



Communicating Across Borders

PARTNERING FOR SUCCESS

By Gai Doran

Academia is where more than 60% of the basic research in the United States is performed. Forty of the world's top fifty research universities are in the U.S., and U.S. researchers are responsible for more publications in top scientific journals than researchers of any other nation, accounting for nearly half of the top one percent of the most cited scientific papers. Still, there is a significant trend of internationalizing scientific research. In 2000, only 25 percent of the U.S. research articles had an international co-author; today that number is 33 percent. Researchers are increasingly mobile, traveling long distances to work with the best colleagues in their fields. They are being supported internationally through cross-border funding from international organizations, multilateral initiatives between governments and research councils, multinational funding bodies, and shared scientific infrastructure. This trend acknowledges that international, multidisciplinary collaborations are needed to solve global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity, food and water security, energy, and potential pandemics. For research administrators, this means dealing with an increasingly complex level of issues to facilitate inter-institutional research collaborations.

Collaborating across borders goes beyond geography. Other barriers come into play, such as re-

sources, time zones, culture, and language. When I moved to the United States from Australia, 28 years ago, my phone calls home cost \$1.21 per minute. I would talk to my mother once a month for an hour. I wrote a lot of letters back then – *pen on paper* letters that took two weeks by air-mail to reach my family. Ironically, one of my U.S.-born adult children went to Scotland for his undergraduate education, and then to Australia to attend graduate school and where he now lives, 9,679 miles and eleven time zones away! He's a night owl so the time difference isn't a barrier for us. We talk via Skype for as long as we like, as often as we like, for the price of internet service, so there are few resource barriers. He and his sister (who lives in the U.S.) are collaborating on Skype to create an on-line game design business. When they want input from their friends from around the world, Skype, Face Time, Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail are their tools. They all speak the same language (and I'm not just talking about Scottish/American/Australian/British English!). How "Jetsons-like" we have become.

Some borders still exist in our own backyards. One might argue that a border exists between researchers and research administrators, and that crossing that border requires special communication skills. When you consider resources, time

zones, culture, and language, the contrasts of our worlds are quite jarring. Faculty conduct research and teach the next generation; administrators manage and carry out the operations of our complex organizations. Faculty are in a world of labs with specialized research equipment, computers for data analysis and modeling, research centers for specialized populations, clinical resources, animal research facilities, etc. Research administrators wrestle with the nuances of laws and regulations, cost principles, administrative requirements, audits and compliance, IRBs, IACUCs, grants, contracts, the Code of Federal Regulations, and the FAR.

How do faculty and research administrators collaborate when our cultures are so different? I suggest that if you want to connect with people, you have to get to know them better. Like any relationship, those between faculty and research administrators need nurturing. The more comfortable and confident faculty are with your competence, the more likely they will be to engage with you in the grant application process. Sometimes the research field is quite accessible, particularly in social science, and getting to know something about your faculty's research will help you appreciate administrative difficulties they may encounter for which you are the best qualified person to address. Ultimately you help your institution when you un-

derstand your faculty members' research because you can be more effective at matching funding opportunities with their interests, at helping them build budgets that make sense, and at matching researchers with others with whom they might collaborate.

Let me share a story which I think illustrates how knowing about a faculty member's research can be useful. Recently, during a pre-award consultation with a faculty member, I asked him to describe his vision for his project, and was fascinated to learn how he planned to use cell phones to capture information about the behavior of people when they were in risky environments. I thought his idea was brilliant, and asked "How are you going to do that?" to which he replied, "I don't know yet. I'll have to find a really clever programmer." Serendipitously, a few days later while I was visiting colleges with my daughter, I learned, during a presentation on links between cognitive science and computer science, of three alumni who had developed new cell phone technology that allows for automated, individual text messaging conversations. I saw the potential of a partnership, and was able to link these researchers with a few quick emails on my smart phone before I had even left the campus. I made the connection because I had asked about the research, and that faculty member now knows that I am invested in helping him succeed.

All this is well and good when the news you are conveying is positive. What about when you have to deliver bad news? Robert Bies offers ten best practices:

- There should be no surprises – warn your audience of what is coming.
- Don't delay sharing the news, thinking it will improve – it might get worse!

- Be truthful – don't hide the facts.
- Keep an accurate, written record of what led to the problem.
- Explain why are you telling them bad news?
- Find a silver lining – this will help with morale and productivity.
- Present a solution or an action plan for how you're going to solve the problem.
- Inform all stakeholders when you deliver the message.
- Track the progress of the solution and let everyone know the problem has been solved.
- Treat people with dignity and respect.

I had cause to employ these practices when the new Conflict Of Interest (COI) regulations went into effect a few weeks before the September 7, 2012 AIDS deadline. Our investigators were, in actuality, the institution's "guinea pigs" as the new process was rolled out. My role was that of liaison between the sponsored research office, COI office, anxious investigators and their U.S. and foreign collaborators. Our sponsored research office and COI office gave us unwavering support through this tense period, and we submitted all the applications on time and in compliance (including a certain P30 Center renewal grant application!). The trust I had established with our faculty stood me in good stead in guiding them through the process, explaining the forms, tracking their responses, keeping them informed of updates, and sympathizing with what they saw as just another piece of red tape in the bureaucracy.

Recently, one of our Russian collaborators was visiting our Center. In a sidebar conversation with me, she admitted that she and her colleagues really didn't understand what they were signing

when we asked them to sign our sub-recipient information and compliance form. We sat down together for the next thirty minutes and talked about F&A rates, fringe rates, conflict of interest policies, debarment and suspension, audits, and the final declaration of the form that reads "*The appropriate programmatic and administrative personnel involved in this application are aware of agency policy in regard to sub-awards and are prepared to establish the necessary inter-institutional agreement consistent with those policies...*" Not only was this enlightening to her, it was a useful exercise for me to check in with myself and make sure I truly understood what we were asking of these researchers whose primary language is not English.

I consider myself fortunate to be working in a Center where faculty research contributes to the prevention and care of HIV/AIDS. Our Center hosts faculty seminars, organizes peer reviews of grant proposals and manuscripts, and disseminates research findings. I have ample opportunities to develop some understanding of their research, although I admit that until recently, when researchers discussed the methods they employed to analyze the data, I zoned out. Since taking courses on biostatistics and research design and methods¹, I now know the *significance* (pun intended) of a p-value and have a much deeper appreciation of our faculty's successes as well as the roadblocks they encounter. Stephen Covey recommends that we "Seek first to understand, then to be understood". We need good strategies for understanding our faculty's research and needs that match our internal capabilities. We may not have much authority, so our leadership approach needs to be tailored to the situation. We must be able to build teams internally as well as negotiate – both internally and with our faculty. We can be a source of innovation, generating new ideas for new processes and services, and become indispensable to faculty, keeping them informed of what is relevant to them. Embrace your administrator-faculty relationships to successfully support what is certainly a future of complex, intra- and inter-institutional collaborations. ■

¹ A shameless advertisement for Rush University's Master's Degree Program in Research Administration

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