Stefanie Keto: Welcome to SRAI's Shop Talk, a monthly podcast spotlighting the people, practices, and evolving landscape of research administration and the community that works collectively to support it. Whether you are new to the field or a seasoned pro, each episode features insights from experts across institutions, big and small, working in pre-award and post-award compliance, communication, and everything in between. I am Stefanie Keto, based at the Office of Post-Award Financial Services at North Carolina State University. This season, we're exploring the theme Bridge Builders: Creating Unity Across Roles, Generations, and Technologies.

Welcome to today's episode of Shop Talk. In this episode, we are stepping away from the daily grind of managing single grants, to focus on the long-term vision. We are asking the big question, how do you help a researcher transition from a specialized area into a decades-long mature research portfolio? To help us bridge the gap between short-term funding and long-term strategic growth, I'm thrilled to be joined by my co-host, Jose Alcaine, as well as a fantastic group of leaders and experts from across our field. Before we meet our panel, I'll turn it over to my co-host to kick things off. Could you introduce yourself and share your role? And after that, I would love for us to go around the room so our experts can introduce themselves and give our listeners a quick overview of their background.

Jose Alcaine: Oh, thanks so much, Stefanie. I'm so happy to be here today for this episode that I think will be very insightful, especially as we're talking about research development and growing our portfolios. I'm Jose Alcaine, I'm Director of Research Services here at the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University, and Affiliate Faculty in the Foundations Department. So, I'm very happy to join everyone in the discussion, and I'll pass it on to our guests to introduce themselves.

Kevin Sutherland: Hey, everyone. My name is Kevin Sutherland. I'm Associate Dean for Research in the School of Education at VCU, and I'm also a researcher. My research is focused on improving the educational experiences of children and youth that have significant risk for mental health problems and externalizing behavior problems, and work in the spaces of prevention science and implementation science. So, nice to be here.

Courtney Hunt: Good morning, everyone. I'm Courtney Hunt, I'm the Director of Academic Strategy at Houston Methodist, and also SRAI Distinguished Faculty. My work sits at the intersection of research strategy, strategic planning and partnerships, and research intelligence. And prior experiences include around 10 years in research development.

Terry Campbell: Hi, everyone. My name is Terry Campbell. I have been the Assistant Vice President Research Services at the University of Ottawa in

Canada's capital for several years. And in that role, I was responsible for the central sponsored research office, strategic research planning, performance measurement, institutional strategies and programs, and all those good things. And since I've retired a few years ago, I now in my spare time spend some time helping researchers and institutions develop their research enterprise.

Jose Alcaine: Excellent. What a wonderful group of guests. And Stefanie, thank you for having me here, co-hosting with you. And I guess we'll dive in to start the conversation, since we are talking about research development, portfolio management, and thinking about the institutional strategic planning more in the long-term and macro.

I guess we can't ignore what's happened, especially, Terry, to your point more specifically, in the United States federal agency funding landscape over the past year or a year and a half, let's say. We've all experienced shifts in funding from federal agencies here in the US, which has really provided some challenges. Would you all share individually just from your perspective, if you have been affected, how were you vulnerable at the unit level or university level, in terms of portfolio management with these changes at the federal level, US federal level?

Kevin Sutherland: Yeah, I can start, since I think we were, I always say it's a great time to be an associate dean for research in a school of education in the United States. So I'll preface it by saying, things weren't as bad as we thought they were going to be. I think say around February, March of 2024, it was a very dark, dark time. We ultimately lost around 15% of our portfolio.

Jose Alcaine: '24 or '25? Sorry, Kevin.

Kevin Sutherland: '25, sorry. Yeah, '25. It was probably dark in '24 as well, but definitely in '25. But yeah, we lost around 15 to 20% of our portfolio. Primarily, a lot of the work that our researchers and folks do is around supporting vulnerable populations, and so we had some grants and contracts cut. And also, one of the bigger challenges that we've had because we are a school of education is a significant portion of our portfolio is from the US Department of Education, and specifically the Institute of Education Sciences. And we had five proposals under review there when it was really shut, shuttered. So it's not only the fact that we had some money taken away, but we also had funding opportunities that no longer exist. So, that created some real challenges.

Jose Alcaine: A huge challenge. Terry or Courtney, any effects from US federal agency changes?

Courtney Hunt: Sure. So like many institutions, vulnerability to these changes depends on the composition of your research portfolio. If

organizations or groups are highly dependent on single federal agency or particular types of mechanisms, that can be more challenging than if you have more spread out, more breadth in that portfolio. And so, my institution of course felt effects, but is also fortunate to have support from multiple different sponsors. And so, we really leaned in on keeping those core strengths and are working to sharpen alignment with priorities and build some of that flexibility into some of our long-term plans.

Jose Alcaine: Excellent. But in your disciplines, were you affected by, let's say, Department of Health and Human Services or any changes in those?

Courtney Hunt: [inaudible 00:07:14].

Jose Alcaine: But because of your portfolio, you said you were able to weather some of those changes?

Courtney Hunt: Exactly.

Jose Alcaine: Excellent, it's a good lesson. Terry, you offer a really unique perspective operating in Canada, but were you affected at all, or?

Terry Campbell: Sure. There certainly have been quite a few impacts for Canada in terms of the... We're so closely related to the US.

Jose Alcaine: Right.

Terry Campbell: But I think that the major ones have been, so for the individual researchers that have held US funding, there's been quite a bit of uncertainty on some of those awards. And as a result, when there's been those issues, the university has had to pick up some of the lapses in funding, etc, so universities have had some financial constraints on that.

On the other side though, is the fact that the Canadian government actually has viewed the issues in the States as an opportunity to launch some very huge funding opportunities to attract-

Jose Alcaine: Oh, interesting.

Terry Campbell: ... US researchers and those from other countries to Canada.

So for example, about a Canada research chair program, a new one that got launched in about record time, I would say, with $2 billion. And so, were wonderful to want to attract US researchers. It's been a lot of work for institutions in these short timeframes to attract people. And then I guess the other issue, and the results are starting to come in, they'll be announced shortly. But on a larger scale was going to be that when we have the opportunity to welcome these US funders or from other countries, US researchers, and they come to

Canada, they're going to have higher expectations for larger operating grants over the long run. And that's actually a concern for some Canadian researchers is, how is that if we don't get ongoing funding, how are we going to be able to take on those new, greatly talented individuals? So, that's from our side now. Good opportunity, but it's going to have to be managed.

Stefanie Keto: So with that, Terry, would there be any issues potentially with infrastructure that have come up in the discussions with these new initiatives?

Terry Campbell: Well, for sure. And on the infrastructure side, I should say that there's also some additional infrastructure funding as well that goes with these chairs.

Stefanie Keto: Oh, okay.

Terry Campbell: But on a larger side, so Canada has done a lot of international recruitment in the last several years, for the last 15 years. And one issue that always comes up is on the infrastructure side, because when well-established researchers want to relocate their labs, it's a lot of work.

Jose Alcaine: A lot of work.

Terry Campbell: It's expensive, and then they also want to bring their students or their students can't come. So, there's lots of ins and outs to it.

Jose Alcaine: I think that, Terry, what you just alluded to, points to the fact of how important governmental investments in research writ large, but also research infrastructure is. Right?

Terry Campbell: Right.

Jose Alcaine: So, certainly challenging times. Stefanie, if I may, just continuing the thread of, and Courtney, you mentioned it, how important it is to keep track and diversify your portfolio so you're not beholden to any one strand, let's say. It's almost akin to investment portfolios, right? They say you need to diversify. So keeping that in mind, what would you define from your perspective is a balanced research portfolio? Is there such a thing?

Kevin Sutherland: I'll speak from our perspective, and again, from a school of education perspective, which is likely to be somewhat different. But for us, all of those full indirect grants, whether it's NIH, NSF, used to be IES for the US Department of Education, those are critical for us because of the infrastructure supports they provide and that they allow us more flexibility, but that would be one. But two would be federal training grants, so, that have lower indirect costs, but provide significant

student support. So, those are very important in a school of education.

Then I would mention state contracts to do a lot of training and technical assistance work that we do, whether those are teacher trainers or school counselor trainers or educational leaders. So, state contracts are very much part of our portfolio.

And then I would say foundations, foundation grants, which don't provide much in indirect cost, but they do provide significant support for faculty to do research in areas that may not be funded by federal agencies.

Jose Alcaine: Great points. Terry or Courtney, ideas of what, from your perspective, a good, diversified portfolio is?

Courtney Hunt: Sure. So from what I heard from Kevin was breadth and playing to your strengths, and I would say that ours is very similar. I think balance is going to look different for each institution, each discipline, but its common denominator is really alignment with your institution, your researchers, and whatever that sponsor is looking for. So for us, we are the academic arm of a hospital system, and so we are going to be very biomedically driven, translationally driven, and so our balance portfolio is going to look different. We are heavy in NIH and Department of Defense's medical research programs, less so on the NSF side. So to me, that balanced portfolio really just means leaning into your institution's strengths and being responsive to your sponsor priorities.

Terry Campbell: So just to follow on Courtney's comments, I would pretty much agree with that, and it depends on your institution in many respects. And then also the goals of the institution, also the researchers themselves, what is the strength in the institution and the career stage of the researchers? You know? Because you have to walk before you run. So, but lots of factors like that go into play.

Kevin Sutherland: Can I just follow up on that really quickly? Terry, I think that's a really good point. I think it's something that I know we spend quite a bit of time thinking about, and Jose knows this, is that playing to the strengths of your researchers. And I think because ultimately you have a core group of faculty that are prepared to write RO1s or to seek NIH funding or NSF funding, and some that maybe need a little bit more mentoring. And what you don't want to do is pressure someone into working on a big proposal that they're not ready for, because then it becomes so punishing that they don't want to do it again. So I think hitting people where they are in their zone of proximal development, if you will, I think is really critical.

Jose Alcaine: Great point.

Terry Campbell: Yeah, I agree 100% with you on that, Kevin. And one of the things in Canada is that that's been a bit of a monkey wrench thrown into this, is we have so many of these large initiatives now that are multi-partnered and all of these different international and all the things that you have to do. And yet, sometimes very early career researchers want to get involved in them. And in fact, their proposal asks for early career researcher involvement, but they have to be the right people and they have to be at the right point. If they don't have their basic, I would say CHR grant or RO1 or whatever, they can't be starting out there. You know? And that's really when it's very helpful for research development professionals within your faculty or department to give some really good advice on where they should be putting their efforts, at what time.

Kevin Sutherland: Yep, exactly.

Jose Alcaine: Great points.

Stefanie Keto: Yeah. And as y'all are talking about the portfolio growth and trying to make sure you hit the right time and everything like that, but are there any tips that you could provide for maybe someone who's looking to grow their portfolio, whether it's a PI or a unit, to make it more long-term or more sustainable? I know there was discussions of different sponsors, but are there any other kind of tips or tricks that you have from your experience that you could share?

Terry Campbell: Courtney, why don't you jump in?

Courtney Hunt: I'd be happy to. A lot of those tips is, it starts with an assessment of where you are now and where you want to go. And so it's looking at, what is the big term question that you're trying to answer? And from there, you can look at what it takes to get there, map out that progression. Right? So it's building in the pile of data, building in the right sized awards. You are not going to jump straight into that complex multi-PI, multi-institutional and be successful. Probably not. So, start building those, those awards that are the right size for the question you're answering in your career stage. And then, building in those partnerships and building in those more complex challenges until you're telling this story and evolving that bigger portfolio that has more breadth, maybe multiple funding streams, or maybe leaning into a particular sponsor. But really, just building out that body of work that's building credibility and building impact over time.

Kevin Sutherland: I think that's a really good point. I think it's targeting, again, where they are, and then, what do they need to be successful? And a lot of times, that might be making connections on campus with other researchers that, like you said, Courtney, they can partner with that might add something to their expertise that might push them over the edge in terms of a fund-able score.

Jose Alcaine: Great point. Terry, similar strategies, pro-tips?

Terry Campbell: I would, yeah, agree with both Courtney and Kevin. I think in terms of helping researchers, the early career ones, having more collaboration and learning about other people within the institution is really important.

And one thing that the University of Ottawa has done, and I think most institutions do, but is really their centers and internal centers and institutes where they actually get together, interdisciplinary institutes and centers, and encourage to people to make these relationships and they start getting to know potential future collaborators. And because sometimes it's hard to make connections, particularly in a big institution when everyone's off doing their own thing. But the more that an institution can do to bring those little naturally occurring groups together, I think the better.

Courtney Hunt: I think it builds up more, well-rounded research questions too, right? You get these different perspectives coming in, whether you are formally collaborating with somebody or just kind of chatting, and you may gain insight that you wouldn't have otherwise if you were staying within your own discipline.

Kevin Sutherland: Yeah, for sure. Absolutely.

Stefanie Keto: And then just jumping back a little bit, because I know we're going from the bigger to the smaller, right? But if you're at the unit level, I think Kevin, you're at the unit level, so are there metrics or goals or strategic plans that as you're looking to develop these faculty that you also are trying to maintain at the same time to manage the portfolio?

Kevin Sutherland: Yeah, it's a great question. I think from the unit level, I'll defer to the other experts on the call because they do more of that strategic approach. I mean, we have a strategic approach but so much of it is driven by what funding opportunities there are. Our university has a strategic plan. We have a research strategic plan at our institution, and I find it pretty broad enough to where we fit nicely into it. So, I don't think we need to make any tweaking there. One of the pillars is, improving the human condition. Okay, that's what we're trying to do. So, I think we fit well there. So, but a lot of it for us is driven by funding opportunities, and I know that's where Jose spends a lot of time keeping his eyes open on what's coming up. What are going to be opportunities for our faculty?

Jose Alcaine: I try, Kevin. I try. Courtney would call it, what do you call it, Courtney? Research intelligence, or?

Courtney Hunt: Research intelligence.

Jose Alcaine: Yeah, trying to look for the scans of what's happening, what's coming up. Yeah, so that's really important.

Going back, if I may, to a couple of comments that you mentioned before, I think Courtney, Terry, Kevin, you all said it, in thinking about strategic planning and growing the portfolio, is maybe looking at what strengths you have and where you want to go. How does that fit into taking an assessment of what resources you have, what faculty mix you have? How does that play into then hiring new faculty, like prospective faculty that might come to your institution, hiring practices? How does that fit in, in terms of strategic planning to grow portfolios or expand work? Does that play in?

Courtney Hunt: Sure.

Terry Campbell: Wow, that's an interesting, it's kind of a complicated question. I think in general, one area that I think is important for an institution or department of faculty is if their faculty, if their academic and research plans are integrated. Because they're then looking at, these are all the professors that... the teaching needs that we have, plus where we want to grow in research. And I noticed at the University of Ottawa, when they started doing the integrated planning, it actually improved the ability not only to recruit excellent researchers, but also excellent tenure track professors that are going to be teaching largely undergraduate, because you're looking together at what do you need, as opposed to separating off two different things. And then also, deans get a little bit more excited in it too, but anyway.

Jose Alcaine: Exactly, exactly. Kevin or Courtney, any thoughts on hiring practices, or?

Kevin Sutherland: I would just say, given our budget situation the past few years, I would love to have the opportunity to hire new faculty.

Jose Alcaine: Right.

Kevin Sutherland: But related to something Terry said, I mean, I think when we do hire faculty, we are looking at the breadth of the experience and training that they have. I think, for sure, their ability to seek and gain external funding is high on our priority list, but also related to, like Terry said, where they fit into our teaching needs. And but for sure, their training and experience becomes critical.

Courtney Hunt: Yeah, likewise. When we're looking to recruit faculty, we are looking at both current gaps and also where we want to be in five, 10 years. Recruiting faculty is certainly a long-term commitment, and so we are looking at the whole package. Right? It's, what is their funding potential? That's one factor, but also, are they bringing a new set of expertise, a new research tool? Are they in alignment with our institutional strengths? What is their potential to collaborate across

our institution? What is their mentoring history or capacity? And so how do they fit in to that overall package of our research enterprise?

Stefanie Keto: Or as Terry alluded, they're bringing everybody, right? Earlier, yeah. So looking at once you get the folks established, once you get your research, once you get PIs, once you get everybody established with what you want them to do, excited about proposal submission, going for that money, do y'all have any guidance for proposal submission or how that's all done to try to enhance their portfolios or in the research portfolio at your respective units?

Terry Campbell: So I'll just jump in on this one, if you don't mind. So I want to just say that yes, every successful institution does. And it really starts with how the faculty research development officers work effectively to support the department and the faculty needs. And having those, that's what is essential, because anything that I have seen as done centrally is only at the central areas just to add some additional help. But it's really the critical support at the faculty department level in understanding the researchers and working with them individually and helping the administrators within the faculty or the department to remove some barriers. Because in fact, there's actually lots of barriers in most institutions for researchers to do research, and our role is to remove those barriers. And because while research administrators love researchers and love to work with them, inherently, we're not the researchers ourselves. So, what can you do to nurture those relationships and support?

And I know Courtney has all sorts of things that she does, but Kevin, I know you have all sorts of needs too.

Courtney Hunt: Kevin, go right ahead.

Kevin Sutherland: I think for us, a few years ago we instituted, I think what Terry pointed out about, I see my role as reducing barriers. That's the role I should serve for the faculty and the school to make it easier to apply for grants and to make the post-award process as painless as possible and so on.

But for us, we started a couple years ago a pre-award process in Smartsheets, where as soon as somebody is thinking about writing a grant, they complete the form and it asks questions like, "Do you need letters of support? Do you need certain statistical supports? Do you need sub-awards? Will this have subs that you need? Will it have internal subs, external subs?" So that, especially for novice investigators, that it can lays out what they need to be thinking about, but then also allows us to step in immediately and provide support. But what we quickly learned is that we have several large research centers and institutes within our school. They have a very robust portfolios and this is what they do, they are externally supported. So they didn't really need to do that, because that would've been a

barrier for them to have to complete another form. So, we laid it out for faculty and especially for novice faculty to do the Smartsheet, but for those more experienced centers and institutes, it wasn't necessary because we didn't want to put an additional task in line for them, so.

Jose Alcaine: Terry, I was going to say to your comment and to Kevin's as well, you were talking about the street level, right? Working with the faculty at the unit level where you have that more hands-on, intimate relationship that helps them and supports them as they go about not only trying to find opportunities but then actually submitting the grants, preparing the grants. And I like the idea of eliminating barriers to make it easier on the whole structure.

Courtney Hunt: Sure. I really liked, Kevin, your point about tailoring the offerings based on the faculty level. And so we do have a similar approach, where we can provide more support for maybe a junior faculty that are just getting started on not only how do you submit grants in general, but how do you do it at our institution? Right? Because every institution has their own quirks that need to be navigated. It's providing information on maybe core facilities or other resources that could be at a faculty member's disposal for a proposal. It's helping to tailor to that sponsor fit so that they're really applying to the most aligned opportunity to increase chances of success. We don't want to just throw spaghetti at the wall, we want to be submitting to something that has the highest likelihood of being the right fit. It can be providing some of that research intelligence on sponsors. It can be just connecting folks with mentors or collaborators, or for my institution, it's maybe connecting with clinicians to get that input.

So, I think there's a lot of ways, different ways to provide support. Some of them require financial investments, some of them require time. And so, there's lots of ways that institutions can help encourage or facilitate success for faculty submitting proposals.

Jose Alcaine: Excellent.

Stefanie Keto: I appreciate all of you joining Jose, Kevin, Courtney, Terry, for our episode today. This has been a wealth of knowledge hopefully for anybody who's looking to develop their portfolio or look to long-term planning. I guess the only thing I would say is if y'all have any other quick tips or tricks to offer to anybody before we sign off. Other than that, thank you for coming.

Kevin Sutherland: Thanks for having us. It's been great.

Terry Campbell: Thank you.

Jose Alcaine: I do want to just add on a tangent, that our conversation reminds me of putting a well-oiled soccer team for the World Cup. And Terry, congratulations on your team for-

Terry Campbell: Thank you.

Jose Alcaine: ... making it to the next round. But really, it makes me think of a well-oiled team where you have the senior more seasoned players, mixed with the junior, in terms of we were talking about faculty and how do they come together and within the structures to succeed. Right? So, thank you all so much for your insights and conversation here. Really enjoyed it. And thank you, Stefanie, for having me as well.

Stefanie Keto: Thank you all.

Thank you so much to my co-host, Jose, as well as our incredible panel of experts for taking us behind the scenes of strategic long-term portfolio management. We covered the foundations on how to help researchers build their portfolio comfortably into a more robust, mature, decades-long research portfolio. As our guests pointed out, one major takeaway from our conversation is that balanced research portfolios operate a lot like financial investment portfolios. A true balance requires intentional diversification, mixing federal sponsors with state, private, and corporate partners to protect against shifts in funding landscape.

Another piece of wisdom from our panel is around how you can master the art of long-term portfolio planning. This isn't about chasing the next single award. It's about building a sustainable, flexible ecosystem around the research.

A huge thank you to Kevin Sutherland, Courtney Hunt, and Terry Campbell for joining us and providing us with their beautiful insight about portfolio management and long-term strategic planning.

A huge thank you, as always, to our wonderful podcast team and everyone who continually contributes to enhancing this podcast. We are proud that this platform brings together people, ideas, and new opportunities in research administration. The conversation doesn't stop here. We would love to hear from you. Please submit your suggestions for future episodes of SRAI's Shop Talk, to shoptalk@srai.org. Thank you again for listening to this episode. Don't forget to subscribe and help grow our community by sharing. I'm Stefanie Keto, and I'll catch you on the next episode.