Social Scientists and Research Development: What Do Research Development Professionals Do?

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The concept of Research Development (RD) has existed for three decades, and select academic institutions have had RD programs for some time. Over the last five years, precipitated by the economic downturn (and subsequent decline in overall research and collaborative nature of research problems, RD programs have spread to more universities, colleges, and research institutions, spanning the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education index.

The National Organization of Research Development Professinals (NORDP) is the leader in this burgeoning area of work within our new and rapidly growing peer network, NORDP members develop and implement cutting-edge approaches in pursuing strategic research initiatives. Work within our individual institutions and our RD network is expanding and institutional approaches to organized research and to capturing research resources.

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The Making of Two Research Development Professionals from the Social Sciences

Gila Budescu: I relocated to the United States in 1992, joining my spouse in a Midwest university town. I had received my Organizational Behavior (OB) from Technion in Israel, training and work experience in psychology and anthropology.

A university town is an exciting intellectual environment for PhDs, especially those pursuing academic careers. Nonetheless, a short while after my arrival, I came across a job listing for a Coordinator at a research in biophysics and in computational biology. I applied, outlining my academic credentials, organization and operation of service organizations. I promised to bring in a unique set of management skills informed by my consulting accomplishments. Just in case, on the way to the interview, I stopped at the public library to find out about biophysics. These fields, as I learned, tackle broad and complex research problems that rely on team efforts across scientific disciplines.
The interview was short. The facility director, a renowned scientist, only asked about my management perspective having an OB PhD supporting the non-science oversight of the facility. His open-minded and thoughtful approach towards the facility, empowering me to perform independently, grow on the job, and develop and nurture a team climate of collaboration and excellence. Over time, my work included not only team and relationship building, funding opportunities, creating and sharing new knowledge, providing training, offering guidance on grants, reporting quantitative evaluations of service quality and stakeholders’ satisfaction, and other entrepreneurial efforts; in sh
today’s RD professionals. Toward the end of my tenure in this position I also contributed as a co-investigator on combining my onsite experience with my previous training in social science research methodology (e.g., the development of software user surveys; the evaluation of software products and support). My next positions allowed me to simulate— and take advantage of— my formal training. I am now the Director of the Sponsored Research and Program Office at University in New York.

Barbara L. E. Walker: Despite a passion for social science research and analysis, I have never been excited about cultural geography at University of California-Berkeley, I began my job search with uncertainty about pursuing post-doctoral applications later, I accepted an NSF Post-Doctoral Fellowship at UC-Santa Barbara. I have always felt that you can lay out a beautiful and elegant research plan that is not complicated by the realities of finding and all the other nuisances that make the best laid plans go awry.

Initially intended as a stopover on the way to the tenure-track, my post-doc turned into a series of increasingly large programs and grants. I continued to apply for teaching positions half-heartedly, but several factors kept me in Santa Barbara and supported long-term fieldwork and a competitive salary, along with strong cultural and family ties. During this time, I received close to $1 million in research funding, and my proposal writing skills had been honed through a variety of interdisciplinary collaborators (a drop in the bucket compared to research funding for “hard” sciences). Abundant funding sources for social scientists, even for someone whose focus is on social theory and qualitative research, sharpened my knack for academic administration as well as my ability to organize and execute complex academic programs.

The arrival of three children in short order coincided with a job opening in the UCSB Office of Research for a position that supported the social sciences, humanities, and fine arts. Established in 1987, UC-Santa Barbara has one of the oldest Research Development offices on any campus that employ a RD professional exclusively for the social sciences, humanities, and fine arts. Recognizing the need for research funding in these areas, and increasing interdisciplinary opportunities calling for collaborative projects, my office provides multiple training opportunities and other programs that catalyze research submission. Ironically, I do a lot of teaching now. I teach an annual grant-writing course, a faculty grant-writing workshop on various aspects of grantsmanship. Sharing my expertise with my colleagues is fun and rewarding and contribute in a small way to the range of brilliant research topics being pursued on my campus.

Lessons Learned

The design/development of smart, proactive, and relevant organizational solutions to meet strategic and routine challenges depends on multi-disciplinary integration and knowledge crossover. Brought together, administrators and a social science PhD can lead to fertile and mutually beneficial partnerships that foster individual, professional growth, provide a unique and exciting context for testing and applying aspects of social science theory, principles, and relationships. Bringing fresh and innovative views and ideas into research institutions creating worthwhile and lasting intellectual contributions.

Job Requirements

A recent discussion on the NORDP listserv focused on what qualities universities look for when hiring a research development professional. Common traits mentioned were: the ability to write and communicate well; an understanding of academia and the research world; and the ability to effectively manage large programs and grants. The ideal candidate would have a strong background in social sciences, humanities, and fine arts, with experience in proposal writing and project management. Understanding

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getting grants, especially involving large multi-investigator grants; administrative/process/project management relationships with sponsors and/or key individuals within sponsoring organizations; and most of all, a desire and confidence about your abilities. Work with leaders that respect your education and understand that it could benefit peers, and networks who will support you and your efforts and advocate the need for them. In an RD position, respect their research needs. Have the capacity to translate investigators’ needs into simple, intuitive, and cost-effective meaningful. Increase investigators’ funding success, yet minimize the administrative burden on them. Be able to institutional priorities and changing funding landscape, and change course if/when needed. Supporting today’s sustaining excellence can be accomplished through true partnerships, flexibility, and reason. Social scientists have

Does Research Development need social scientists? Absolutely. Explore the NORDP site and Job Board for positions.

www.nordp.org.

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