know. And yet, their understanding of financial management is so often insufficient.

This gap in knowledge isn't necessarily their fault. If you look at the types of training that PIs attend, rarely is it geared towards training PIs on understanding and reading grant reports. But they did sign up to be responsible stewards of their award, and that means they need to be able to read a ledger, or at least the parts that matter.

And that's where we come in: as research administrators, it's our job to figure out which parts of the ledger are worth their attention and teach them what they need to know.

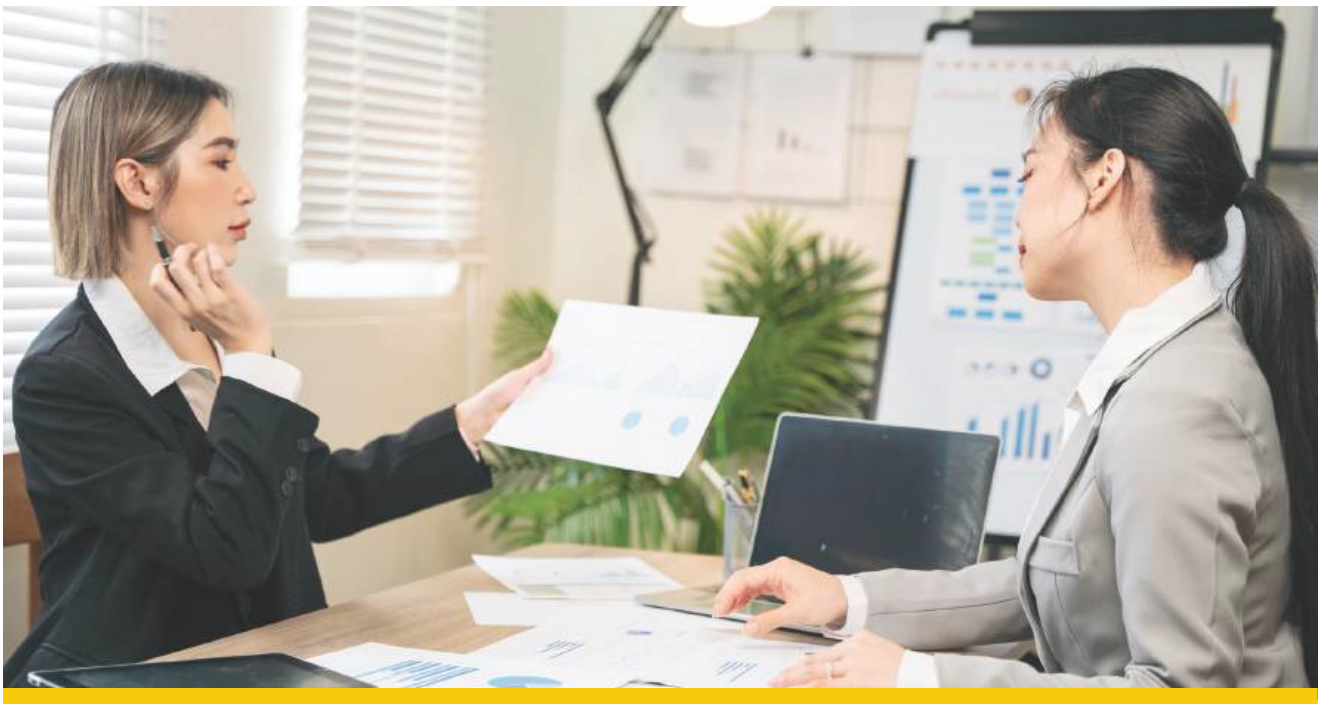
The Easy Part

Most PIs care deeply about the overall health of their award: How much have we spent? How much do we have left? Are we on track? These are the questions most PIs want to know the answer to. A simple summary (awarded, expended, amount remaining, and percent of the project period elapsed) gives the PI a "vital signs" snapshot before you dive deeper. If the burn rate looks healthy, great. If they've spent 80% of the budget with 40% of the project period left, that's the conversation to have first. However, you can't stop here (even if the PI wants to). The PI has a deeper obligation to manage their funds appropriately that go beyond this "bottom-line thinking."

The Hard Part

Work with the PI to ensure they understand the different sections of the budget and don't be afraid to explain things that may seem obvious. Accounting language is not always intuitive; be ready to explain things like appropriation and YTD (year-to-date), and any other terms or acronyms they may not be familiar with.

As PI, they are responsible for ensuring that all expenses on their awards are correct and applicable to the project. This means that they need to take the time to review their funds down to the line item. Fund Managers can make sure that laboratory supplies were budgeted on a specific award, but it's the PI who knows whether that beaker was actually used for the project in question. If you're meeting monthly (which you should be), reviewing all expenditures should not be too overwhelming and will help catch errors early.



We should also walk our PIs through the personnel reports and ask them to confirm that the monthly effort charged to the award reflects the time team members are dedicating to the project. The statistician who is split 50/50 on two awards, but who spent the last three months dedicating all of their time to the project that ends this quarter? That needs to be fixed, and fast.

The Stuff You Can Ignore

You do not need to walk a PI through indirect cost calculations, cost transfer history, or the nuances of object code categories. Save that for your own review. Information overload is the enemy of engagement, and an overwhelmed PI is one who stops showing up to financial review meetings altogether.

The Really Hard Part

Meet with the PI monthly. Seriously. Get your financial review meetings on the calendar as a standing monthly meeting and hold the line on that cadence. Cost Accounting Standards require that errors be identified and corrected within 90 days. If you are only meeting quarterly, you are cutting it too close, and that assumes your PI attends every single meeting, we all know they will not. When a PI cancels (and they will), a monthly meeting schedule means you are still connecting at least every 60 days. That keeps you comfortably within the 90-day compliance window. A quarterly schedule with one cancellation suddenly becomes a five-month gap, and now you have a problem. Monthly meetings also keep the volume of information manageable. Reviewing one month of transactions is a 15-minute conversation. Reviewing three months of transactions can feel like an audit.

The Bottom Line

PIs do not need to become financial experts. They need to trust that their award is healthy, confirm that their expenses are accurate, and verify that their people are being paid correctly. Build your financial reviews around those three goals, keep the meetings short, keep them monthly, and keep the jargon to a minimum. Your PI will thank you, and so will your compliance record.

AI Statement

I used AI (Claude) to compose the teaser, help with the title, and to tighten up a few of the paragraphs for length/clarity. But the content and vast majority of the text is my own.

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AUTHORED BY:

Laura W. Sheehan
Manager of Research Administration
Department of Family Medicine
University of California, Los Angeles

COMMUNITY & MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Grant Writing at the End of History

By Shawn Sumrall

> *"Expect the end of the world. Laugh.*
> *Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful*
> *though you have considered all the facts."*
>
> *– Wendell Berry*

The world is ending. Sorry if you're just hearing about this now. I was told all about it a few years ago myself, but it appears to me that the news has spread more slowly than you might imagine. Otherwise, there are a lot of people for whom the knowledge of the "total end of everything" is having a very strange effect. We all keep going to work, for one thing. The stock market keeps climbing, for another. "Great," I hear you say, "What does the end of history have to do with grant writing?" Sure, okay. We'll get to that.

I won my first grant in my sixth month on the job. The project and award amount are lost to my memory; What has stayed with me is the knowledge that my success equated to failure for someone else—another person in a different state, a different city, a different cubicle that may have looked similar to my own. It meant that the population of people my healthcare organization serves would receive provisions, while another population in, say, Pittsburgh, did not. And this is one of the largest, most sophisticated mechanisms of wealth distribution in human history. (Maybe it gets better than this, but we'll probably never see it. Cool!)

Sometime after that, in late 2022, I sat at my desk scribbling some thoughts down on a couple of Post-its that I have since lost. They said important things like "meritocracy" and "a priori"—words that have little to no meaning at the end of history. But I realized my position. I'm a grant writer, not a congressional candidate. My idealisms have the comfortable advantage of only ever existing in my head or, probably too frequently for the workplace, in the ears of my coworkers.

So, you asked me why I'm talking about the end of the world as we know it, when this is supposed to be an article about grant writing. Well, here it is.

If you are like me, you might think about all this stuff (the concept of existence, why we are all here, the inevitability of the end) somewhere between two and a thousand times a day. Otherwise, like all the other people who haven't heard the news, you focus on the tasks at hand: You sit down and knock out a budget narrative, a paragraph on sustainability; you meticulously edit a Statement of Need. Then an executive order dictates that you can't use words like "equity" or "barrier" in applications anymore. Great. Maybe you trauma dump to your coworker about politics or distract yourself with a 30-minute (OK, like two-hour) Joy Division Wikipedia rabbit hole. You send emails that are anxiously crafted to avoid making another person feel at fault for something they clearly did wrong. Then you think, "Oh, but maybe it's my fault because I forgot to send them that second reminder email." Maybe you even say that out loud on a Webex call.

This is normal. This is how it all gets done at the end. It is one of the most incredible achievements of human evolution—to take impending doom and the knowledge of your absolute cosmic insignificance, and push them aside long enough to reflect on how you might make another person feel in an email.

Down here at the bottom of the org chart, we grant writers feel the political changes like the citizens in *Richard III* feel the imminent succession/usurpation of the throne—like a storm or seasonal change, a natural phenomenon to be endured and, hopefully, outlasted. If "wise men put on their cloaks"[1] when the "clouds roll in," what are we to do?

1. **Keep your head down.**

   Most of us can't afford the blowback if we decide to speak too loudly. Remember, the storm blows over. We are still doing work that matters to people. There are people out there securing funds for the next technological advancement in human well-being.

2. **Give yourself time/space to process difficult emotions.**

   When the weight of this stuff gets to feel overwhelming, TAKE A BREAK! Shut your brain off for ten minutes. Do breathing exercises. If you have the option, step away from the desk. Go for a walk outside. Get a drink of water. You're not an anomaly for feeling these things.

3. **Find your friends and help each other.**

   Many of us probably wish that these resources were available with a more cooperative spirit guiding their distribution. That spirit starts with us. Remind each other of your mutual interdependence. Don't get caught up in personal successes and competition to the extent that it damages relationships with coworkers or organizational interlocutors. When your friends need help, you help them. Consult on a budget, assist with a statement of need, share helpful resources, be encouraging. Voice complaints and concerns with each other; this is an act of solidarity and community building.

The world might be ending (fictitiously, in this article, or for real, because, you know, climate change), but everything ends. That does not mean our work is insignificant. We may all be cogs in a machine, but we get to decide how that machine operates. We are one small part of a whole, but we are human.

Take it from me, a random stranger you've never met: You are not alone.

[1]-Shakespeare, William. *Richard III.* Act 2. Sc. 4. FTLN 1462.

AUTHORED BY:

Shawn Sumrall
Assistant Director of Pre-Award Management
The Health & Hospital Corporation of Marion County

GRANT MANAGEMENT & FINANCIAL OVERSIGHT

The Machine and Me: An Introduction to AI and Its Use in Research Administration

By Robyn Honey

Increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) tools are being used to manage workloads—helping streamline processes, reducing administrative burden, and supporting consistent, reliable outcomes. This article introduces key AI literacy concepts, outlines ethical frameworks for responsible AI use, and offers practical guidance for integrating AI into post-award workflows.

Research administrators are increasingly expected to manage larger workloads with less time, fewer resources, and fewer colleagues to share the burden. At the same time, the expansion of the research enterprise brings increasingly nuanced regulations, sponsor requirements, and organizational obligations. Together, these pressures push administrators to identify tools that extend their administrative capacity without sacrificing the accuracy, compliance, and audit readiness demanded in the field.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools are increasingly being positioned to meet this need by streamlining processes, reducing administrative burden, and supporting consistent, reliable outcomes. Yet, practical guidance on responsible and effective use of AI in the field remains scarce. For the purposes of this article, unless discussing the broader history or field of AI, the term "AI" will refer specifically to generative artificial intelligence (GenAI).

SCAN FOR COMPANION GUIDE

What is AI?

While AI can feel like magic, it is just a tool grounded in statistical probability and computer engineering. This foundation allows it to mimic human learning, understanding, and thought processes.Although its performance can be shockingly impressive, it is vital to remember that AI does not "understand" anything: it generates responses by predicting the most probable sequence of information based on its training and available information.

Despite recent breakthroughs that have thrust AI into mainstream dialogue, the technology has been steadily evolving and in use for nearly 80 years. Early AI began in the 1950s with rule-based data systems that relied on predefined instructions to solve problems and make simple predictions. Over time, this has evolved into machine learning (ML), which trains models on historical data and does not require specific programming for every scenario. In the 2010s, deep learning advanced ML further by using layered neural networks to recognize complex patterns in large datasets, making it exceptionally useful for processing non-standardized formats, such as images and speech patterns. Most recently, this growth has produced generative AI (GenAI), which builds on deep learning to generate new content—like text, images, or even computer code—based on learned patterns.

A helpful way to understand AI is to think of it like a young child who is learning about the world. Adults might tell the child "That's a car," but they only learn what a car is after seeing many examples. Through examples, they identify 'car' patterns like wheels, lights, and movement, while also learning what is similar to but not quite a car (e.g., bicycles, shopping carts). By experiencing more examples, their predictions become more nuanced and correct. AI works similarly, but instead of real-world experiences, it learns from data. By training on large amounts of data, a model identifies recurring patterns and associated relationships, which allows it to make predictions about unseen datasets and, eventually, generate original information. The quality and quantity of training data directly influence how accurate and nuanced predictions can become (Figure 1).

AI Risks: GIGO, Model Limitations, and Human Reliance

The risks of AI use fall into three buckets: "junk in, junk out," performance limitations, and human interpretation of and reliance on AI. First, the longstanding IT adage "junk in, junk out" (GIGO) is exceptionally true when it comes to a user's inputs into an AI tool. If the data put into the machine is inaccurate, incomplete, or otherwise skewed, then the output could reflect those flaws.

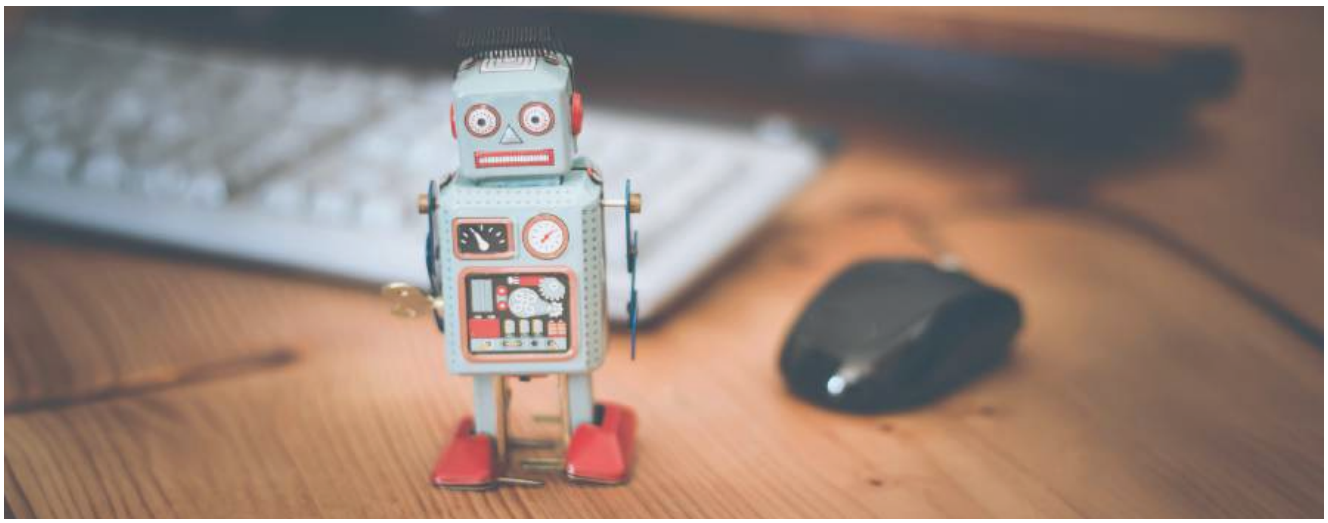
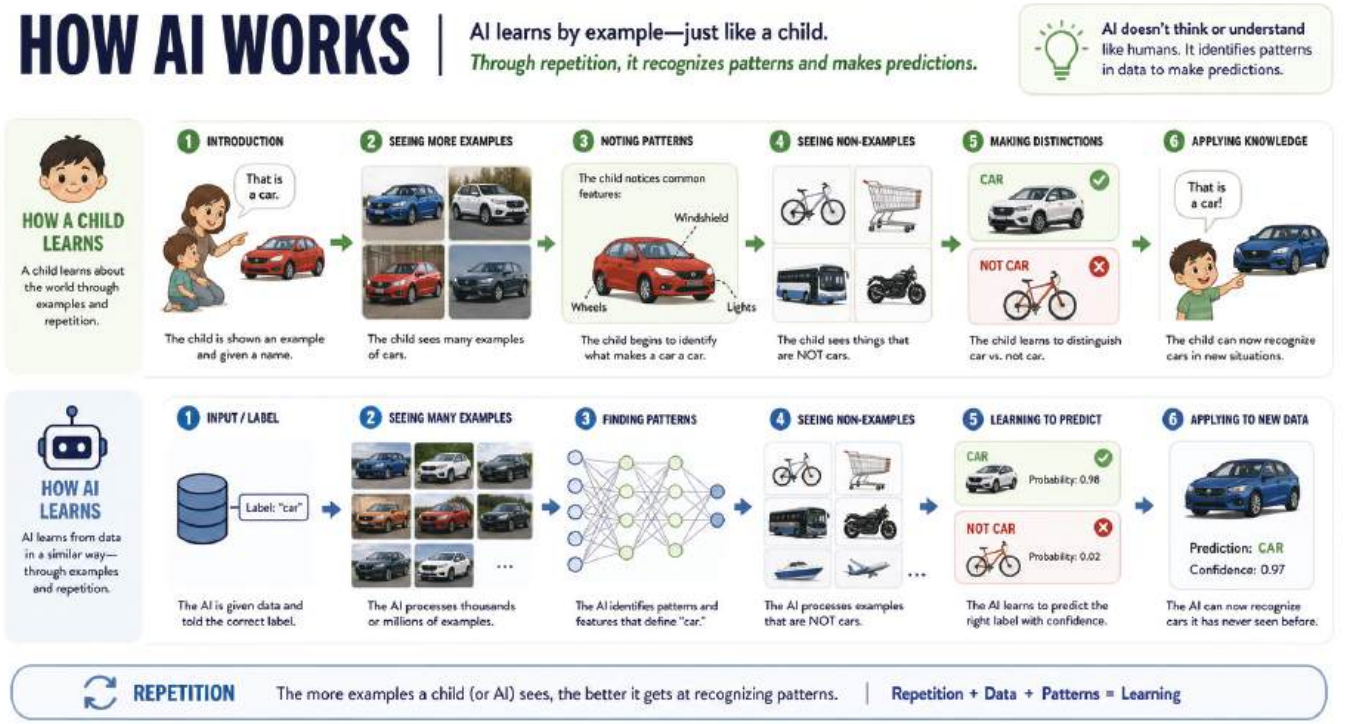


Figure 1.
Comparing human learning patterns with AI learning patterns (Original Content Generated Using OpenAI's ChatGPT 5.5)



Ensuring input accuracy is critical, especially in highly complex areas or in fields where nuance is key. For example, if a contract containing incorrect project dates is used as a source document for a query, then any materials generated based on those documents will incorporate that error, potentially affecting all further analyses or outputs.

Secondly, AI performs three key functions: (1) interpreting the user's prompt, (2) drawing on learned patterns and available information, and (3) generating a response. This process creates a key limitation: the machine is likely to provide an output even when the available information does not sufficiently support a response. Even when the model lacks sufficient information (or the prompt includes incorrect assumptions), the model may generate a convincing but incorrect answer rather than admit to a gap in knowledge. In generative AI, this tendency is called a "hallucination," the phenomenon in which the model produces information that appears plausible but is unsupported, fabricated, or inconsistent with the available evidence. In this regard, AI is much like the human brain in its commitment to completing the job of finding meaningful patterns—such as faces in random objects or movement in the empty darkness—even when the information does not support that finding.

Finally, as with any information, the value and reliability of AI outputs depend on the human judgment applied to them. AI is designed to find a statistically plausible output to fulfill a user's request based on information available to the model, not to meticulously ensure every idea is fundamentally truthful. As such, human oversight—or Human-in-the-Loop (HITL)—remains essential. Users must be able and willing to critically evaluate AI outputs against existing knowledge and independently reliable sources.

When users lack knowledge, discernment, or willingness to conduct human evaluation, reliance on AI increases the risk of inaccurate or misleading information being accepted as fact. In research administration, this human oversight can present

itself in a multitude of ways: for example, verifying AI answers against award documents, regulations, sponsor guidance, and professional expertise. Remember: the higher the consequences of an error, the greater the level of human intervention and verification that is required.

Beginning to Incorporate AI in Research Administration

Based on this information, then, what are some excellent uses of AI in research administration? What can you start doing now to incorporate AI into your workflow? The first step in using AI to improve your administrative life is to identify which tasks you perform regularly that are standardized, static, and rule-based. These are the best tasks with which to begin your AI experimentation.

- Standardized—Processes that have a definitive workflow and expected outputs. For example, reading a Call for Proposals and identifying the necessary proposal documents, the timeline, and the requirements of the awardee.
- Static—Tasks with answers that do not change greatly over time. For example, calculating budget vs. actuals on an award with predefined rates and allowable costs.
- Rule Based—Tasks with a definitive 'right' answer. For example, calculating total budget based on the budget justification and notice of award.

Incorporating tasks that are standardized, static, and rule-based into your early AI workflows will allow you to engage with the tool while learning its boundaries and your own preferences. Once you become more familiar with how AI integrates into your life, the tasks you give it can become more dynamic by requiring the tool to engage problem-solving and decision-making skills: "The PI has a need for (equipment), but the sponsor's terms are ambiguous around capital outlay. Read the award documents and give some advice on what we should do."

What is the future of AI in Research Administration?

AI, although intended to reduce administrative burden, introduces a new psychosocial burden that has bled into the workplace: adoption pressure, job displacement anxiety, and ethical discomfort, to name a few. As the progress in AI development continues to accelerate, research administrators will likely see growth in AI-assisted compliance monitoring, predictive analytics tools, and further AI integration into common enterprise resource planning tools (ERPs), such as Workday and Ellucian Banner. Nevertheless, AI adoption is and must always remain a choice. Individuals have the right to use AI to their own comfort and the duty to use AI responsibly.

To prepare for this growth, administrators should carefully define their own AI boundaries and journey:

- What training would you need to feel AI literate? Where can you receive it?

Table 1.
Task Nuance Scale

Static →	Standardized →	Context-Dependent →	Judgement-Based
The rules and correct answer are well-established	The process is standardized, but the answer is dynamic based on input. "If/then"	The answer depends on the input entirely. This requires contextual understanding and problem solving.	There is no 'fixed' answer. This leans on interpretation and professional judgment.
"Calculate F&A based on 55.5% MTDC"	"Review this proposal checklist and check off completed tasks"	"Determine if this expense is allowable based on the award documents and applicable rules.	"Help me negotiate a solution with the PI based on the email chain and award documents attached"

- Everyone: AI Literacy Basics, ERP-specific AI training.
- Financial Administration: AI training specifically for Finance and Accounting; ERP-specific AI, such as incorporations in Workday or Banner.
- Pre-Award and Proposals: Building AI-Ready Documentation, AI for word processing and Adobe.
- Compliance: AI and Intellectual Property, AI and Academic Integrity

- To what extent do you want to interact with AI? In what ways will you use it? *Remember to ask: is the output accurate? How will I evaluate accuracy?*
  - Low Risk: drafting emails, reformatting information, creating templates, brainstorming ideas, summarizing non-sensitive materials.
  - Process Assistance: Extracting information from award/proposal documents, comparing information, creating checklists, categorizing transactions, performing calculations
  - Decision support: researching regulations, analyzing terms and conditions, evaluating cost allowability, identifying areas of compliance risk, suggesting courses of action.

    Ask: What role am I giving AI—assistant, partner, analyst, agent, co-worker?

- What are your hard boundaries with AI use? How will you work to enforce them?
  - What information is acceptable to enter into AI?
  - What determinations can be made with AI?
  - How autonomous do you want your AI to be?
  - How will you communicate your AI boundaries?
  - How will you learn others' AI boundaries?
  - What controls will you have in place to prevent you from crossing boundaries?

- What is your institutional policy on AI use? How does it impact your work?
  - What AI tools are approved at your institution?
  - What are the rules for data types at your institution?
  - Does the AI tool you are using collect your data for training?

- What information are you permitted to input into AI tools?
  - What kind of information are you entering: public data (low risk), published policy, institutional data, unpublished or confidential information, personally identifiable information (name, DOB, ID numbers), potentially harmful data (human subject information, personnel information, export-control data)?
  - Does your institution classify what data is acceptable to enter into AI?

If you are new to realm of AI, try experimenting with a few tools on low risk use cases, such as drafting emails or summarizing paragraphs. If you are an early adopter of AI, explore more advanced uses by experimenting with prompt engineering. Be mindful to define how you will evaluate outputs prior to engaging with AI. Understanding how, when, and why to use AI tools not only benefits your workflow but also positions you as a strategic leader in the field.

For definitions and further information on AI, as well as resources cited in this article, please visit the companion guide at qrco.de/SRAICatalyst-10-26_MachineAndMeCcompanionGuide. or scan the QR code on page 27. For questions, feel free to email me at honeyr@uncw.edu.

AI Disclosure Statement

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used, including Google Gemini 3.7 Flash and OpenAI ChatGPT 5.5, to assist in the structural organization, infographic drafts, and copyediting of this article. All AI-generated content was critically reviewed, fact-checked, and edited by the author to ensure technical accuracy and compliance with research administration standards. The author maintains full responsibility for the final content and conclusions of this work.

AUTHORED BY:

Robyn Honey
Grants and Contracts Officer
University of North Carolina Wilmington

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COMMUNITY & MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Utilizing Research Administration at Foundations for Community Engagement & Outreach

By Marilyn Marshall, MBA

Many of us already volunteer in our communities or with nationally recognized nonprofit organizations that we hold near and dear to our hearts. Imagine collaborating with these organizations to generate positive community impact and create meaningful change by applying your research administration expertise.

Foundations of all types and sizes can benefit from research administrators in higher education and academic organizations. There are many different types of IRS-designated federal tax-exempt organizations, including nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations. Organizations described in section 501(c)(3) are commonly referred to as charitable organizations (Internal Revenue Service, n.d.-a). Whether a research administrator wants to shift gears to work at a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization or volunteer with one, they can showcase their research administration expertise. It is recommended that research administrators first learn as much as possible about the organization from external sources. How is the organization structured? What is its size? Does it employ staff, or is it entirely volunteer-run? Does it currently have 501(c)(3) IRS designation? Is obtaining this designation something the organization desires, or is it already in process? Is the organization also designated by its state as a nonprofit organization? What are its main goals and vision? The answers to these questions may dictate how you interact with each nonprofit organization.

Table 1.
Main Principles of the GAAP Framework

Main Principles of the GAAP Framework	
Principle of regularity	The organization's accounting adheres to the standards of GAAP.
Principle of consistency	The organization's accounting practices are consistent & comparable across every reporting period.
Principle of sincerity	The organization's accounting is an accurate & correct depiction of the financials.
Principle of permanence of methods	The organization's accounting practices are constant across financial periods.
Principle of non-compensation	All aspects of an organization's performance are fully reported with no prospect of debt compensation.
Principle of prudence	The accounting entries are timely & realistic.
Principle of continuity	Short-term & long-term classifications of financial information are based on the idea that the entity will remain in business.
Principle of periodicity	The accounting periods are regular, routine & consistent.
Principle of materiality	Assets are valued at cost & all financial reports are based on truthful information.
Principle of utmost good faith	Every person involved in the accounting process is acting honestly.

One of the most straightforward ways to serve nonprofits is to serve on the organization's board of directors. Depending on the nonprofit's bylaws, this might involve being elected by members, serving in an officer position, or simply assisting board members where possible based on the organization's needs and your expertise. Many nonprofits do their best to maintain lean administrative structures because of their limited bandwidth and capacity. Research administrators can contribute by developing or refining the nonprofit's policies and procedures, assisting with external audits of financial records, navigating federal systems, supporting fundraising and capital campaigns, and applying for external funding when applicable.

In my experience, I have pivoted from managing research administration in higher education to collaborating consistently with nonprofit organizations in my community. These organizations have ranged in size from small to large, and these collaborations have been among the most fulfilling work of my career. For most of these organizations, I first became a member simply because of my interest in their events, activities, and community outreach. Each organization had a different mission and vision, ranging from alleviating food insecurity and supporting local entrepreneurship to promoting environmental stewardship.

I have applied my experience as a research administrator to collaborate with each nonprofit in a variety of ways. If a nonprofit has 501(c)(3) designation and gross receipts of $50,000 or more, it is required to file Form 990-series return (Internal Revenue Service, n.d.-b). Many of these organizations conduct financial audits, which may be outsourced to a professional firm or conducted by volunteers and members. I have participated in several of these audits, and a research administrator with strong post-award financial skills can lend their expertise in this capacity by helping ensure that Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) are followed. See Table 1 for the main principles of the GAAP framework (Office of Justice Programs, n.d.).

Applying for external funding with a nonprofit organization is another area in which research administrators can lend their expertise. I have found it is helpful to develop a small working group or committee of organization and board members to assist with this endeavor. Repeatedly, I have heard participants express a desire to learn more about external funding and grants. I believe that anyone,

from a novice to an expert in external funding, can contribute to this effort. When forming this group, it is important to recognize each individual's experience level, capacity, strengths, and challenges. It has been rewarding to collaborate with groups with varying levels of expertise, and I believe this collective approach has led to greater success in securing external funding to benefit our local community. I have often had the opportunity to work with technical writers, grant writers, CPAs, other financial professionals, and project managers on these teams, which has provided a valuable and enriching experience.

With support from an external funding committee, a research administrator can manage program priorities, navigate competing deadlines, determine eligibility, and develop proposals to support nonprofits. The teams I have worked with have naturally gravitated toward pre- or post-award management roles, and it has been extremely beneficial to have multiple people working together throughout the process. Foundation grants to nonprofits can range from a few hundred dollars to millions, and there are often more opportunities available than an organization has the capacity to pursue. A research administrator can help guide the team in narrowing down eligible opportunities within an acceptable time frame to achieve organizational goals. The team usually begins by reviewing a funder's IRS Form 990 through the publicly searchable database (Internal Revenue Service, n.d.-c). From this form, we can determine how much funding a funder has recently awarded and which organizations received it. The form can also help identify the funder's areas of funding priority. For example, if a funder consistently awards grants to organizations in the arts and humanities sector while the nonprofit you work with is more closely aligned with human services, the investment of time and resources required to submit a proposal may not be worthwhile. It is best to strategically pursue external funding from foundations that are most likely to support your nonprofit organization's proposal.

I encourage fellow research administrators to volunteer with or explore opportunities to collaborate with a nonprofit organization in whatever capacity they have available. The fundamentals and experience in research administration can be applied to nonprofit organizations, allowing research administrators to expand their networks and expertise while contributing to organizations whose values align with their own. Working or volunteering as a research administrator with nonprofit organizations not only increases their organizational capacity but also allows us to give back to our community through outreach and community engagement.

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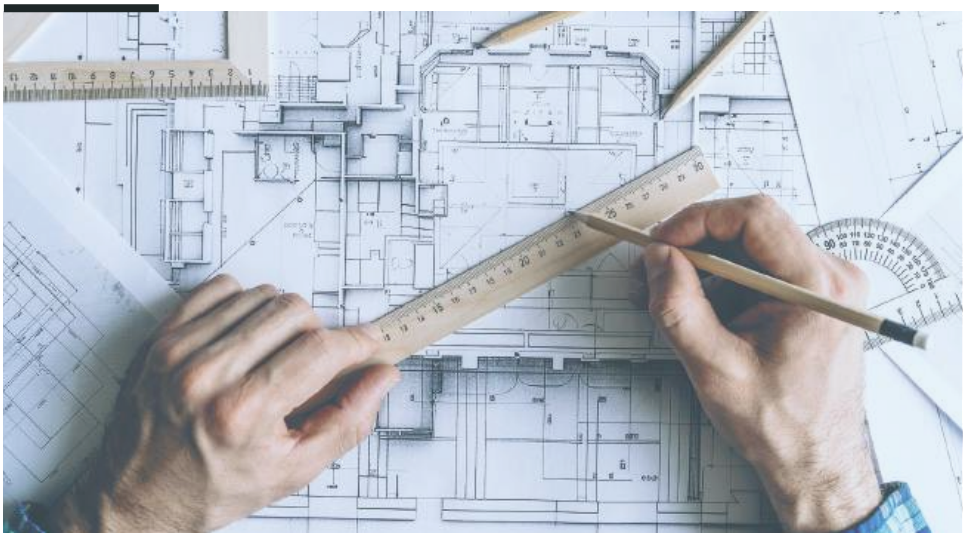
AUTHORED BY:

Marilyn Marshall, MBA
Founding Consultant
Helios, Research Administrative Services

GRANT DEVELOPMENT & STRATEGY

A Blueprint, Not an Autopsy: Rethinking Evaluation at the Proposal Points

By Camelia Kantor, PhD



What if the most important evaluation question is asked too late? This article argues that evaluators and research administrators should be strategic partners from proposal development through implementation. This early and sustained collaboration will help research teams define success before the first dollar is spent, not just measure post-award.

> Many funding agencies now expect projects to not only demonstrate scientific excellence but also produce evidence of organizational learning, stakeholder engagement, workforce development, broader impacts, sustainability, and long-term impact and change.

Success is a Design Decision

Imagine receiving a 20-million-dollar award. The assumption is that to be awarded, the proposal must have had a very strong evaluation section. That assumption is probably correct, but the devil is in the details. Limited evaluation space allows proposals to meet basic requirements of reviewers (who, in most cases, are not experienced program evaluators but subject-matter experts) and by only scratching the surface. The real test comes post-award, especially in cooperative agreements or other funding mechanisms that require formative program evaluations, including site visits. That's when the big question lands: What does success mean to this group? Which outcomes matter most? How will you measure it? Ironically, these are often the first-time research teams start paying attention to evaluation and discussing success. Unfortunately, at that point, most of the important decisions have been made. Evaluation is still an add-on rather than something that shapes (and re-shapes) the project itself.

Changing the View on the Evaluators' Role

One of the biggest misconceptions in sponsored research is that evaluation is primarily a post-award responsibility. Although funding agencies, research developers, and administrators repeatedly emphasize in NOFOs and PI meetings that evaluation must be embedded in the project, many investigators still view evaluators as people who produce boring annual reports and administer surveys solely to satisfy sponsor requirements. This is where research administrators can step in to advocate for early engagement with evaluators. Certainly, reporting is part of the evaluator's work, but experienced evaluators contribute something far more valuable. They ask questions nobody else is asking:

- What would success actually look like?
- What assumptions are we making?
- What outcomes matter most?
- What evidence would convince a skeptical reviewer that the project worked?
- If this project fails, how will we know?

These are not reporting questions but strategic design questions.

Program evaluation requires systems thinking, recognizing patterns, feedback loops, and the mental models that shape outcomes over time. It "forces" the scientific team to "turn the mirror inward" and have conversations that "balance inquiry and advocacy" (Senge P., 2006), building a shared vision and clearer execution plans.

Many funding agencies now expect projects to not only demonstrate scientific excellence but also produce evidence of organizational learning, stakeholder engagement, workforce development, broader impacts, sustainability, and long-term impact and change. An evaluator who joins the proposal team early helps ensure that these ambitions are actually measurable, not just aspirational. In my 8+ years' experience as a

program evaluator and even longer working with program evaluators for my own grants, I find that the best evaluators are those trying to understand the project, even if only in lay terms, and who challenge the research teams to clarify objectives, distinguish activities from outcomes, identify realistic indicators of success, and think through how evidence is collected and, most importantly, used to provide valuable feedback that can allow for adjustments in real-time. Those conversations often improve the science itself by facilitating greater clarity about what the project is trying to accomplish. This is strategic leadership, positioning the evaluator as an important part of the team.

Evaluators as Part of the Future Vision for Research Administration

The most common mistake made when teams transition to implementation is falling into the temptation of counting things: how many workshops, trainees, publications, participants, meetings, etc. Those are outputs, but funders increasingly care about outcomes. Did collaborations persist? Did trainees change practice? Did the engaged institutions adopt the model? Did policy change, and if it did, what was the outcome? What kind of lasting capacity was built? These are harder to track data, but much more interesting.

Good program evaluation doesn't simply tell us whether a project succeeded. It helps define success before the first dollar is spent. It gives the team the confidence and knowledge to adapt when a project veers off course. Ultimately, a program evaluator's greatest contribution to science isn't just measuring impact but helping create it.

This idea builds on a broader trend in our profession: historically, research administrators have been viewed strictly as experts in compliance, process, and stewardship. Today, institutions rely on us as strategic partners who strengthen proposals, facilitate collaborations, and help institutions learn from their investments. Evaluation is part of this evolution. Championing early evaluation is a natural part of this evolution. When evaluators are brought in merely to satisfy sponsor requirements, they are relegated to report writing. But when research administrators advocate for their early engagement, they become strategic partners, and together we can make a much bigger impact.

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AUTHORED BY:

Camelia Kantor, PhD
Director of Strategic Initiatives
The Pennsylvania State University

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OPERATIONS & WORKFLOW MANAGEMENT

Performance Evaluation in Research Administration: Methods, Outcomes, and Benefits

By Mark Lucas, CRA, & Anita Sharma, PhD

The annual employee performance evaluation process at organizations has historically been a military-derived tool that found its way into corporate America. Fortunately, a variety of modern tools now exist to improve the evaluation process and provide employees with more meaningful feedback and guidance.

"He sets low personal standards and then consistently fails to achieve them."

The annual employee performance evaluation began during World War I, when the U.S. military used it to rank and promote troops. Corporate America later adopted the practice to justify pay increases and give management a way to assess productivity, while providing employees feedback on their work. Over the decades, however, it has hardened into a rigid, forced-ranking process rather than one focused on continuous, growth-oriented feedback, leaving many organizations with a negative and laborious annual ritual. Fortunately, a range of modern tools can improve the evaluation process and deliver more useful feedback and guidance to employees.

"He has delusions of adequacy."

The most common evaluation format has employees assess themselves before the supervisor reviews and comments on that self-evaluation. This tool has become the foundation of the evaluation process across corporate America: employees grade their own work, highlight milestones, and identify strengths and weaknesses; the supervisor then weighs in on daily tasks, responsibilities, and overall contributions to operational targets. The result is often a "report card"

approach that grades employees on attendance, KPIs, productivity, and volume. While this gives organizations a way to evaluate performance across an office, it offers little year-over-year insight into quality and long-term improvement. Furthermore, in today's fast-paced world, an annual evaluation simply cannot keep up with productivity, trends, and ever-shifting priorities.

"You did an outstanding job... for our competitors."

Research administration is a unique field in which to evaluate performance. Should performance be measured by successful submission of proposals? By volume? Or, by intangibles such as principal investigator satisfaction or funding success rate? Should an employee with a high Q rating (likeability scale) be evaluated in the same way as a more introverted—but highly productive—colleague?

Fortunately, several modern evaluation tools can better capture performance and give research administrators (RAs) the feedback they need to enhance and improve performance. These methods help organizations measure skills, set clear goals, and better support professional development, while also helping RAs align themselves with the research mission and broader institutional goals.

"Doesn't want to participate in company foosball games. Not a team player—not recommended for promotion."

Research Managers may want to reframe both the current process and the main priorities driving staff evaluations. Employees who receive more immediate feedback can course-correct in real time, and those who receive frequent positive feedback tend to be more productive. RAs, in turn, seek feedback that helps them succeed within their professional careers, which is directly influenced by their performance within their organizations. Below are a few alternative evaluation strategies in research administration worth considering.

360-Degree Feedback

This approach gathers input from everyone an RA works with—managers, peers, direct reports, and researchers—for a complete picture of performance. The RA and manager jointly select individuals at various levels who have worked closely with the RA. These stakeholders respond anonymously to scaled ratings and open-ended questions; their responses are then compiled into performance patterns, strengths, and blind spots. The goal isn't criticism, but tangible feedback and developmental goals to improve interactions and contribute to the team's mission.

Management by Objectives (MBO)

MBO focuses on measurable goals that the manager and RA set jointly at the beginning of the review period. These goals clarify what is expected of RAs and how their work contributes to the research enterprise and institutional objectives. Ongoing check-ins keep the process moving towards those goals throughout the review period. At the end, the goals are assessed and tied directly to rewards, pay adjustments, or the next round of goal-setting and development.

The MBO approach strongly relies on thoughtful goal-setting. Clear goals give the RAs direction and the managers a structure for meaningful feedback and planning. Goals generally fall into two categories: performance goals, tied to work output and unit objectives; and development goals, centered on learning, training, and career growth (such as building leadership and supervisory skills or mastering a new tool or system). In order to be effective, goals should be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. Without that structure, goals can remain vague ideas rather than materializing into practical commitments. RAs should typically prioritize two to three goals at a time, based on the scope of their role. One example of a SMART goal would be to increase the number of complete, on-time proposal submissions by 5% over the previous fiscal year by implementing a standardized intake

checklist, meeting internal deadlines, and conducting a monthly review of submission-readiness data.

Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale (BARS)

BARS is a framework that assesses employees by matching their behavior to clearly defined examples within each level of a rating scale, typically using a Likert scale (1-7). These ratings are based on quantifiable data (such as competency on a specific program or productivity using a tool) and can be continually measured over a career. If established properly at the onset, the performance becomes less subjective and often more collaborative.

"Consistently exceeds performance expectations and delivers high-quality results on time."

Research administrators need clear goals to understand their job functions and the ways in which individual performance evaluations can result in salary increases. It is important to make this a transparent, bi-directional process early on. As RAs hone their core job functions in the early years, performance evaluations become easier to conduct. Further, RAs in a more stable and mature phase of their careers need to know the metrics used to evaluate them. This may work best as project-based or professional growth-based tools (e.g., did they take on a new task, learn a new skill, grow the unit by X%?).

Evaluations are meant to aid career development and help managers assess performance. If provided in real-time and on a bi-directional and horizontal basis, evaluations support a stronger sense of collaboration towards improving RAs' personal growth and productivity, while allowing management to optimize resources, and ultimately leading to growth in the research enterprise.

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AUTHORED BY:

Mark Lucas, CRA
Chief Administrative Officer
Departments of Neurobiology and Computational Medicine
David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA
SRAI Distinguished Faculty & SRAI Catalyst Feature Editor

Anita Sharma, PhD
Director, Research Services
The Office of the Vice-President Research
Thompson Rivers University
SRAI Catalyst Editor

OPERATIONS & WORKFLOW MANAGEMENT

Streamlining Research Administration: The Necessity of Automation

By Olusola Fasunwon, PhD, & Nicole Van Rootselaar, PhD

Research administration is changing quickly. With more compliance requirements and growing global partnerships, automation has become essential. This article examines how electronic research administration systems reduce manual tasks, simplify workflows, help staff manage their workloads, and keep institutions competitive in today's complex research environment.

Automating research administration, operations, and workflows is now essential for today's research institutions. As research grows in scale and complexity and compliance rules tighten, many organizations still rely on outdated manual methods and uncoordinated electronic processes, such as using multiple platforms to complete certain administrative steps. Automation is key to staying competitive and meeting new standards; keeping all processes in one place, like a one-stop shop, is more efficient and sustainable. Global politics also affects research administration, especially as international collaboration becomes more common. For example, according to the Government of Canada's news release, Canada has recently invested in efforts to attract international experts to tackle issues such as climate resilience, food and water security, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing and materials (Government of Canada, 2025). Likewise, the National Research Council of Canada has made international partnership central to its own research strategy. By forming global partnerships, nations, companies, and researchers can access broader networks, improved facilities, specialized expertise, and new markets (National Research Council of Canada, 2024). These joint efforts strengthen local industries and help fuel economic growth.

Consequently, at this level of growth and expansion in the research ecosystem, institutions, especially small and mid-sized ones, require a system that will reduce workload, streamline workflow, and expedite approval processes in research administration, in alignment with the limited resources available to them. In these institutions, research administration is rarely a straight line; it's a juggling act. Staff handle pre award, post award, compliance, reporting, and a dozen "urgent" requests in between, often with a lean team and a tight budget. The process creates a lot of administrative work, including sending numerous emails, manually managing documents, and doing continuous follow-up, while also forcing staff to ask multiple times for copies of templates and documents that are hard to find or retrieve.

Realistically, as cross-border and interdisciplinary research grows, research administrators (RAs) face increasing pressure to streamline workflows and keep everything aligned. Efficient operations are needed to scale up activities without overwhelming staff or raising costs. With technology now widely available, institutions can run a smart, scalable research operation. Automation takes repetitive tasks off RAs' plates, so they can offer better support and value to their organizations. For example, at our small institution, the pre- to post-award administration process was hindered by reliance on six distinct, outdated systems: customized web platforms (Bridge, Banner, Xtender, and iWeb), a Shared Drive (Microsoft product), and DocuSign (external subscription service). This fragmentation created repetitive work: emailing various stakeholders whenever an update occurred or a document was added, manually copying information between platforms, and paying system user fees to maintain these separate forms and services. The result was a heavy administrative burden for office staff and researchers alike, and it underscored the need for an integrated system that supports institutional excellence.

Manual processes, despite being electronic, like email chains, spreadsheets, shared storage, and DocuSign, are hard to scale. If only a small number of researchers submit a few applications a year, these manual processes are simple, and a small office can easily support the faculty. However, as institutions grow, along with the number of researchers, the number of RAs may not increase accordingly. Switching from these familiar methods can be hard, even when navigating several systems is itself a challenge, but flexible workflows are needed to keep improving and stay competitive. Institutional growth can result in changes to processes, and institutions may face resistance to moving to electronic research administration (eRA) systems, as well as budget limitations. Still, many technologies can be tailored to different budgets and support changing needs through ongoing support and customization. Anecdotally, we have seen that as research administration changes, good change management, such as clear communication, can help administrators and faculty adjust.

In today's fast-paced environment, automation can boost job satisfaction by enabling staff to focus on important tasks, reducing manual errors, supporting succession planning, helping people build new skills, and balancing workload distribution. This happens because fewer systems mean staff no longer manually copy information from one platform to another. By using automated notifications and having a central platform, the number of emails is reduced, and access to information is made easier. Standardized systems also make onboarding and cross-training easier and provide more flexibility regarding career moves within research administration. Ultimately, more efficient processes lead to less stress, better employee retention, and smoother assimilation of new staff members. As institutions grow, RAs may be asked to take on more tasks without additional compensation, and a simple platform that consolidates all processes in one place can make a difference.

Table 1.
The University of Lethbridge's electronic research administration (eRA) system reduces manual work for research facilitators (RFs).

Action Required for Research Workflows	Total Per Award without an eRA	Total Per Award with an eRA
Minimum Emails RF sends in pre-award stage:	5	1
Minimum Emails RF sends in post-award stage:	3	0
Minimum Emails Research Finance sends	1	0
Minimum documents RF uploads in 2 different places to manage redundancy	4	0
Emails PI replies to during the whole award process	~6	0

More than ever, funders expect detailed, data-driven reports, but creating them can be difficult, time-consuming, and expensive, especially when data collection is slow or error-prone. Modern multidisciplinary projects often involve multiple institutions, international partners, and industry collaborators, all sharing data in complex settings. Using outdated tools, like manually updated spreadsheets, to manage these relationships leads to delays, reporting inaccuracies, and sometimes project failures. Institutions of any size need systems that work well together, rather than relying on separate spreadsheets and multiple staff to collaborate, update, and report data consistently. In our experience, collecting data across several systems, as mentioned above, was daunting and sometimes resulted in missing data. Automated solutions keep records in one accessible place, thereby reducing problems caused by disconnected systems. By collecting data in mandatory fields within the eRA platform, researchers and RAs can ensure all records are complete and use these fields to export data from a set time window. This means they can be confident that the system captures all submitted data in the report it generates.

We encourage research offices to see workflow automation as necessary for every institution, not just the big ones. Automation gives RAs real benefits and helps them grow professionally. As mentioned earlier, many systems can be adjusted to fit an institution's needs and budget; it is crucial to identify the right solution early. A case study from our small Canadian institution, the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, shows how much manual work across six different platforms decreased after adopting an eRA system, as shown in the data below. Previously, RAs, faculty, and approval queues often needed up to nine email exchanges per award across these systems. With the eRA, this dropped to just one email exchange as the system automatically sends notifications and saves documents. Faculty members no longer had to respond to approximately six emails during the process.

To sum up, inefficient administrative processes put institutions at a disadvantage as the need for efficiency and competition for talent grows. Automated workflows benefit RAs by making processes clear, reliable, and open. Instead of relying on manual transfers, lengthy email exchanges, and arbitrary decisions, automation uses standardized steps that provide clarity and help avoid delays, redundant work, and miscommunication, all of which are often unnoticed expenses that take up staff time and hinder progress on projects. Because the workflows are well-defined, they also produce consistent data and performance metrics, making it easier to detect bottlenecks, monitor service

levels, and promote continuous improvement. The case study indicates that automation creates value not only by generating direct cost savings but also by enhancing the organization's capacity. Routine administrative tasks are completed faster and with fewer errors, allowing administrators to apply their expertise to higher-value duties such as advising researchers, participating in strategic planning, managing risk, and improving processes. Researchers benefit similarly because they spend less time on administrative tasks and workflow issues and can focus more on research design, knowledge production, partnership development, and other major scholarly activities. Hence, automation improves both operational efficiency and the institution's overall research effectiveness. Modern practices help administrators meet global standards and facilitate international collaboration.

To make real progress, research offices should start by carefully reviewing their workflows to identify inefficiencies and opportunities to automate. Talking with peer institutions and seeing how they use electronic research administration (eRA) systems can offer helpful ideas. By taking these steps, institutions can improve their operations and prepare to succeed in the fast-changing research landscape.

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AI Statement

Grammarly was used to refine tone and clarity.

AUTHORED BY:

Olusola Fasunwon, PhD
Director
Research and Innovation Services
University of Lethbridge

Nicole Van Rootselaar, PhD
Research Facilitator
Internal/UG Awards, PDF Funding and RMS Support
University of Lethbridge

GRANT DEVELOPMENT & STRATEGY

⏮ FROM THE ARCHIVES

Straight from the Experts: Creating Research Development Capacity for Institutional Success

By Kimberly Read PhD, MBA, CRA

To explore how growth in research development (RD) is taking shape, I interviewed two leaders from RD programs who are actively building and redesigning innovative approaches to support their institutions' research goals. This synopsis provides insight for exploring how to build or redesign a research development program.

Apart from its vital role in helping researchers find funding, Research development (RD) is a growing, dare I say, exploding niche within the broader picture of research administration. The National Organization of Research Development Professionals (NORDP) defines RD as "strategic, catalytic, and capacity-building activities." Courtney Hunt and Dhanonjoy Saha describe RD in plain language as "assessing where an institution or team currently is, where they want to go, and formulating a plan of how to get there" (Hunt & Saha, 2022). It's about creating environments where research can flourish.

Research development (RD) is gaining recognition as an attractive career field (Siedhoff, Easter, et al, 2026). To explore how this growth is taking shape, I interviewed two leaders from RD programs via email who are actively building and redesigning innovative approaches to support their institutions' research goals.

Sandy Justice is the Director of the Research Development Institute (RDI) at the University of South Florida (USF), and Kimberly Pratt, MA, CRA, is the Director of the Office of Research Development (ORD) at Ohio University (OH). Both bring decades of Research Administration (RA) experience and are now leading RD teams. I sent each of them the same 28-question survey (eek, big, right?!), asking about their firsthand experience and how their institutions approach key aspects of research development.

Don't stop reading! I'm not presenting all the results in this summary. This is the TL:DR (too long: didn't read) version. I've pulled specific points and edited comments to highlight what I think is a useful starting point for exploring how to build or redesign a research development program.

Origin & Vision

What gap or need within your institution's research ecosystem led to the creation of your research development program?

> **Sandy Justice (SJ):** RDI was created to complement, not replace, the research administrative model, providing proactive support of USF's growing research enterprise. The increasing complexity of the landscape requires focus on strategy, grantsmanship, and team science rather than transactions alone. RDI was designed to reduce administrative burden, increase proposal competitiveness, and provide faculty with concierge level research development support across the full lifecycle of idea to submission.

> **Kimberly Pratt (KP):** In developing a new vision for the research development office, the university identified several needs: 1) to align research development activities with institutional priorities and emerging opportunities in the external funding landscape, 2) to cultivate a culture of continuous growth and innovation among researchers at all career stages, 3) to ensure that research development investments are data-informed and aligned with OHIO's mission, 4) to foster a vibrant, forward-looking, and competitive research environment, and 5) to position OHIO faculty for success in securing large-scale, high-impact funding.

Planning & Development

How did the planning process for the RDI unfold, from concept to launch?

> **SJ:** The planning process had a structured progression, starting with a listening tour to identify faculty and administrator needs, then benchmarking against national models, followed by the development of a formal proposal to university leadership, and finally, the formation of an implementation task force.

What were the most important decisions made during the development phase?

> **SJ:** Key decisions included positioning RDI as a centralized yet collaborative unit, prioritizing services with the highest strategic impact—such as multi PI proposal support and competitive intelligence. Another critical decision was designing RDI with a growth mindset by starting strategically, then scaling services as demand and capacity increase.

Organizational Structure & Services

What core services or programs were prioritized at launch, and why?

> **SJ:** Unlike research administration support, which is largely housed within colleges or departments, RDI is centralized, reporting to



the Vice President of Research and providing a suite of RD services to all USF faculty. At launch, RDI prioritized support for large, interdisciplinary proposals. The first RD services included grant capture, proposal review, constructive editing, and scientific illustration/graphic design. These foundational services were selected because they directly improve proposal clarity and competitiveness, which we believe are key factors in funding success. To facilitate team science, think tanks were launched to facilitate faculty synergy.

KP: Supporting the creation of large-scale, interdisciplinary, multi-institutional ideas was our main priority. In addition to providing project management, proposal creation support, and budget planning aid, we organized proposal development teams. We also developed tools and resources to help faculty craft competitive and innovative proposals, continued to oversee the administration of internal seed-funding and pilot grant programs, and organized workshops and training sessions.

Challenges & Lessons Learned

What were the biggest challenges encountered during the development of your program?

SJ: One of the biggest challenges was change management and the capacity limitations of a lean team. We had to help stakeholders understand how RDI complements—rather than replaces—existing research support. Building trust, clarifying roles, and demonstrating early wins were critical to overcoming this challenge.

KP: The most significant challenge is "flying the plane while building it." The office must find capacity to undertake the strategic work necessary to advance long term goals while simultaneously sustaining day to day operations in an environment where formalized processes and practices are still under development.

Another challenge lies in clarifying the department's role within the broader research enterprise, establishing a cohesive university research support service model,

and clearly articulating the value of research development, particularly to faculty who may be skeptical or unaware of the scope of research development services.

Impact & Outcomes

How do you measure the effectiveness and impact of your program?

SJ: RDI measures impact through a combination of quantitative metrics, such as proposal volume, success rates, and funding outcomes. We also use qualitative feedback from faculty. In the longer term, we continue to examine the breadth of our research, strengthening the way we partner with the industry and measuring the broader impacts on the communities we serve.

KP: We are in the early stages of designing systems to collect data that will later be analyzed to assess the impact of research development services on proposal success. In parallel, we have begun gathering faculty impact stories (testimonials), workshop evaluations, and tracking the conversion of internal awards into external proposal submissions. We are working to build comprehensive evidence of the value of research development support.

Future Directions

What advice would you give to other institutions seeking to establish a research development office?

SJ: Start with listening. Ground your design in faculty needs, benchmark rigorously, and focus on clarity of purpose. Invest in people with both technical and relational expertise, and design RD support that is flexible, scalable, and deeply aligned with your institution's research mission.

KP: Just do it. Don't wait for a perfectly designed plan to start a research development office. Rather, start by determining the most urgent needs of your institution and work from there, letting the larger framework unfold naturally. Progress doesn't have to be all at once. Leverage the resources you do have and hire staff that are mission-oriented and comfortable working in ambiguity. Flexibility, curiosity, and a willingness to iterate are far more valuable than perfection out of the gate.

I think Sandy sums things nicely: "The most important lesson is that research development is fundamentally about relationships. Effective infrastructure requires know-how, data, and tools. However, success ultimately depends on collaboration and responsiveness. Starting with purpose and clarity makes everything else scalable."

A huge thank you to Sandy and Kimberly for graciously tackling this questionnaire and providing valuable insights into the nuts and bolts of constructing research development programs.

> "Just do it. Don't wait for a perfectly designed plan to start a research development office. Rather, start by determining the most urgent needs of your institution and work from there, letting the larger framework unfold naturally."

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AI Statement

Kimberly used Grammarly to ensure correct grammar and punctuation.
Sandy used Copilot to polish her interview responses.

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AUTHORED BY:

Kimberly Read, PhD, MBA, CRA
Assistant Chair for Operations
Child & Family Studies
University of South Florida
SRAI Distinguished Faculty & SRAI Catalyst Feature Editor

INTERVIEWEES:

Sandy Justice
Director
Research Development Institute
University of South Florida
SRAI Distinguished Faculty

Kimberly Pratt, MA, CRA
Director
Office of Research Development
Ohio University
SRAI Distinguished Faculty
& SRAI Catalyst Feature Editor

Functioning Effectively: A "How-To" Guide for Program Evaluation for Research Administrators

By Julie Swaringim-Griffin, PhD, & Robert McTear

How can we move beyond generalized assumptions and identify what's actually working? Program evaluation can help professionals use both quantitative and qualitative data to determine the efficacy of existing programs, as well as what improvements need to be made. Evaluation does not have to be complicated and can be an effective tool for making decisions.

There are several approaches to program evaluation that can fit into the research administration environment, and we suggest exploring all options to see what fits best for your program and needs. In this article, we discuss the Kirkpatrick Model as the primary framework for evaluation. Although the Kirkpatrick Model is best known for training program analysis, it can also be creatively adapted as a tool for evaluating workflow changes.

In a nutshell, the Kirkpatrick Model helps break evaluations into four consecutive levels (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016):

1. **Reaction:** How participants react to the training, program, or process being evaluated.
2. **Learning:** Whether the program or process was understood by the participants.
3. **Behavior:** Did the behavior of the participants change (after the training was completed / process was updated)?
4. **Results:** Did the program or process change have a positive impact (on the institution, business, or organization)?

Through two possible scenarios, let's break down how to use the various levels of the model when assessing a new process or program.

Level 1: Reaction

First, ascertain the nature of stakeholder support regarding the project/product/process. (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). For this level, it is best not to wait until the end of the project or process roll-out; start at the beginning, then continue to implement a few more pulse checks throughout implementation.

> ***Scenario A, Contract Review Process Update:*** You are rolling out a new contract review process over the course of the next six months. During the rollout, engage with the stakeholders around three months in to gauge stakeholder sentiment: What's working, and what isn't up to par? Essentially, receiving the initial reactions to the new process before full implementation occurs to provide time to make adjustments as necessary.
>
> ***Scenario B, Certified Research Administrators (CRA) Study Group Implementation:*** You have started a CRA study group and are a few sessions into the program. At this point, you can garner initial opinions via staff satisfaction surveys, then use the feedback to refine the program.

Fun Fact:

It can be valuable to think about the Kirkpatrick Model *backwards.* Essentially, consider Level 4 first when planning your evaluation (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016): What are your desired results? Then, plan your programming around achieving those results by working through each step of the implementation process.

Level 2: Learning

During evaluation, it is vital to determine the stakeholder's learned knowledge, skill acquisition, attitude and confidence, or commitment to reach the desired outcome (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

> ***Scenario A, Contract Review Process:*** To assess learning in this scenario, a questionnaire to rate staff confidence in their knowledge of the process could be a viable option.
>
> ***Scenario B, CRA Study Group:*** To assess learning, you could implement pre- and post-test questionnaires to gain insight into the learning outcomes.

Level 3: Behavior

Beyond what is learned, new behaviors must also be applied successfully. This involves measuring the application of what is learned and how the knowledge is being transferred into the work (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). This is the application phase of learned knowledge.

> ***Scenario A, Contract Review Process:*** A strong method to assess behavior would be to analyze a sample of the contracts reviewed and see if staff followed the process accurately.

Scenario B, CRA Study Group: To assess behavioral change, you could reach out to supervisors of study group participants to identify any positive changes in their understanding of regulations, policies, workflow, etc.

Level 4: Results

This level measures whether the desired outcomes were reached based on what was implemented (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Think of this goal at the organizational level.

Scenario A, Contract Review Process: If the desired result is to improve the overall time spent negotiating a contract, then tracking this metric incrementally throughout the process rollout and after full implementation can provide the data needed to assess results. This is where data can be compared and analyzed. At an organizational level, the desired outcome is for negotiations to move more quickly (Example: Average time to review decreased from 20 days to 8 days following the implementation of the new process). This would enhance the sponsor's experience with the institution, and hopefully garner more activity in the future.

Scenario B, CRA Study Group: If the desired results of the CRA Study Group were for staff to obtain their certification to help improve the overall support at the organization, this is where data on how many staff took the exam and passed would come into play (Example: 85% of staff who took the exam passed). Another metric to assess could be changes in satisfaction levels with the resources provided by the institution, particularly those services or programs in which the study group participants were involved. This could show the impact of multiple aspects of the Study Group: the act of preparing for the exam, the impact of achieving the certification, and how the information learned may have been applied to positively influence institutional success.

Bottom line: The Kirkpatrick model is one of the many ways one can evaluate different programs or process updates. Carefully executing each level will provide you with the opportunity to assess the initial reactions, acquire knowledge, change behavior, and ensure that the result of the implemented project/product/process/etc. is the desired outcome.

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AI Statement

The content is written by the authors. AI was used to improve the structure of the article.

AUTHORED BY:

Julie Swaringim-Griffin, PhD
Assistant Vice President
Central Sponsored Programs Administration
Oklahoma State University
SRAI Communications Committee Co-Chair

Robert McTear
Director of Research Administration
New York University School of Medicine
SRAI Communications Committee Co-Chair

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REGULATORY & COMPLIANCE OVERSIGHT

How Iterative AI Can Save Research Administrators Time

By Alyssa McKinley, PhD, & Jennifer Biladeau, MS, MA, CIP

By automating the initial screening of research proposals for regulatory compliance, AI can reduce administrative backlogs and allow human experts to focus on complex cases, ensuring both efficiency and accuracy in the review process.

In research administration, regulatory compliance is a critical framework that provides vital safeguards for research and development. However, it is notoriously perceived as a bottleneck to progress. Ensuring federal proposals adhere to multiple key regulations require meticulous review which demands significant resources and as a result, there are often delays in execution of critical funding and technology evaluations.

In cases of research compliance, mistaken classifications on proposals can result in severe consequences: unregulated human subjects research (HSR) can potentially harm not only an individual's protected rights but life and limb as well; unvetted animal protocols lacking oversight can compromise animal welfare, void entire datasets, and suspend institutional funding; while missed Conflicts of Interest (COI) can lead to skewed data, resulting in the erosion of public trust. To avoid these potential harms, in the past, regulatory compliance has been overly cautious by over flagging proposals, leading to a waste of time and effort for all involved. Mistaken classifications of research compliance can be grouped into two groups, false negatives and false positives:

- A false negative bypasses necessary Institutional Review Board (IRB), Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), Conflict of Interest (COI) review and more.
- While a false positive bogs down the system which can route some proposals into lengthy, unnecessary review queues.

This article explores using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to clear this administrative bottleneck. A recent project utilizing a generative AI (genAI) agent based on the Google Gemini model in a federal research environment demonstrates this technology can serve as a highly reliable and time-saving AI teammate' for research administrators.

Enter the AI Teammate

A common misconception is that AI tools are ready to perform complex regulatory tasks and reviews right out of the box. In reality, the key to beneficial AI integration in research administration is iterative, human-in-the-loop prompt creation. This is especially true with genAI agents such as Google Gemini where you are not necessarily "training" the AI agent but refining the prompt for its Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) framework. In practice, you are not altering the AI's foundational code, rather, you are guiding a highly capable assistant using the specific regulatory guidelines and instructions provided to it.

Federal agencies, such as the Department of War (DOW) and the Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) have been tasked with implementing AI into part of the daily "battle rhythm" and are exploring how secure generative AI platforms can help streamline operations and outpace adversaries. A major hurdle in maintaining this battle rhythm is the time-consuming administrative burden of reviewing research proposals for regulatory compliance flags. Automating these initial screening steps is essential to keeping vital research initiatives moving forward without delay.

To do this, we designed a Google Gemini agent to reduce the human subjects research screening bottleneck. The specialized AI agent was designed to evaluate federal proposals and classify them into two categories, "could contain HSR" or "does not contain HSR." The aim of creating the agent was not to replace human regulatory decision making, but to reduce the false positive compliance flags on pre-award proposals that were causing the operational bottleneck, allowing DOW personnel more time to review actual HSR cases. With this, the agent was also created to ensure no false negatives slipped through the screening cracks.

Human-in-the-Loop Training

To design this Google Gemini agent, an iterative, human-in-the-loop prompt engineering method was used. Simply put, this agent was developed through continuous human testing and feedback, refining the instructions over multiple testing rounds to ensure the agent provided correct and accurate outputs. In the feasibility testing stage, the genAI agent did not initially achieve operational perfection. When the baseline model was stress tested against complex, historical regulatory consultation cases, its accuracy plummeted to just 42.1%. This was clearly an unacceptable accuracy rate; if left unchecked this would have created more administrative risk than solutions.

This is where the expertise of HSR administrators became crucial in the iterative prompt engineering method that was used. Using this methodology to achieve an acceptable accuracy rate, compliance staff audited the AI's performance across 13 sequential testing phases involving 198 proposals.

The testing loop looked like this:

1. Deployment & Evaluation: The AI reviewed a batch of proposals.
2. Expert Audit: Human experts graded the AI's answers against the ground truth.
3. Root-Cause Analysis: Experts analyzed why the AI made false positive or false negative errors.

4. Prompt Optimization: Administrators refined the AI's core instructions, adding explicit rules for tricky boundary conditions (like differentiating general product usability testing from physiological data collection).

This process is very similar to perfecting a recipe: you cook a batch, test it, figure out what flavors are off, and adjust the ingredients for the next round until you perfect the recipe. Through this testing loop, the AI's performance evolved dramatically. By establishing zero trust boundary definitions, edge cases, and safe harbor exceptions, the model's accuracy soared to a sustained 90.0%–100.0% in late-stage testing with no false negatives in the accuracy rate, only false positives. This successfully routed all actual HSR proposals to human reviewers and kept borderline false positives to a bare minimum, while automatically clearing all non-HSR submissions

Reclaiming Administrator Time

The most profound benefit of this trained AI agent is the immediate impact on administrative efficiency and time management. Rather than experts spending hours reading hundreds of pages, an agent can quickly process the raw text and output a structure summary containing a core determination, a regulatory justification, and actionable administrative flags.

The successful calibration of the agent enabled significant time savings via:

- High Specificity (Reducing False Positives): The agent learned to correctly and rapidly clear Non-Human Subjects Research (NHSR). This prevents standard engineering or software proposals from needlessly entering the review queue, which instantly reduced the administrative backlog.
- Smart Routing for Edge Cases: Rather than asking the agent to make a definitive ruling on highly complex scenarios, administrators trained the agent to flag specific, high risk edge cases. The agent was programmed with specialized administrative routing rules for projects that truly involve human subjects research as well as cadaveric studies, hyperbaric environments, international collaborations, and high-risk studies.

Empowering the Compliance Workforce

While this article specifically demonstrates the success of pairing experts with genAI agents to automate HSR screening, given the universality of this approach, successful automation can be scaled across any number of fields for effective compliance screening.

By embracing human-in-the-loop iterative prompt engineering, institutions can transform AI agents from a generic chatbot into a specialized administrative AI teammate. This collaborative paradigm not only ensures regulatory safeguards but also reclaims countless hours of administrative time, allowing the entire enterprise of researchers and administrators to focus on what they do best.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Government, United States Department of War, of United States Air Force.

AI Statement

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AUTHORED BY:

Alyssa McKinley, PhD
IRB Analyst/HRPO Administrator
DAF Air Force Research Laboratory

Jennifer Biladeau, MS, MA, CIP
Compliance Officer
DAF Air Force Research Laboratory

COMMUNITY & MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

FROM THE ARCHIVES

GOALS: Guiding Objectives for Advancing Long-term Success

By Susan Sedwick, PhD, CRA



Growing up, I realized very quickly that the simple practice of setting goals can reverberate acoss a lifetime. Soon after, I learned that writing them down (and sharing them with others who will hold you accountable) only increases your likelihood of fulfilling those aspirations. This article serves as a case study in the power of ambition committed to ink.

I grew up on a working cattle ranch in South Texas, where hard work shaped both my work ethic and my resilience. I was so small when I first learned to ride that even our children's saddle was too large for me, so my uncle had one custom-made to ensure I could "ride a horse proper." Before I was old enough to attend school, I had already participated in 20-mile cattle drives, moving livestock between pastures and crossing the Nueces River on horseback, before I knew how to swim. While that probably says a lot about my parents' sink or swim approach to child-rearing, my first unwritten goal in life was simple: don't fall off.

With brothers a decade older than me, I was well acquainted with academic and athletic opportunities afforded through my small but rigorous school. My educational aspirations began before my formal education did as I set three early goals for myself that served as my compass, and twelve years later, I had achieved them all. Setting those goals and stating them out loud taught me the value of commitment, accountability, and the power of achieving long-term ambitions through incremental progress.

Two decades later, leadership development programs introduced me to the practice of writing lifetime goals across both personal and professional domains with shorter-term corresponding objectives. That exercise became a roadmap for my personal life and ultimately for my career in research administration. Those also helped me recognize the importance of tradeoffs and prioritization. I committed not only to lifetime goals but to establishing annual objectives, tracking progress, and revisiting priorities each year. I still have that initial worksheet on which those lifetime goals are scribed.

In the early 1980s, as a new mother and community volunteer, my primary focus was family. Although I stayed home with my children, I held onto the aspiration of pursuing advanced education and eventually returning to the workforce. When I became a single head of household, I reassessed my priorities and brought career development to the forefront. I shared with others my intention to earn a doctorate, even though the nearest PhD program in my field was over 200 miles away. I could see in their eyes that many were skeptical of my lofty aspirations.

With only a bachelor's degree and limited access to graduate programs, I advocated persistently for the creation of a local master's program in my discipline at a nearby university and became one of its first graduates. Completing that degree in two years while running a small business and raising children reinforced my belief in structured goal-setting. Although my initial aspiration was to become a university professor, a 1994 opportunity at Texas A&M University–Kingsville led me into research administration, a profession I quickly realized was the right fit for me.

Earning a doctorate required another pivot. Through a distance-learning cohort at Texas A&M University in College Station, I was able to continue my education while working full-time. I approached my doctoral studies with a detailed plan, completing coursework and campus residency requirements in four years and defending my dissertation the following year. Hearing my advisor address me as "Dr. Sedwick" marked the fulfillment of a goal I had first imagined as a college sophomore twenty years earlier.

As my professional horizons expanded, I recognized that opportunities for growth in South Texas were limited. Encouraged by colleagues at the University of Oklahoma, I applied for a pre-award director position there. Shortly after I arrived, the vice president who hired me stepped down. While initially unnerving, the transition proved immensely fortuitous. The new vice president enthusiastically supported my professional advancement, the professional development of research administration staff and engagement with the Council on Governmental Relations and the Federal Demonstration Partnership. I benefitted greatly from his mentorship that modeled thoughtful,

inclusive leadership. Luck truly is the intersection of preparation and opportunity.

I later expanded my career goal to include leading research administration at an Association of American Universities (AAU) institution which led to the University of Texas at Austin, where, fittingly, longhorns (more cattle) once again became part of my story. I worked to build an exceptional leadership team, and together we built capacity and professionalism, restored staff confidence, integrated pre- and post-award operations, established a career ladder that rewarded professional certification and secured space to co-locate teams. While I brought the vision, it was our collective effort that made the transformation possible.

Having achieved my career goals, I quasi-retired and transitioned into consulting. This allowed me to rebalance my priorities and devote more time to my health and family. Throughout my journey, written goals and annual reflection on my milestone progress kept me grounded and focused on what truly mattered. Awards and recognition were never the objective; those were the byproducts of building strong relationships and helping others succeed.

Written goals played a critical role in my success. Research conducted years ago first validated the importance of goal-setting on achievement. That seminal study found that writing down goals increases the likelihood of achieving them by 42 percent. Sharing those goals with others can further strengthen accountability (Matthews, 2007) and increase the likelihood of attainment of those goals. There is even physiological evidence suggesting that writing specific, aspirational goals activates the brain's ability to help us recognize opportunities aligned with our ambitions (Moruzzi, G., & Magoun, H. W., 1949). Written goals have served as a quiet but powerful guide and lodestar for my career aspirations.

I share this journey hoping it inspires others to reflect on and write down your own aspirations. Think about what you want to achieve over the course of your lifetime. There are no wrong answers, and the process is deeply personal. Once you have clarity, identify three objectives for each goal that you can accomplish within the next year to move you closer to achieving that vision. Commit your goals to writing and share them with someone who will support you and hold you accountable.

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AUTHORED BY:

Susan Sedwick, PhD, CRA
Senior Consulting Specialist
Attain Partners
SRAI Distinguished Faculty

The Pineapple Express: An Overview of the Bayh-Dole Act

By Mark Lucas, CRA

In 1980, the Bayh-Dole Act filled a much-needed gap within the U.S. research enterprise, allowing universities to retain ownership of inventions created with federal funds and awards, rather than the ownership reverting to the federal government. With the current U.S. Federal funding instability, awareness of this policy and its implications in attempting to identify alternate funding streams is essential.

The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 allows universities to retain ownership of inventions created with federal funds and awards, rather than the ownership reverting to the federal government. This has enabled universities to patent, license, and commercialize new technologies, accelerating the transition from laboratories to the marketplace. Under the Bayh-Dole Act, federal grantees may retain the patent rights to an invention created with federal support. The federal grantee may then use the invention itself or license the patent to an industry partner, thereby profiting from their work.

Prior to the Bayh–Dole Act, the United States had a different system for handling inventions originating from federally funded research. There were fragmented, agency-by-agency policies; each federal agency had its own patent policy — some allowed grantee ownership; most did not. For federal agencies such as NIH, NSF, and DoD, the government usually retained the patent rights, and as a result, discoveries often remained with the federal government rather than being further developed. Businesses faced an inefficient and inconsistent system.

Companies were reluctant to engage or invest in technology. Consequently, commercialization rates were very low. By 1980, the U.S. government owned ~28,000 patents. However, fewer than 5% were licensed or used. Most inventions were essentially "shelved." Further, universities had little reason to patent discoveries or to identify industry partners. Researchers rarely benefited financially. As a result, there was no infrastructure to support commercialization, such as today's technology transfer offices. Private companies avoided development. Turning research into products can be cost-prohibitive, especially for medications. Without exclusive patent rights, companies could not protect their investments.

Imagine this scenario: a federally funded university lab discovers a promising cancer therapeutic. The government holds the patent. No company wants to invest in trials without exclusivity. So, the discovery never becomes a drug. The Bayh-Dole Act was designed to encourage innovation and the commercialization of research, to turn government-funded discoveries into marketable and useful products, and to promote collaboration between academia and industry.

The Act has had a substantial impact! The Bayh–Dole Act has accelerated commercial development of pharmaceuticals (new drugs and vaccines), has accelerated biotechnology start-ups, and has helped create university technology transfer offices (which became widespread after the law) to facilitate more interactions between academic institutions and commercial entities.

Notably, the Act created "march-in rights," which allow a federal agency (such as the NIH or the Department of Energy) to step in and grant additional licenses to other companies, even without the patent holder's permission. Thus, if an invention isn't being used appropriately, the government can "march in" and make it available to itself or others. Although this has never been invoked, one can imagine the need during a pandemic or other national emergency.

The overall impact of the bipartisan Bayh-Dole Act on universities has included the emergence of technology transfer offices, increased patenting and licensing, accelerated university start-ups, increased collaboration with industry, a revenue stream for universities, and a translational avenue for researchers. The Act has created over 19,000 start-ups, supported millions of jobs, and has driven $1.9 trillion in economic growth thus far. The Bayh-Dole Act remains one of the most significant federal laws affecting university research operations.

While the act is nearly 50 years old, the relevance of Bayh-Dole is still most current. University technology transfer and patent offices remain robust due to the level of activity generated by investigators looking to take discoveries to market. In our current climate of funding challenges and restrictions, it is important to explore alternate funding streams. Commercialization remains an encouraging option for investigators, with revenue sharing options possible with institutions and external companies. Even a small discovery (cell line, new methodology) could be leveraged. Research administrators would be well-advised to understand the importance of the Bayh-Dole Act and how its use can aid their investigators and research teams.

AI Statement

AI tools were used for fact-checking the historical information in the article.

AUTHORED BY:

Mark Lucas, CRA
Chief Administrative Officer
Departments of Neurobiology and Computational Medicine
David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA
SRAI Distinguished Faculty & SRAI Catalyst Feature Editor

A Final Note

As you turn to this last page, we hope the stories and insights inside have sparked new ideas and connections, leaving you inspired.

Research administration is a field built on collaboration. Your engagement, as well as your dedication to the profession, ensures we continue to grow stronger together.

Thank you for being part of our journey. Until next issue—keep building, keep connecting, and keep leading.

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From award to closeout.

April 14 – 15

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