



## The Secret Life of a Research Administrator

By Diane Barrett

James Thurber is always enjoyable to read, but *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* has long been my favorite of his stories. I didn't see the movie, and I probably won't. It's hard to beat words that make me laugh out loud. I read it back in the day when I had more than a few silly daydreams of my own. For instance, I desperately wanted to be Mr. Spock or his brilliant child (Speck?). I equally desperately wanted to be the young amazing percussionist for John Denver. Believe it or not, those two are probably the least embarrassing, and they are embarrassing enough.

**But, now that the movie is out, I have been tickling myself thinking about *The Secret Life of a Research Administrator*. I suspect that I am not the only one with these same fantasies:**

1. It is Friday afternoon of an NIH deadline and I am putting on my jacket to go home early because every PI had their proposals in by Monday.
2. All of these proposals are in because the university policy states that they must be at the central office at least 5 days early, so of course they are.
3. All of my ongoing negotiations have resolved themselves this week with nary a squeak from anyone about language, including IP and jurisdiction.
4. After helping Professor Meanswell seventeen times with his budget, he arrives unexpectedly at my desk with a large bouquet of flowers and an even larger box of dark chocolate.
5. Grants.gov works better than FastLane.
6. The PI who tried to get by with purchasing "feminine hygiene products" on her p-card and calls it an "emergency medical expense" is hired by some other university.
7. I receive a call from a colleague at FDP yelling "Effort reporting has been abolished by the Supreme Court!"
8. Congress decides to keep its nose out of the research enterprise and increases funding to the agencies by 100%.

**I am sure you are guffawing by now, but there is more:**

9. All sponsors, federal and non-federal, decide to use the same data set, and only that data set (no add-ons) for all proposals.
10. PIs make sure that all expenses are accrued before the grant ends.
11. After several months, receipts suddenly turn up for the \$21,000 a PI spent in personal cash in Africa and charged to an NSF grant.
12. The university finally realizes that the research infrastructure is sorely lacking enough staff and tells us to go hire all of the people we need.
13. Cost sharing has become a federal crime.
14. The graduate student that actually backed a rented jeep into a lake in Mongolia turned out to be the figment of a fitful dream. I woke up and 'poof,' it never really happened. Right.

**Woo boy, we are just getting started, aren't we?**

15. I did NOT receive an A-133 audit report from a subrecipient that began with: "The [institution] does not have adequate systems and procedures in place to ensure that the federal funds it administers are properly accounted for and expended in compliance with regulations."
16. The Omniscircular is condensed to 15 pages, and is in large print to boot.
17. The auditors that are hired by the OIG arrive actually understanding what it is they are doing.
18. All Program Officers are on top of the regulations and never think to ask for fringe benefits to be removed because it will stretch their grant dollars farther.
19. There is one F&A rate, and only one, that covers all sponsors.
20. IRBs and IACUCs are no longer needed.
21. FFATA? What is FFATA?

Well. This could go on and on, couldn't it? So, best to put my coffee and daydreams away for the day. Have you noticed that the best stories we share are often those incidents that were the least funny at the time? Thank goodness for each other. ■



**Diane Barrett** has been in research administration for 29.99 years. After those formative years at various institutions, she now works as a Senior Research Administration consultant for rSmart, where she enjoys helping other research administrators make grants management easier. Her mother still does not understand what she does.