

Play the Right Music

By David Smelser & Linnea Minnema



Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

The Beatles "A great thing about research administration is that every day when you go to work you get to help a diverse group of people change the world."

Ask any undergrad walking around campus, with their ear buds connected to their iPhone, "What is the definition of good music?" and your answer will be a discussion of more genres than you even knew existed. You might here: Alternative, Blues, Classical, Country, Jazz, Rock, Emo, Hip-Hop, and so on. None of the genres are any more the *correct* answer than the next. They all have merit and they all have their purpose. Regardless of your personal favorites, most would agree that the right song at the right time can be just what you need. Maybe you scroll down your iPhone's song list to Bobby McFerrin's *Don't Worry, Be Happy* during a break on a stressful day, hoping it will lift your spirits. However, just as that right song can be what you need, the wrong song can have the opposite effect. Accidentally pressing play on Paul McCartney's *Scrambled Eggs* during the White House's annual Easter Egg Roll probably isn't a good idea. As research administrators, we can think of our individual skill sets as the "music we play" and we need to learn to play a wide variety of music to be successful.

Like any good musician, we have to know our audience and have the ability to play the right

song at the right time. For research administrators, the audience is the faculty we serve, our principal investigators. As much as we like to lump them together into groups, they are individuals just like us. They each have their own unique work styles, strengths and weaknesses, and idea of how they would like the

process to move forward. In essence, they all have their own personal playlist of favorite tunes and want to hear them in the order they set. As research administrators, we need to understand that the songs we use to assist one PI might not resonate with the next. To achieve the results that best suit everyone, we cannot simply prepare a playlist that works for us, just as conforming exactly to a faculty member's set list isn't the right approach either. Instead, we must act as a DJ with a vast repertoire of songs, because we never know who is going to show up at the party. Sometimes, following up Bobby Bare's *Praise The Lord & Send Me The Money* with Notorious B.I.G.'s *Mo Money, Mo Problems* is the right thing to do. We have to learn to play the right songs for the right audience.

For example, some PIs always seem to be at their wits end when writing proposals. Their approach is scattered, unorganized, and even small problems have a tendency to send them off track. It's like they are listening to Led Zeppelin's *Dazed and Confused* on loop. These PIs might have the best of intentions in the beginning, but get so caught up in the requirements, regulations, and red tape that they just don't know what to do next. When working with this type of PI, perhaps it's best to play something a little more soothing, like Bob Marley's *Everything's Gonna Be Alright* and use your skills to help them settle down and reassure them that together, we will crescendo to a brilliant finish.

On the other hand, some PIs can be too laid back. They never seem to be in a hurry to do

what needs to be done, like Jimmy Buffet's *Boats, Beaches, Bars, and Ballads* is the only album they own. Their overly calm demeanor might result in not starting proposals until it is too late or letting reports become overdue because they aren't as in tune to these requirements as they should be. In this situation, playing some soothing reggae isn't going to produce the necessary results. These PIs need you to exercise a different skill set, such as playing Motley Crue's *Keep Your Eye on the Money* to help them focus on the task at hand.

In the world of research administration, however, singing only the karaoke-classics will not bring you the success we all strive for. It is very easy to build your own personal playlist that you're comfortable with and that uses your natural skill set. But, because we don't get to choose which audience we play for and our PIs don't get to choose which concerts they attend, we as the DJs need to be ready for any request from the crowd. Research administrators exist to assist all the PIs at our institutions and each of those PIs need to receive that assistance in a way that works for them. Whether it's The Beatles or Stevie Wonder's rendition, we have to sing *We Can Work it Out* in whatever way the job gets done.

In this spirit, new (and maybe even some not-so-new) research administrators must ask themselves, "How do I get better at playing the right music?" In the same way that Jimmy Page didn't have *Stairway to Heaven* in perfect form the moment he picked up a guitar, it takes time and practice to build up your research administration skill set. Also, it takes having the courage to make some mistakes along the way, like the little child sitting on the piano bench at their very first recital. No one in the audience expects Mozart from the 6-year-old, but they know that eventually the little one will complete the song. It might be a little bumpy, but it will get done. Anyone who has been in this profession for more than a few days will have a story about a time when a proposal was barely completed in time for the deadline or when their interactions with a PI were less than harmonious. We all have Britney Spears' *Oops!...I Did it Again* in our song list, even if we don't want to admit that out loud.

The moral of the story is research administrators must learn something from each experience and play a different song the next time. We must commit to practice and patience to learn new songs and discover different genres. So, how do we do that?

It's important to keep in mind that even Mozart had a teacher. He was inherently more talented than most, but he had someone to guide his practice and instruct him when he needed assistance. Having a more seasoned research administration mentor is great for those times when *Help!* by The Beatles is the only song you know and you need another mind to go over a problem with you. This person could be your supervisor, someone in your department, or even someone from another institution that you connect with. Foster a relationship with someone whom you

are comfortable with and whose opinion you trust. In addition to finding your mentor, listening to the "greatest hits" helps to build your knowledge base. Attending conferences where new situations are presented may not be immediately relevant, but in a time of need you can hit "re-play" on a song that you have heard before. Leonard Cohen may have originally recorded *Hallelujah*, but Jeff Buckley made it his own. Learning from what others do can save you time and the headache of sour notes.

For research administrators, like musicians, it is important to have a long list of "songs to play" for diverse audiences. It is equally important to keep that list growing so that we can handle the new situations that come our way. Grow your list and watch your career climb the charts. ■



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2014 NCURA Election Results

Robert Andresen, Director of Research Financial Services, Associate Director, Research and Sponsored Programs, University of Wisconsin - Madison, has been elected Vice President/President-Elect of NCURA. Throughout his 25 years of NCURA membership, Bob has been extremely active in NCURA. He is currently serving as NCURA's Treasurer and the Chair of the Financial Management Committee and is on NCURA's Education Scholarship Fund's Task Force. Bob has been on



the Global Traveling Workshop Faculty since 2012 and has been a Peer Reviewer since 2007. He has served as a Faculty member for both the Financial Research Administration and Fundamentals of Sponsored Project Administration Workshops. He has been on many program committees, both at the national and regional level, and has presented at countless regional meetings, Annual Meetings, FRA and PRA conferences. Upon his election as NCURA Vice President/President-Elect, Bob says, "Being elected as Vice President/President Elect is very exciting and I am extremely honored by and grateful to my colleagues and friends for this opportunity. Thank you! Now more than ever, many of us rely on NCURA's professional development programs and outreach as we deal with new Federal guidance and a challenging funding environment. I look forward to working with everyone as we continue to learn from each other and to grow our profession."

Glenda Bullock, Manager of Business Operations, Washington University in St. Louis, has been elected to the position of At-Large Board Member. Since joining NCURA in 1993, Glenda has been involved at both the regional and national levels. Glenda is currently on the Departmental Research Administration Workshop Faculty. She has both presented and been on the workshop faculty for NCURA's FRA and PRA conferences, Annual Meeting, and Region IV's meetings.



Glenda was on the national Nominating and Leadership Development Committee and has also served on several regional committees. Glenda received both Region IV's Distinguished Service Award and Kevin Reed Award. On being elected to this position, Glenda expresses, "I am beyond excited to be selected to serve on NCURA's Board of Directors. It is humbling to know the membership would place their faith in me. I am proud to be a part of an organization that offers so much to its membership. I do not take this responsibility lightly, and will do everything possible to foster the continued growth of training and personal development of the membership."

Toni Shaklee, Assistant Vice President for Research, Oklahoma State University, has been elected to the position of At-Large Board Member. In Toni's nearly 25 years of NCURA membership, she has made many contributions to NCURA. Toni is currently a Co-Editor for *NCURA Magazine*, a member of the Peer Review team, a member of NCURA's Education Scholarship Fund Task Force, and a member of the Fundamentals of Sponsored Project Administration Traveling Workshop Faculty. She has been on Annual Meeting Program Committees and served as a Co-Chair for the 2013 PRA conference. Toni was also a member of NCURA's Professional Development Committee from 2010-2013. Upon being elected, Toni shares, "I've always appreciated that NCURA provides me with several ways to be part of a community of professionals around the nation (and now the world) engaged in research administration. I am delighted to have this new opportunity to serve as an at-large member of the Board of Directors for this vibrant organization."



Both Bullock and Shaklee will begin serving January 1, 2015 for a two-year term. Andresen will take office January 1, 2015 for one year after which he will succeed to a one-year term as President of NCURA.