RESEARCH ADMINISTRATORS ASSISTING PEERS (RAAP)

Beta-testing a peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk as part of a forward-thinking, responsive support and development plan.

by Joseph Murphy

A capstone project paper submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master’s of Science

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Abstract

This capstone project proposes a way to utilize the collective knowledge of university and institutional research administrators to provide knowledge, guidance, and assistance to each other via a peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk. These administrators support a trio of relevant constituencies: the individuals who conduct the research, the institutions that provide a home for the research, and the sponsors that support the research financially. Providing this service proves challenging due to the constantly mutating rules and nuances creating and governing research bureaucracy. These constantly shifting rules and exceptions are why “it depends” is a cliché widely thought of as the unofficial motto of research administrators (NCURA 2021).

Whether a research institution uses a centralized or decentralized approach to its administrative architecture, both methods rely on expert authoritative guidance from specialized departments. Unfortunately, these central offices often do not have enough staff to answer questions in a timeframe that works for a modern research administrator’s relentless schedule. Over the past three decades increased governmental regulations and capped administrative funding have resulted in more responsibility being transferred from the central offices to the unit-level administrators. Consequently, the administrators working at the departmental level cannot be responsive to their internal customers while waiting days, weeks, and sometimes longer for guidance, nor do they have the time to chase the answers externally. A peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk, may provide an online platform where administrators can post questions, reply to others, discuss concepts, and build a network. By doing so, they could create a powerful source of guidance and mentorship, fueled by the hard-won wisdom of their peers, that can help alleviate the pressure on departmental and central administrations.
Dedication

Cheryl, Maddy, and Ellie, thank you for supporting me and allowing me the time to pursue all of this. I am endlessly proud to be yours and so grateful that you are mine. You’re my reason for reason, the step in my groove.

Mom and Dad, there isn’t a thesis long enough to honor what you mean to me. Thank you endlessly for everything. Eileen, Cassidy and Delaney, and Finny, I love you all. Please excuse the crudity of this paper, I didn’t have time to build it to scale or paint it.

I have been blessed with amazing colleagues over the years, but a few became part of my family. Jamie and Kara, this paper does not happen without your friendship and support. You have been the best part of my career and made it so much fun.

Neil, it has been an privilege to be your sidekick all these years. Thank you for valuing research administration and always listening. Sherry and John, thank you for your kindness and mentorship. I wish you both fun and headache-free retirements.

Thanks to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for giving me an amazing second career 17 years ago. I felt at home immediately and inwardly beam every time I tell someone where I work.

At its core, this project was inspired by the generosity research administrators show each other every day. By sharing their time, knowledge, and hard-won wisdom with their peers, the vocation of research administration was whittled into existence. I am proud of our dedication to researchers (especially 'our' students) and the commitment to the integrity of research and the funding entrusted to us. I am honored to be a member of this club.
# Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... ii  
Dedication...................................................................................................................................... iii  
Figures............................................................................................................................................ vi  
Tables............................................................................................................................................ vii  
Glossary and Abbreviations......................................................................................................... viii  

Chapter 1. Introduction................................................................................................................... 1  
1.1 Background............................................................................................................................... 1  
1.2 Statement of the problem ........................................................................................................ 10  
1.3 Research question ................................................................................................................... 17  
1.4 Objectives ............................................................................................................................... 18  
1.5 Significance ............................................................................................................................ 19  
1.6 Exclusions and limitations ...................................................................................................... 20  

Chapter 2. Literature Review........................................................................................................ 21  
2.1. Overview of the Literature Review........................................................................................ 21  
2.2 Details of Review .................................................................................................................... 22  
2.3. Gaps in Existing Research ..................................................................................................... 23  

3. Need(s) Assessment.................................................................................................................. 25  
3.1. Needs Assessment.................................................................................................................. 25  
3.2. Metrics ................................................................................................................................... 25  
3.1.3. Sources ................................................................................................................................ 28  
3.1.4. Committees ......................................................................................................................... 28  

Chapter 4. Methodology............................................................................................................... 29  
4.1. Methodology Overview ......................................................................................................... 29  
4.2. Project Design and Discussion ............................................................................................. 31  
4.3. Discussion of Questionnaire ................................................................................................ 35  
4.4 Selected data from the questionnaire ...................................................................................... 36  

iv
Figures

Figure 1 Research Award Administration Lifecycle ................................................................. 1
Figure 2 Increased funding to increased regulation to increased administration pattern .......... 7
Figure 3 Graphic from Research Administration and Management, Chap. 2, P.18 ..................... 8
Figure 4 Graphic depicting the flow of research bureaucracy .................................................. 14
Figure 5 Cumulative Number of Regulatory Changes Since 1991 (Chart source, MIT May/June 2017 Faculty Newsletter) ................................................................................................................ 8
Figure 6 A screenshot of the actual p2p virtual helpdesk as it was embodied in a SLACK channel .......................................................................................................................................... 34
Figure 7 Sample interaction on slack ........................................................................................ 35
Figure 8 Normal wait time for an answer from a central, authoritative office. ....................... 37
Figure 9 The longest a respondent waited for a response from a central, authoritative office .... 37
Figure 10 Preferred solution when baffled ............................................................................. 37
Figure 11 Main factor in decision to ask peer .......................................................................... 37
Figure 12 "Are you hesitant to ask a question in a semi-public forum like this? ....................... 38
Figure 13 Actual interaction on the virtual helpdesk ................................................................. 40
Figure 14 Unprompted content being shared .......................................................................... 41
Figure 15 Screenshot of results of a search for "cost sharing” in RAAP .................................... 42
Figure 16 Screenshot of a user discussing form SF298 ............................................................ 42
Figure 17 Approval Chain for RAAP beta test at MIT ............................................................. 44
Figure 18 Approval chain ending with the firm 'no” from MIT. ................................................ 44
Tables

Table 1 Some prominent federal research funders and their approximate annual research budget (CRS, 2024) ......................................................................................................................................... 3

Table 2 Comparison showing the increased financial responsibilities of an AAII between 2013 and 2023 taken from actual MIT job descriptions ................................................................................................................................. 12

Table 3 Side by side comparison showing the increased financial responsibilities of a financial coordinator between 2013 and 2023 ........................................................................................................................................ 12

Table 4 Graph of topic issues research administrators most often need guidance. .......................... 27

Table 5 % when asked if respondents would ask a peer or only a central authority ....................... 27
Glossary and Abbreviations

Centralized Research Administration: A senior research administrator, such as a vice provost or vice president of research, holds primary responsibility for advancing the university's research mission. They oversee policy development and implementation in research, technology transfer, compliance, economic development, and inter-campus collaborations. The Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) (or similar) director, reporting to the executive research administrator, manages university-wide sponsored program services. Both offices closely collaborate with administrators in the division of administration and finance and research development offices.

Central Research Administrator: Administrative staff working in a department that oversees a certain aspect of research administration for an entire organization.

Decentralized Research administration: In this model, departmental offices empower professional staff to oversee sponsored program services for departmental PIs, focusing on research priorities. The central university office sets the university's research plan, manages resources, ensures compliance, handles information flow, organizes PI training, conducts marketing, facilitates technology transfer, and manages sponsor relationships.

Departmental Research Administrators: Also known as unit-level administration, departmental research administrators work at the department and college levels have a wide range of responsibilities and functions while managing research portfolios. DRAs must have expertise in both pre- and post-award activities. DRAs are distinguished from other research support functions because they are intimately involved with all facets of the research administration process, including daily interactions with faculty, while concurrently managing other department-specific responsibilities (NCURA 2023).

Distributed Research Administration: Sponsored program services operate with centralized policy and authority but decentralized practice and responsibility, aiming for flexible, responsive, and proactive support for PIs. This approach aims to enhance understanding and reduce administrative burdens in obtaining and managing extramural funds.

Expense Management Platforms: Automate the recording, tracking, approval and payment of reimbursable expenses incurred by employees. Expense management software aligns with the company’s expense management policy to ensure the business doesn’t overspend on approved (or unapproved) expenses (Beaver 2020).

Institute of Higher Education (IHE): College or university that awards an associate, baccalaureate, graduate, or professional degree.

Internal Review Board (IRB): Research ethics committees that provide a core protection for human research participants through advance and periodic independent review of the ethical acceptability of proposals for human research. (Grady 2015)
Peer-to-peer learning: a training program that involves coworkers teaching other coworkers. Rather than hiring an expert, a trainer or a manager to teach employees skills and knowledge, colleagues within the same department or working at the same level share what they know with each other (Indeed, 2023).

Research Administration: encompasses the activities that support faculty and staff involved in research projects across the University, regardless of funding source (Harvard 2023).

Research lifecycle: the span of a research project from proposal to closeout (MIT RAS, n.d.).

SLACK: popular cloud-based communication platform used for team collaboration, offering features such as instant messaging, file sharing, and channel-based communication.

Sponsor: an external organization, such as a federal agencies, state programs, or private organization that provides the funding for research activities.

Stakeholder: one involved in or affected by a course of action (Merriam–Webster). In research administration stakeholders can be sponsors, colleagues, researchers, licensees, members of the public.

Workaround: an action performed to circumvent a block in workflow and achieve a desired goal. (Seaman 2015)
“It depends”

-an unofficial motto of research administration.
Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Research administration supports various components of a research enterprise, including the individuals conducting the research, the institutions providing a home for research projects, any living subjects involved, and the transfer of knowledge created in these programs to relevant audiences, such as sponsors or the public.

Research administrators (RAs) are an important connection between sponsor organizations and federal agencies that provide funding, the hosting universities and institutions, and the people who conduct the research. Examining the research lifecycle can be a useful exercise to understand this enterprise.

In the pre-award phase, RAs play an essential role in the grant proposal process. While RAs possess varying skill sets, departmental (or unit-level) administrators commonly compile documentation, formulate budgets and pricing justifications, and ensure alignment between the submitted proposal and the requirements of the sponsoring agency or organization. Central office
RAs typically review grant proposals for errors, adherence to institutional or federal policies, and offer guidance that could enhance the likelihood of an award. Upon awarding, RAs mediate the negotiation between the sponsoring agency and the institution, ensuring that the policies and core principles of both the sponsoring organization and the research entity are reflected in the award contract.

Throughout the lifespan of an award (the research project), RAs are integral members of the research team. They commonly handle the financial aspects of the program, such as tracking expenditures, forecasting, and monitoring the allowability of costs. They also support the projects by executing various practical tasks: procuring equipment and materials, liaising with facilities, arranging and expensing travel, organizing and hosting research meetings and events, processing personnel appointments, and supervising the creation and completion of reports. These are just a few of the myriad responsibilities that RAs typically undertake.

At the conclusion of the research project, RAs collaborate with the Principal Investigator to finalize the award. This involves making the research findings accessible through the writing of final reports, publishing, and transferring the developed technology. This can encompass patent filings and licensing, journal papers, books, financial and technical reporting, and the preparation of subsequent research and collaborations. The research award lifecycle is merely one of numerous research contexts for which RAs are accountable. Comparable cycles occur in research contracts, care of human or animal subjects, technology transfer, property and institutional development, environmental health and safety, and export control, among others.

Research administrators offer support across various venues:

- Institutions of Higher Education (IHE)
  - According to the 2021 NSF HERD survey, over 900 academic institutions spend at least $150,000 yearly on research and development.
Despite a consistent proportional decline in recent years, the majority of higher education research funding in the United States originates from the federal government.

- Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDC)
  - e.g., Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL)
  - e.g., Argonne National Laboratory (ANL)
- University Affiliated Research Centers (UARC)
  - e.g., Johns Hopkins University: Applied Physics Laboratory (Navy)
  - e.g., Pennsylvania State University: Applied Research Laboratory
- Government Research Agencies with (approx. annual research budget)

<table>
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<th>Agency</th>
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Table 1 Some prominent federal research funders and their approximate annual research budget (CRS, 2024)

- Manufacturers, software companies, pharmaceutical companies are examples of businesses that contribute to research and development activity.
  - Private sector companies often focus on applied research, leaving basic and fundamental research to IHEs.

“U.S. technological breakthroughs have relied on a “triangular alliance” among government, academia, and business, each playing to its sectoral strengths.” (Goodman 2020)

Similarly, research administrators balance three interconnected sets of stakeholders: the researchers themselves, the institution, and the sponsors (Beasley 18) each needing unique types of support. In any given instance, RAs will be untangling conflicts or facilitating progress between various combinations of these parties, often simultaneously.

Research administration is a profession that flourished due to the expansion of sponsored research in the mid-twentieth century. Emerging from the Second World War, the US made substantial investments in R&D, thereby becoming the world’s leader in technology (Goodman 2020). This focus and investment paved the way for the Information Technology Revolution by fostering a disruptive private sector, a vigorous university research culture, and a skilled workforce (Blumenthal 1998).
As the country’s research machine grew, so did the need for administrative staff to support it. The government and private industry invested larger sums of money necessitating project management, resource allocation, and financial upkeep. It became clear that the same functions necessary in a business were needed for the responsible management of research.

The number of RAs grew, and so did the complexity of their job descriptions. RAs became the first line of defense against inefficiency and the mismanagement of taxpayer funds. The mission of RAs became to allow scientists to concentrate on their work, manage funding pools that would survive audit, and help IHEs and Labs create and maintain reputations as trustworthy and impactful environments for research. While performing these charges, RAs often face questions outside their general field of knowledge. Repeated stoppages to wait for guidance tends to impede momentum and lower their effectiveness. Being able to obtain guidance on questions and challenges quickly and accurately is a constant need for everyone in this field.

The primary objective of this project is to determine whether implementing a peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk enables research administrators to access collective knowledge and expertise more efficiently, thereby enabling them to receive prompt, actionable guidance compared to reliance on a centralized specialized office. For ease of discussion, the helpdesk has been named RAAP (Researchers Administrators Assisting Peers). A secondary goal of this project is to understand the historical development of these jobs and the reasons why additional assistance for these administrators is necessary.

The increase in federal research regulations created powerful evolutionary pressure on the workload of research administrators. A 2020 study conducted among 2,416 research administrators from four different countries found that burnout is a significant concern within research administration. Nearly 70% of respondents reported high personal burnout and 60%
reported work-related burnout (Tabakakis 2020). The top three reasons for burnout amongst RAs are high administrative burden, lack of support or team members, and inadequate tools to succeed (Cayuse n.d.). This project posits that understanding the root causes and facilitating peer support can mitigate the increased administrative burden, job burnout, and turnover pervasive in the research enterprise.

The emergence of modern research administrators in the United States can be traced back to efforts during World War II to gain a technological advantage. President Franklin Roosevelt recognized the need for coordination among the scientific community in order to leverage American technology in the war effort. To that end, the Office of Science Research and Development (OSRD) was established in June 1941. While predecessor organizations like the National Defense Research Council (NDRC) had a military mandate and dealt with labs that were funded directly by individual branches of the military, OSRD received appropriations from Congress and a wider mission, most notably an expansion into medical research.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the OSRD by executive order to coordinate and support scientific research for national defense. OSRD facilitated significant advancements such as radar, penicillin, and the development of the atomic bomb as part of the Manhattan Project. By the end of the second world war, the advances overseen by the OSRD demonstrated the value of scientific research to President Roosevelt. At that time, Vannevar Bush, President Roosevelt’s appointed leader of the OSRD, wrote a seminal report, “Science: The Endless Frontier” (Bush, 1945). Bush’s report, and the successful collaboration and cooperation among researchers toward the end of the war, were instrumental in the founding of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and is still referenced today when discussing the importance of scientific research and engineering advancement. It made the case that the
accumulation of fundamental knowledge of the universe has an impact beyond national defense and wartime efforts.

Over the course of five years, despite the disparate viewpoints of Congress, the President, and the research community, a system of national research which still endures today was established. In establishing a central agency to oversee federally funded research, issues surrounding financial control, award distribution formulas, and accountability were at the center of the debate. After several attempts, a bill to establish the NSF was signed with compromises on accountability and other administrative issues. In the end, NSF would be overseen by a presidential appointee confirmed by the Senate.

This is where the importance of research administrators is fully realized. Many who had been a part of the OSRD during the war were now working with researchers on the post-war scientific efforts. These people had become adept at working through the government bureaucracy and smoothed the path for continued governmental support of research in peacetime. They are the ancestors of the modern research administrator.

The budget for NSF was modest to begin with, its inaugural budget just $3.5 million. However, within five years, the budget had increased to $16 million. The 1960s saw significant increases in investment in the NSF budget, $88.7 Million in 1962 up to $157.8 Million in 1966 (Beasley, 15). In the early years, there was little regulation over the monies devoted to research. As more money was appropriated, more oversight and stewardship were needed. The growth of research administration is directly connected to the expansion of federal investment in research endeavors and the attempts at regulating the use of that research funding.

A pattern emerges:
As federal investment in fundamental research steadily increased over subsequent decades, the demand for skilled administrators to support research also grew. Research administration, including the various operational costs to support an effective place of research, became a large investment itself. To codify the reimbursement of these costs the “Bureau of Budget” issued guidance on determining “indirect costs” via Circular A-21 in 1958. In the years immediately following, indirect cost reimbursements, known as “facilities and administrative costs” (F&A), were capped, and set with a blanket rate across the various participants. This rate, 15 – 20%, (NSF 1991) is low by modern standards. In the mid-1960s the ceiling was removed, and universities started negotiating F&A rates with federal agencies directly (NSF 1991).

Universities needed to build capacity, hire personnel, and create resources to support research efforts. F&A costs were recognized as essential to making effective use of the taxpayer investment. As more money is appropriated, the government establishes more regulations and research institutions employ additional research administrators. In the ensuing decades, the research administrators’ roles evolved; providing support structures for researchers in the labs, serving as stewards of federal funding (taxpayer money) and implementing institutional policies and initiatives (NSF 1991) (MIT 2017).
In 1991 the Office of Management and Budget updated circular A-21, Cost Principles for Educational Institutions, to impose a 26% cap on administrative cost reimbursements on federal grants (Mufson, 1991). Federal regulations to enhance compliance and transparency also started to increase consistently starting in 1991.
The Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, also known as the “Common Rule,” was established and affected regulations in 15 federal agencies (OHRP n.d.). This established protections for human subjects in research in response to the problems identified by the 1979 Belmont Report by strengthening rules around IRBs, consent, and other compliance issues. The combination of heightened regulations and funding constraints forced educational institutions to increase administrator workloads for compliance. Over time, this gradual burden growth left research administrators in an unwittingly unsustainable situation, akin to the boiling frogs in Goltz’s famous 19th-century experiment (Foster 1873).

The job descriptions of RAs grew more complex within this evolution. It was not just that there was a need for more RAs, there was a specific need for more staff steeped in the intricacies of myriad administrative subfields:

- federal regulations
- research policy and conduct
- general administrative knowledge (HR, Payroll, Space allocations)
- procurement strategies
- facilities management
- technology transfer

Finding personnel proficient in even a couple of the topics on this partial list was a challenge, so a strategy of conversion was employed. Institutions would find people who had experience in a similar support and administration position, perhaps in procurement or accounting, or hire individuals with targeted administrative abilities such as organizational skills, financial acumen, and the ability to multitask, and train them on the job (SRAI News, 2022). Candidates with hard skills that transfer to research administration would be hired and given a metaphorical trial by combat. Finding candidates who already have the specific knowledge base needed for specific positions becomes even harder as the intensity of the job descriptions...
increases. Therefore, candidates are chosen based on their potentially transferable skills.

Institutions then train internally and rely on hands-on experience via real projects (SRA, 2022) (Acker, McGinn, Campisi, 2019). Many research administration environs use the “deep end theory” presenting support staff with a “sink or swim” mindset (SRA, 2022). “Often when people are hired, they either succeed or fail. There is no in-between (Kulakowski, p. 101).” A new candidate’s success often depends on their ability to find answers to work-related questions on their own.

1.2 Statement of the problem

In the 2010 Research Administrator Stress Perception Surveys (RASPerS), survey results showed that 90% of RAs working in the United States felt their job was getting more demanding (Shambrook, 2012). Research administration has gotten more complex and the volume of work per administrator has increased over time. Department administrators are expected to support faculty, provide front-end service for numerous functions across a lab or campus, be a resource for researchers, students, fellow administrators and staff, as well as visitors. One could say that nearly every research administrator has a job as unique as a fingerprint. There are several factors that change the mix of tasks that staff will need to perform. It can vary depending on the type of:

- organizational structure of the research institution
  - centralized
  - decentralized
  - hybrid
- research being performed
  - national defense
  - medical
  - fundamental vs. applied
- ways that the research is funded
  - federal vs. private
  - grants vs. cooperative agreements vs. contract or other
- institutional culture
aggressive, competitive
- teaching-focused
- faculty personality
  o ambitious
  o student-focused
  o hands-on vs. hands-off

The workload expected of research administrators and support staff has undergone significant mission creep over time. This can be observed by comparing past job descriptions with current job descriptions. While observing the evolution of the “Administrative Assistant II” (AAII), a common support staff position in a research university, the expansion of work is evident. AAII is traditionally a mid-level support staff position with more autonomy and responsibilities than the entry-level Administrative Assistant I (AAI). Typically, an AAII will handle more complex tasks including calendar management, event planning, correspondence, travel, and meeting arrangements, whereas the AAI might answer phones, file, operate printers, and copy machines, etc. But the differences in these positions are more often about autonomy rather than the specific tasks required.

In 2013, AAII job descriptions tended to focus on supporting the faculty, students, and department in general, with traditional office needs. The job descriptions included tasks like “administrative and clerical support,” with examples such as “carry out routine office duties such as filing, mail services, photocopying, and ordering office supplies.” In recent years, the purview of an AAII has grown to include more direct research administration. Now, the job descriptions more typically contain phrases like “provide varied and complex administrative support,” with examples such as “miscellaneous tasks related to personnel, space management, and contract management,” and “Principal duties include providing financial support (budgeting, approvals, reconciliation).” The AAII job description below shows striking changes in recent years in terms of financial responsibility.
The same is found in other mid-level support or administrative staff supporting departments. A Financial Coordinator is another position that has seen their domain grow to include more compliance and strategic planning of sponsored programs. Where a financial coordinator or fiscal officer may have formerly provided support to a Principal Investigator (PI) by monitoring spending and helping create budgets in advance of a proposal, they are now expected to interpret regulations, create forecasts, decipher solicitations, and often act as the de facto research administrator for assigned PI’s sponsored projects.
Additional evidence of the increasing complexity of departmental RAs’ job descriptions is the education and experience expected. Many of these job descriptions went from being silent on educational requirements, to bachelor degrees being “required,” to graduate degrees being “preferred.” This can be seen with the “Program Coordinator” position. In 2013, a program coordinator was expected to have a bachelor’s degree and experience supporting an executive. In 2020, a candidate would have been required to have a bachelor's degree in a specific major (business, economics, etc.) and experience in program or project management. By 2023, a master's degree in a relevant field had become preferred (Appendix 1-C). In his article “Remembering 50 Years of Research Administration,” Ira Goodman remarked,

[Research administration] now attracts and requires individuals from a wide spectrum of professional backgrounds including science, accounting, engineering, ethics, law, finance, and non-profit management. It now requires so much more knowledge and expertise.

One reason the responsibilities of administrative positions grew over time was ever-increasing compliance demands with no further funding. The effect of increased regulation is significant. The burdens introduced by state and federal laws are some of the same issues faced by for-profit corporations, medical facilities, as well as the safeguards in place for schools. For instance, these examples:

- IHEs are subject to the same laws regarding hiring as any other employer
- Many students from foreign countries come to study and conduct research on American campuses, so understanding immigration laws such as F1 and J1 visas is an area of focus unto itself.
- Research universities are treated as financial institutions in some contexts and will need to abide by laws meant to curtail funding to terrorism.
- Environmental health and safety
- human and animal subject safeguards
- tax exemption issues
- export control

are just some of the subjects that require skilled and in-demand staff to oversee (Parker 2006).
However, hiring and maintaining the staff who have the skills and knowledge to perform the types of issues listed above is challenging. This is because the federal government capped the percentage of indirect funding that can be used to pay for administration and general expenses at 26% (OMB 2004) at the same time they started to introduce greater regulation. This meant that IHEs had to figure out ways to ensure compliance with ever-increasing regulation with no additional money to hire staff trained to do so. As depicted in the figure below, IHEs started to push traditionally central responsibilities from the core institutional offices out to the departmental staff.

Figure 5 Graphic depicting the flow of research bureaucracy
As administrative burden increases, tasks requiring specialized advanced understanding of topics like the ones previously mentioned cannot be fulfilled solely by central research office. Therefore, much of the compliance tasks dictated by sponsor regulations, are pumped out to the periphery of an institution; alleviating a bottleneck that forms in the central offices ideally tasked with oversight and compliance.

As shown in the evolution of job descriptions (tables 2-3), since 1991 the increase in federal regulations has meant that unit-level administrators are required to know more, do more, and be more. This is made more challenging by the 26% administrative spending cap, instituted the same year that regulations started to rise (figure 6), limiting the ability of IHEs to hire more specialized administrative staff, who are typically better compensated.

According to data from Glassdoor.com and an NCURA 2020 salary survey, administrative assistants typically receive an annual salary of approximately $50,000. In contrast, the same survey indicates that contract administrators working in central research administration offices usually earn between $75,000 and $100,000 per year, with the most common response falling within the range of $100,000 to $125,000. Moreover, it's worth noting that central staff members are typically funded through indirect costs (F&A), with the administrative portion capped at 26% since 1991 (OMB 2004). Conversely, departmental staff members are often paid from gift or corporate funding sources. Apart from being more cost-effective, departmental support staff members also fulfill their traditional role of providing support to faculty and department heads. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) rely on departmental staff to both attract and retain talented faculty. While professors may not immediately notice a reduction in contract administrators within central sponsored programs offices, they will certainly feel the impact of having fewer departmental staff available to support them.
In addition to the increased administrative burden caused by expanding government regulations and limited funds due to an administrative rate cap, IHE central offices struggle to provide responsive guidance and support to unit-level administrators tasked with the increased workloads. To illustrate this point, the following is an actual question that a departmental administrator encountered requiring guidance from a specialized central office. The question centered on a determination on whether a research-build could be capitalized as fabricated equipment:

March 1, 2023

John Doe <johndoe@sampleuni.edu>

Dear Sample Uni Property Director,

I know that prototypes or devices built as the focus/purpose of the research cannot be considered Fab Equipment.

Does Sample Uni have formal wording or guidance on this policy/regulation?

To understand my concern, different research institutions seem to have different takes on it:

Caltech: "A completed experimental or prototype device built to obtain data or to demonstrate the feasibility of a particular process may be considered an Equipment Fabrication only if the cost of the device is $5,000 or more, and it’s initial useful life is one years or more."

UMaine: "This Fabricated Equipment Guidance does not apply when the purpose of the sponsored project is construction of experimental equipment or prototypes."

UMASS: "An explicit prototyping activity in the project plan would not be considered to be a fabrication task since the prototype does not result in a functional piece of equipment."

I'd like to be able to point to a policy or guidance statement in my discussion with my PIs.

Thanks,

John
The sender of the email waited two weeks for a response before following up. At that time, they forwarded the same text and copied the property office email-alias to increase the chance of contact.

The property office never ended up responding and the question eventually got answered by the institution’s sponsored programs office in early April 2023, over a month after it was originally posed. This could have been a productive use of a peer-to-peer resource. Instead of waiting, John Doe could have asked other departmental RAs for guidance. If the peer network was robust enough there would have been a chance that someone had faced this same question previously and answered within a much shorter timeframe.

1.3 Research question

Depending on the individual mix of factors, RAs tend to develop idiosyncratic skillsets. This creates a powerful collection of knowledge that is often inaccessible due to a lack of efficient connection tools. By facilitating communication between peer administrators, this knowledge can be harnessed, and the inefficiencies diminished. Hunting for answers to work-related questions can be minimized as colleagues start sharing their hard-earned knowledge with each other.

This project considers the history, evolution, and current research administration culture and poses this research question: Can research administrators benefit from a peer-to-peer resource to address work-related questions and problems?

Finding a way to utilize the knowledge and experience of colleagues in the departments, labs, and centers is a potentially powerful concept. Often, institutions cannot hire enough central staff to address all research needs (McKenzie 2024). The institutions invest in expense
management platforms that make it possible for unit-level staff to conduct work that was traditionally done in central offices. Platforms for overall research administration like Cayuse, Kuali Coeus, or homegrown databases have become ubiquitous. Concur and Egencia make it possible for administrators who do not specialize in travel to be able to book, expense, and reimburse travelers. EProcurement services driven by companies like Airbase or Coupa have become standard tools for buying, paying, and ensuring compliance. These tools, while making the work possible for undertrained workers to accomplish, do not normally educate or train users on the “whys” of research administration. When people understand the purpose of their tasks, they retain the information better and feel more connected to the work (Brendza 2019).

Education technology writer, Janica Solis, says that peer-to-peer learning is reshaping corporate training, “Unlike traditional methods, peer learning creates a safe environment where employees feel comfortable taking risks and giving constructive feedback. It fosters management and leadership skills through group reflection conversations (Solis 2023).”

1.4 Objectives

The primary goal of this capstone project is to establish RAAP, an online peer-to-peer helpdesk, and encourage RAs to make use of it. Upon its launch, the investigation aims to assess whether RAAP facilitates effective communication and knowledge-sharing among RAs, thereby enhancing their job performance. The impact of RAAP will be evaluated through the analysis of participation trends and its potential influence on users' workloads. Subsequently, a follow-up questionnaire, informed by observed interactions, will be devised and distributed to solicit feedback from users.
Data gathered from surveys and observations of RAAP in action will undergo comprehensive compilation and analysis to form conclusions. Subsequently, this analysis will inform the development of actionable information and recommendations, which will be formally presented.

1.5 Significance

Fundamental research advances knowledge and delivers new concepts, fosters innovation and drives development of new technologies for all of society while encouraging curious study of the universe. Most of the fundamental research done in the United States is sponsored by the federal government because the private sector tends to fund research with more immediate benefit (applied research). With federal research dollars ultimately coming from the taxpayers, and with the United States’ current state of political polarization, it is more important than ever that fundamental research be as cost-effective and efficient as possible.

Congress and federal agencies have set requirements for U.S. universities and research institutions receiving federal grants. These rules aim to ensure transparency, efficiency, and accountability in the use of funds, while also preventing waste, fraud, and abuse (Harris, 2017). In addition to increased regulatory burden, the Government has also limited how universities can be reimbursed for the cost of compliance (Decrappeo, 2011). Universities find ways to fulfill requirements by establishing their own workflows and layers of policy throughout the research activities at their institutions. It would be impossible for the central research administration offices to perform all these new tasks, even if they are the administrators who best understand what is being asked, because the volume of projects happening at any one time on campuses is too great. As such, the decentralized research administration model, which dominated the management of academic research for decades has started to fall away (Antonak 2006).
Recently, a common solution is to push complex analysis and processes outwards to the research departments but with strong centralized control and oversight. Therefore, for maximum efficiency many research institutions are not adhering strictly to a centralized or decentralized approach and instead opt for a distributed research administration (or hybrid) model (Smith, 2016).

1.6 Exclusions and limitations

RAAP was originally conceived as a limited proof-of-concept facilitated by MIT. The hope was that a selected portion of the institution would encourage its support staff to participate in this project and seek guidance from their peers when faced with a question or unfamiliar situation.

The project was intended to function as a beta test, rather than an official MIT initiative, but it was developed under the assumption of the institution’s endorsement and support. However, due to institutional concerns at both MIT and JHU, the peer-to-peer network had to be established independently of the academic research infrastructure. As a result, the peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk ended up being smaller than originally envisioned, and its availability for use was limited. This led to some confusion among potential participants, causing some to opt out. With limited participation and a shortened timeframe, any conclusions regarding the potential efficacy of a resource like this will be limited.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of the Literature Review

Understanding how this profession came to be is essential to finding ways to improve and expand its effectiveness. This history informs the evolution and increased weight of responsibilities given to the research administrative professionals over time. While investigating the development of research administration as a profession and the individual development of research administrators, this project referred to books, articles, and web resources. In addition to scholarly works and literature published on these subjects, this secondary element will rely on surveys, actual job descriptions written by MIT’s Human Resources Department, and analysis of staffing strategies during the 1990s, 2000s, 2010s up until 2023.

As the partnership between the government and research communities blossomed, the need for stewards of the funding, the discovered technologies/information, and the facilities these necessitated, became critical. Understanding the role of research administrators is outlined in publications put out by NCURA and SRA in addition to journal articles and governmental reports.

Current onboarding and training practices are also evaluated within this project. NCURA, SRA, and a variety of resources found on Institutions of Higher Education websites were excellent sources for this information. General information on modern onboarding and training was provided by blogs on business and employment-focused resources like LinkedIn and Indeed.com. Peer-to-peer training effectiveness is also understood through the perspectives found on workplace leadership resources.
2.2 Details of Review

A comprehensive history of research administration was included in Chapter 2 of “Research Administration and Management” by Kenneth Beasley. This account details the origin of research administration, as we would recognize it, starting with the government tapping into the nation’s research community to gain a technological advantage to finish WWII. Articles and government publications detailed how President Franklin Roosevelt tasked Vannevar Bush to lead both the National Defense Research Council and the succeeding Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD), thereby laying the foundation for the National Science Foundation. In the “Emerald Handbook of Research Management and Administration Around the World” the chapter “History of Research Administration/Management in North America” reminds its readers that before the roles of research administrators became codified, the administrative responsibilities often fell to a laboratory director. As agreements became more complicated, and as the emphasis shifted from acquiring funding to stewardship, the administration of extramural funding was too burdensome for a laboratory director.

The evolution of research administration is efficiently summarized in the NCURA magazine article, “Starting small and growing: The profession of Research Administration and Graduate Higher Education Opportunities.” Administrative burden, being a topic at the heart of this project, is described and demonstrated in several surveys including “A Profile of Federal-grant Administrative Burden Among Federal Demonstration Partnership Faculty” a survey conducted by Robert Decker et al and “Research Administrative Burden: A Qualitative Study of Local Variations and Relational Effects” by Spencer and Scott, and the Federal Demonstration Partnership’s Faculty Burden Surveys of 2007, 2012, and 2018.
While discussing why there are growing needs for new and innovative ways to assist departmental RAs, the project points out that, starting in 1991, the federal government started to increase regulations to curtail perceived wasteful spending. At the same time the federal government was adding more regulation (i.e. 1991) they capped indirect cost reimbursements of the administrative portion of the F&A rate (while excluding the facilities portion) at 26%. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that this cap on administrative costs cut reimbursements to IHEs over $100 million in FY 1993 alone (OST July 2000). Government memos, circulars, press releases, and advisories were examined to document the shifting bureaucratic landscape of federal research support since the 1990s before juxtaposing it with the evolving internal dynamics of research administration at IHEs.

Finally, material on peer-to-peer training and onboarding is found within blog posts from indeed.com and eduflow.com, teachfloor.com, and togetherplatform.com. “How to Help Your Employees Learn from Each Other” from the Harvard Business review describes the benefits of the “Learning Loop”—which is where knowledge is gained, put to practice, and then reinforced by teaching it to someone else.

2.3. Gaps in Existing Research

Research administration has grown exponentially since WWII, but it is still a small portion of the workforce. Obtaining an estimate of how many people are working as a research administrator can be difficult. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics makes no distinction between research administrators and other postsecondary school administrators. The National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA)'s membership is less than 10,000 individual members from about 1,100 colleges, universities, teaching hospitals, and research institutes
across the world. While it is a reasonable assumption that the majority of RAs do not join a professional society like NCURA or SRA, the target audience for articles and books on research administration is low compared to many other professions.

As the profession is a small portion of the USA workforce, books dedicated to research administration are in short supply. There needs to be more peer review and case studies done to improve the experience and efficacy of research administrators. In short, research administration needs to be researched.
3. Need(s) Assessment

3.1. Needs Assessment

To determine the need for a peer-to-peer resource, a questionnaire was developed and given to project participants. The introduction to the questionnaire explains the purpose:

*Colleagues, please fill out the following questionnaire to assist me in completing the Research Administration Master’s degree program at Johns Hopkins University. My Capstone Project thesis explores a peer-based tool to help research administrators get effective guidance from each other in a time frame that reflects our schedules—which get busier every year. Your honest feedback will help immensely. Though we have so much in common, each staff member finds themselves in an individual, unique work environment.*

The questionnaire is provided in its entirety as appendix three. The issues addressed in the questionnaire were:

- The frequency in which questions on procedure, policy or research administration practices come up
- The current solutions respondents use now to get answers to these questions
  - Institution/workplace website
  - External website
  - Asking a peer
  - Contact central institution/workplace office authority
  - Training or educational opportunities
- The time lag, if any, respondents experience when going to central institute resources for guidance
- With which topics do respondents find they need guidance
- If solutions respondents use to get guidance vary by topic

3.2. Metrics

The initial survey results indicated that most of the respondents felt that questions do arise daily and that they would welcome additional resources to get answers to these questions quickly. Over 2/3 of the respondents indicated they have questions on procedure, policy, or best practice at least once per week, with most of those respondents indicating the questions arise daily. The solutions most popular with respondents were “institutional/workplace website” (43%) and “ask a peer/collleague” (43%). A conclusion that can be made from these results is
that most respondents would prefer an immediate answer to their question. The least popular solution was "training or educational opportunity" with over 70% ranking it in the bottom two options. These opportunities are often not on-demand, and the particulars of their problem may not be addressed within that resource.

When asked how long they normally wait for a response from a central resource the results were:

- Instant response 0%
- Hours 38%
- The next day 43%
- Days 9.5%
- Weeks 9.5%
- More 0%

The results indicated that none of the respondents found themselves getting the answer immediately, allowing them to continue their work uninterrupted. Nor did they find the answer to be longer than “weeks” which would indicate a complete failure. Some respondents found they received the answer to their question within several hours, (38%). Most respondents reported a wait of at least a day or longer (62%).

The questionnaire also asked respondents to consider the longest time they have had to wait for help from a central resource. Here the answers were more mixed:

- 52.4% of respondents felt the longest they had to wait was days
- 19% reported having to wait weeks
- 14.3% reported having to wait longer than weeks

The questionnaire asked, with all things being equal, would respondents prefer to ask a peer or a central resource for guidance:

- 38.1% reported almost always preferring a peer or colleague
- 28.6% Would probably prefer asking a peer or colleague
- 33.3% would probably prefer asking for guidance from a central institution/workplace office
None of the respondents expressed “always preferring” either a peer or a central resource. When asked what factor informed their preferences about half of the respondents said “response time,” and a third said “familiarity.” When asked what drove their choice of solution in instances when they opted for the central office 2/3 indicated that they desired “official guidance” and the other 1/3 said they appreciated getting expertise on the topic.

The respondents were also asked which topics they needed guidance from most often:

The topic respondents needed help with most often was “sponsored accounting (including billing) followed by pre-award, post-award management, and corporate relations/contracts. All four of these topics are important, complex, and often time sensitive.

The respondents were also asked which topics they felt confident asking peers about and which topics in which they would only approach central offices. Several topics scored high in both these questions, indicating the respondents were split on this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would ask a peer</th>
<th>Topic:</th>
<th>Would only ask a central resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>Pre-award</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>Post-award management</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>Sponsored Accounting</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>Technology Transfer</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>Corporate Relations/Contract</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Foundation Relations</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>Academic Appointments</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: % when asked if respondents would ask a peer or only a central authority
3.1.3. Sources

The questionnaire was designed to assess the need research administrators have for additional resources for guidance. This is the main source informing this needs assessment. However, other sources guiding this overall project including the history of research administration, the evolution of the function research administrators serve and the additional regulations that have been introduced to professional research in general also serve to demonstrate the need for additional resources.

3.1.4. Committees

No committees were formed for this capstone project.
4.1. Methodology Overview

The capstone project began with a comprehensive review of the history and evolution of careers in research administration. This involved understanding how research administration developed post-World War II and examining the changes that occurred after the federal government updated the rules around research funding in 1991. The impact of these developments on Research Administrators (RAs) today was also explored.

The subsequent step involved formulating a questionnaire and disseminating it among RAs. The aim was to pinpoint the issues they frequently require assistance with, understand their current methods of obtaining help, and determine the time it takes to receive the necessary aid.

Next, the focus shifted to the heart of the project: the establishment of a peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk. This necessitated meetings with MIT’s leadership, including the Assistant Dean for Administration for the School of Architecture and Planning, the Director of Research Administration Services, the Administrative Officer for the Vice President of Research’s office, and an Associate Provost. Initial meetings were met with enthusiasm, but then concerns about the potential spread of incorrect advice or “workarounds” was raised leading to the decision to place RAAP outside the MIT sphere of activities.

Simultaneously, approval from Johns Hopkins University’s Internal Review Board (IRB) was needed since this project involves human subjects. This entailed submitting an application, modifying project parameters in line with IRB feedback, and crafting a Letter of Informed Consent.
The process of creating a virtual helpdesk outside an IHE infrastructure then began. Various off-the-shelf communication platforms were discussed with potential users to gather input. SLACK was chosen due to its availability, security features, and no-cost option.

The next phase involved inviting participants. This was done by reaching out to colleagues, creating and emailing a letter of invitation, meeting with admin groups, and publicizing the opportunity on LinkedIn. The assistance of Dr. Marianne Woods, Director of the Research Administration Program at Johns Hopkins and Former President of NCURA, was enlisted. She posted the invitation on her LinkedIn profile, making it visible to hundreds of research administration professionals.

The use of the resource was then observed, with certain interactions documented and recorded. In an attempt to bolster participation, reminders were sent to participants. After two months, RAAP was discontinued and selected interactions were chosen to be highlighted. A follow-up survey was developed and circulated to record feedback and examine the participation patterns.

Upon completion of the project, a thorough analysis was conducted. This involved a detailed review of all the data collected, the feedback received, and the experiences documented during the project. The analysis aimed to understand the effectiveness of the peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk, the challenges encountered, and the overall impact on the Research Administrators.

Based on this comprehensive analysis, a set of recommendations was formulated and presented. These recommendations were designed to address the identified challenges, enhance the effectiveness of such a helpdesk in the future, and provide ideas on how to better support unit-level RAs and foster their development.
4.2. Project Design and Discussion

The project was established to examine whether the experience and advice of current research administration professionals can be harnessed with a virtual peer-to-peer (p2p) helpdesk as a conduit to that source. The rationale behind this concept was explained in the invitation to potential participants:

When encountering a new or unfamiliar issue as a research administrator, you may have noticed a common initial response to a question is "it depends." Our work is rarely black and white, cut and dry. Often, we'll face an unfamiliar issue, or an old situation we've not dealt with in a long time, maybe a confusing institute/university policy, or a new federal regulation. Whatever the dilemma, there are numerous central offices or experts that can be relied upon for definitive guidance. However, responses from the central experts can be slow, making them incompatible with the schedule of a modern research admin. If you are like me, you might have a few trusted peers whose information has proven consistently reliable over time. So, when stumped, we jump on a chat, dial a number, peek over our cubicle, or stroll down the hall to a respected co-worker. In practice, our work culture relies heavily on peer support.

This invitation was sent within an initial network of professionals via email and a post placed on LinkedIn, with growth anticipated via word of mouth.

The participants who responded were given a questionnaire asking how they seek guidance when they are faced with a pressing task, situation, or issue with which they are unfamiliar. The results of this survey indicated most respondents would like to get their information from the authoritative central office administrator who has the expertise to answer definitively. However, equally clear was that this method of gathering information was slow and it prevented them from getting their work done in the time needed. Therefore, most would choose to get the information from a peer or colleague who could answer immediately rather than wait; confirming the hypothesis that inspired the core concept of this project.
Informed by the survey results, this project sought to test the hypothesis that an online p2p helpdesk could be an effective way to get accurate and timely guidance from current research professionals for the following reasons:

1. **Strength (and speed) in numbers**: At research institutions, the proportion of departmental employees to central employees is slanted heavily towards the departmental staff. A p2p network open to the larger pool of possible participants should increase the number of potential “peers.” A larger group means more people see a question and answer it correctly and in a timely fashion.

2. **“Wisdom of the crowd”**: An open forum like a p2p network, compared to a private conversation or an email, gives the community (i.e., fellow participants) an opportunity to review the information. Many research administration situations are not black and white and a few strategies could apply. Having many eyes on a question can lead to diverse takes on the issues. If outdated, incorrect, or risky advice is given, there are others who could point this out and express another opinion. Ideally, participants from the central offices might join the network to look over the questions and the advice being given. This possibility provides an added benefit of creating a “frequently asked questions” source from the departmental RAs to the central office administrators.

3. **Searchability**: The advice remains visible, creating a searchable repository of informative threads. Follow-up advice and correction could happen anytime, even after the original poster's problem is addressed.

The resource, nicknamed “RAAP”, which stands for “Researcher Administrators Assisting Peers”, was created as a beta test version of a p2p virtual helpdesk. Interactions within
this resource were monitored and participants' use of it was documented. After some discussions with professionals familiar with this type of interface, it became clear there was no benefit to having a proprietary message board designed for this project. The message board would be constructed from one of several potential “off the shelf” solutions.

Various options were considered including several free, publicly available message boards like Reddit, Microsoft Teams, and Google Groups. But with many of these larger, free and publicly accessible wiki platforms, the control of the content does not remain sufficiently with the users. The online communications platform, Slack, had quickly emerged as a top contender since its customers maintain ownership and control of the submitted content.

However, not all potential users were pleased with the choice to go with Slack. One responded to the invite with “I am very anti slack [sic], too many methods of communication...” This person, a 20-year departmental administrator with the knowledge to match, was identified as an ideal candidate to help populate RAAP with information and advice. They were true to their word and did not join the Slack group. During visits to administrator meetings to try and recruit users there was no clear consensus on what forum platform to use. Another individual thought an email thread would be easiest, while most others thought that strategy sounded unwieldy. No one relished the idea of adding another communication method to their workflow.

Ultimately, Slack was chosen due to its common use in professional settings thereby providing a smaller learning curve and the ability to own and protect the data generated on the platform. Many IHEs already had Slack as part of their institution’s suite of tools—that is, no additional user costs -- and Slack also offered favorable privacy and security settings for the content that would be created or transmitted for this project. Slack was already approved to be
compliant and capable by the information technology staff at most IHEs including JHU where HIPAA compliance was needed. Slack offered:

- Powerful encryption
- Data retention and disposal options
- Professional security monitoring and response

A private and personal slack account was created outside the slack communities of any research institution, in part to assuage MIT’s and JHU’s concerns. It was important to both institutions that RAAP not be characterized as a sanctioned endeavor since the advice could not be considered official guidance.

The Slack workspace was customized to suit the purposes of a p2p help resource for the research administration space. Several “channels”, the base unit of Slack’s organizational convention, were created for many of the most common concerns RAs deal with, such as pre-award, post-award, procurement, and travel.

Figure 6 A screengrab of the actual p2p virtual helpdesk as it was embodied in a SLACK channel
The hope was for participants posting questions (Original Poster or OP) to choose the channel most closely related to pose their question or concern. Each new post would start a thread within which replies would be nested. A sample of what a simple interaction may look like:

![Sample Interaction on Slack]

In the above example, “Original Poster” represents the person asking a question, stating a concern, proposing a topic, etc. “RA1” and “RA2” stand for research administrators 1 & 2 and represent the people who are replying to the original poster.

4.3. Discussion of Questionnaire

As part of this capstone project, a survey was conducted of departmental research administrators. This questionnaire was designed to get input directly from the intended audience of this project. How prevalent were the problems this project is designed to address? Would the ideal embodiment of this project help alleviate those problems? What issues were the participants specifically looking for assistance with?

**Several of the questions dealt with timing issues:**

- *Approximately, how often do you have a question on procedure, policy, or best research administration practices?*
- *In the instances where you reach out to central institutional resources, (a contract administrator, travel specialist, etc.) how long do you normally have to wait for the central office’s guidance?*
• What is the longest you’ve waited for guidance from a central institution/university resource?

Other questions centered on what solutions participants use now, including a ranking of those solutions:
• Please rank the following strategies to find answers to a question on procedure, policy, or best research administration practices
  • Internal search of your workplace institution or university's website
  • External search outside your workplace or university's resources (e.g. other institution or government website)
  • Ask a peer / colleague from your own or another department or lab
  • Reach out to the relevant central institution/university resource (RAS or OSP Contract Administrator, Technology Licensing Officer, Sponsored Accounting, etc.)
  • Training or educational opportunity (LinkedIn learning, employer training course)
• With all things being equal, would you usually prefer to ask a peer or colleague or reach out to a resource at a central institution office for guidance?
• When you choose to go to a peer or colleague, what factor drives that decision?
• When you chose to ask a central institution source, what was the main factor in that choice?

There were questions about the topics involved in these discussions.
• Check the research administration topics on which you need guidance often?
• Please check the boxes of topics you would confidently ask other departmental administrators for assistance.
• Please check the boxes of topics you would only ask central institute offices (RAS, TLO, VPR, VPF) for assistance.

The initial and follow-up surveys are shown in their entirety in appendix three.

4.4 Selected data from the questionnaire

When asked “How often do you encounter a question on procedure, policy, or best administration practices?”, 39% of respondents said “daily” and 31% said “weekly.” Over 50% of the respondents said they usually ask a peer or colleague from their own or another department. Most respondents did describe reaching out to a relevant central office as a favorable strategy, but all reported a delayed response when doing so.
When asked who they would prefer to go to with a question or concern, about two thirds of respondents expressed a preference for asking a peer. When asked what makes going to a peer preferable, over half of those surveyed identified “response time” as the deciding factor.

A follow-up survey was carried out to understand the perspectives of those who did not engage with the peer-to-peer network. The aim was to identify factors that could motivate these individuals to use the network in the future. The feedback received was varied and somewhat inconsistent.

Respondents were asked to explain their reasons for using or not using the RAAP Slack channel. One participant cited a change in job role after joining the project, which made the resource unnecessary for them. Some respondents felt they were already managing too many communication channels. A few respondents felt unsure about their ability and were hesitant to provide advice to others.
When asked about their comfort level in asking questions in a semi-public forum like this, 40% of the respondents indicated discomfort. An equal proportion of respondents were concerned that their questions might expose a lack of knowledge or make them appear inferior.

Figure 12 “Are you hesitant to ask a question in a semi-public forum like this?” and “Would you worry about looking inferior?”

Additional survey findings revealed that a segment of the respondents was apprehensive about how their involvement in a resource like this could potentially impact their professional standing. Even though this was a viewpoint held by a minority, it was a recurring response and holds statistical significance. An equal proportion of participants suggested that the option of remaining anonymous might increase their likelihood of engaging with a resource like this.

Figure 13 20% of respondents expressed concern that participation in this resource could affect their standing as a staff member.
Chapter 5. Project Results and Discussion

5.1. Project Results

RAAP was unexpectedly underutilized, which was surprising considering the results of the initial survey. To understand why the resource was not widely adopted, a follow-up questionnaire was developed and sent out. These two surveys taken together show consistency with the results of the p2p test platform.

One reason for the sparse use of the p2p resource is that research administrators have become highly skilled at independently finding answers. The follow-up survey results suggest that experienced research administrators develop a kind of ‘muscle memory’ in this process. The strategies they employ to navigate unfamiliar issues are influenced by the amount of time they have available to address a specific question on any given day.

Many research administration workflows come with time limits that RAs have learned to work within. The typical IHE policy on filing a travel expense report is within 60 days of the trip’s conclusion. A well-organized RA with a proper workload and a typical expense report situation would be able to ask a travel department for guidance on most standard questions. However, situations arise that require quicker action. For example, if a graduate student ends up covering much of their travel expenses out of pocket, the student might require quicker reimbursement due to limited personal funds. In those situations, awaiting guidance from an understaffed central office may not suffice.

There was also an unexpected element of shyness that emerged. In the pre-project survey, 42.9% of respondents reported that they go to a colleague or peer for answers on procedures, policy, or best practices most often. However, RAs are accustomed to asking the same trusted
colleagues over and over for advice. These relationships are often started because of proximity to each other, similar job scope, and collaboration on prior projects. These in-person peer-to-peer relationships are friendships of a sort and make it much more comfortable for RAs to be vulnerable and ask for help. As working rapports develop, a balanced exchange of advice builds and the RAs feel comfortable asking questions. RAs feel more relaxed asking for assistance if they know their question is legitimate and does not make them look or feel “less than.” In short, RAs were reticent to broadcast what they did not know.

Though RAAP was underutilized, it also showed some promising utility. Some participants made good use of the helpdesk by posting questions and getting advice from their fellow administrators. One example:

![Figure 14 Actual interaction on the virtual helpdesk](image)

This conversation presents a situation that could be unique and rare, or standard and frequent, depending on the type of department the RA finds themselves supporting. The potential for the P2P helpdesk as a powerful resource for RAs rests in this variability. The information the
OP received from the two responding RAs was clearly not definitive, but this type of conversation could be thought of as *coffee-machine* or *water-cooler* talk. The transfer of knowledge from colleague to colleague informally is a longstanding and near-universal part of workplace culture. If the information received here was not actionable, it may have reduced iteration between the OP and travel officers by providing some experience and context to the framing of the discussion. For example, knowing that a “request for payment” which is often handled by a central accounts payable department rather than the travel department, is likely not possible could have saved the OP a day or more in waiting time.

Another benefit the p2p helpdesk became was a repository of announcements and resources that users found useful. In one instance, a user had just finished a project that caused them to learn the ins and outs of cost sharing and they shared some helpful information with the rest of the p2p network.

![Original Poster: Cost Sharing can be a very confusing topic. Feel free to pass on resources that have helped you, post some questions, etc. Here are some resources:
https://rsp.wisc.edu/costsharing
https://ras.mit.edu/document/cost-sharing-primer-ras-2020-10-28-0
https://osp finance.harvard.edu/cost-sharing-policy
https://ras.mit.edu/grant-and-contract-administration/cost-sharing
Cost sharing is the portion of a project or program cost that is not reimbursed by the sponsor. In a proposal or an award, cost sharing represents a commitment by the Institute. Cost sharing may be either mandatory or voluntary.](image)

Figure 15 Unprompted content being shared
There is promise here for a resource like this to act as a bulletin board. This was put under the slack thread “cost sharing” so it would be easy to find and would be completely discoverable later.

![Figure 16 Screenshot of results of a search for "cost sharing" in RAAP](image)

Another use of RAAP was as a repository for documents. In one instance a user commented about a new government cover sheet. They made some editorial criticism and then posted the document for anyone to download or view.

![Figure 17 Screenshot of a user discussing form SF298](image)
The OP discussed the form and its purpose. They gave some helpful hints as to what boxes they needed to fill in and how to handle content that they may have been less familiar with. They passed along guidance they were given and even provided a link for more information.

These examples show some further potential of this idea. Overall, however, RAAP was not extensively used. Only about 25% of those who signed up made use of the resource. Of those, about 75% of them used it for one interaction.

5.2. Discussion of Results

MIT was originally considered as a home for the peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk. MIT operates as a hybrid centralized / decentralized administrative structure. Most of MIT's administrative and support staff work at the departmental level with decision making authority retained by the central offices, making MIT an environment where a virtual helpdesk could be a potentially useful tool. With most staff out on the research department or lab level, harnessing their shared knowledge presents a powerful advancement in resource development.

To establish RAAP as an institute-sanctioned resource, permission and approval from the leadership was an important early step. MIT’s support and buy-in could have provided several benefits such as:

- MIT’s expertise in setting up a program to help ensure the project stays within legal and bureaucratic guidelines.
- Stakeholder involvement to help spread awareness, get local feedback, promote recruitment and use of the resource.
- Clear messaging about what the project was and what it was not.
- Administrative needs (informed consent forms, survey and questionnaire proliferation fulfillment) would be easier under the banner of an MIT sanctioned initiative.

Since RAAP becoming an institute-wide initiative immediately was unlikely, the project was proposed as a small-scale beta test to be populated by an administrative subset within one of
the Institute’s six schools (MIT SA+P). At first, the project received the blessing at a few levels of MIT management. The preliminary approval chain was:

![Approval Chain for RAAP beta test at MIT](image)

**Figure 18 Approval Chain for RAAP beta test at MIT**

The first few meetings a decision-maker at MIT expressed support for the idea. Eventually the project was presented to the Assistant Provost who expressed strong concerns about the proliferation of faulty guidance and unacceptable workarounds. At this point, the possibility of the project being hosted at MIT with MIT’s support and promotion ended.

![Approval chain ending with the firm "no" from MIT.](image)

**Figure 19 Approval chain ending with the firm "no" from MIT.**
Chapter 6. Recommendations and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The p2p resource, RAAP, had minimal use. Considering the hurdles that had to be cleared to get the project approved and started, it is hard to conclude whether the idea itself was rejected by the potential users or if the clumsy roll-out of the project affected adoption. After analysis and reflection, here are some recommendations that might make an initiative like this more successful.

6.2 Recommendations

1. Institutional Backing:
Explore avenues to gain institutional support for the resource. Administrative endorsement can significantly enhance projects by leveraging communication channels and leadership influence. According to the follow-up questionnaire, 40% of respondents had forgotten about the resource as an option. Additionally, one respondent mentioned that they would have been more likely to use it if they had observed trusted administrative authorities utilizing it.

2. Extended Duration:
Originally, RAAP was intended to remain active for four to six months. However, due to challenges related to institutional approval, internal review board delays, and holiday scheduling, the actual active period was reduced to approximately two months. Extending the availability timeline could allow for better adoption and utilization. The project will need time to develop momentum and allow membership to grow. Giving the project at least a year would allow for the annual administration activities to take place. Some examples of yearly administrative chores and tasks RAs are more likely to encounter over the course of a year include:
• Closing out and opening fiscal years
• Grant management
  o Reporting, fiscal / technical / IP
  o Extensions
  o Budget adjustments
  o Salary and Effort reporting
• Academic milestones and appointments
• Sponsored accounting tasks
  o Budgeting and reporting
  o Billing
• Increased likelihood of grant proposal submissions

Many RAs would not encounter these tasks very often and might require guidance. The p2p helpdesk could be a resource they would turn to.

3. **Stimulate activity initially**

The follow-up survey results indicated that this type of resource can be self-sustaining. However, a sparse message board does not inspire participation. Possible solutions to jumpstart participation and content could include:

- **Collaborate with central offices** within the institution to provide initial content. Examples include conversational blog posts on common issues, repositories for frequently used forms, and sample grant proposals and documents.
- **Engage experienced admins** (potential über-users) to create an FAQ to help jumpstart the project.
- Consider providing **gift cards** (e.g., for coffee shops, Amazon, or local lunch spots) as an employee recognition program to users who regularly contribute valuable advice or responses--especially in the first few weeks. The goal is to eliminate the “blank-canvas” feel and create an engaging and active workspace from the outset.

4. **Explain the vision**

Spend time articulating to the intended users the advantages of this resource. Beyond the fundamental benefit of acquiring guidance more quickly, the potential for fostering a stronger
sense of community among users and tapping into the collective wisdom of their peers are potent ideas. Although most Research Administrators (RAs) have their own methods for gathering information and solutions, a persuasive explanation can motivate them to try new approaches. Without such clear communication, RAs are likely to revert to their standard problem-solving techniques.

5. Get to know your constituency

This capstone project could have benefited from more input from the research administrators it was designed to serve. The resource was developed based on anecdotal evidence, a brief discussion with a group of administrators, and a questionnaire. With more insights, better strategies to encourage participation could have been developed. For instance, the culture of peer support might flourish naturally in one institution, while it might not develop at all in another. Engaging in conversations with the administrators you aim to assist could uncover alternative strategies that better align with specific workplace needs.
Chapter. 7. Conclusion

This project’s core premise was that a peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk, in an ideal embodiment, would assist departmental administrators in obtaining answers to questions more promptly by leveraging the collective knowledge and experience of their colleagues. A significant proportion of research administrators indicated in the surveys used for this project that they would welcome a well-structured and effectively promoted resource.

Although the concept received a positive reception, insufficient participation prevented a definitive proof of the utility of the peer-based virtual helpdesk. The follow-up survey revealed that there were probable reasons for the users’ limited adoption. Experienced research administrators, accustomed to finding answers already, relied on their familiar techniques during hectic workdays. When participants visited the virtual helpdesk, instead of finding an energetic forum of colleagues exchanging information, they found a sparsely used Slack channel. This created a self-reinforcing loop for the short time the forum was open and available. The abandoned atmosphere of the platform perpetuated its underutilization.

Additionally, the subsequent survey revealed some introversion among the participants. A large percentage of respondents indicated a preference for reaching out to a known and trusted colleague instead of a more public message board. The aforementioned muscle memory played its part again as the participants opted for asking the peers they normally ask for advice.

The introversion and reliance on ingrained habits were unforeseen challenges. These issues might have been more easily addressed had the project not encountered unexpected institutional resistance, which delayed the start and ultimately shortened the participation period. At Johns Hopkins, obtaining IRB approval took two months, and MIT’s initial enthusiasm was
replaced by concerns after preparations were already underway. The irony that a project designed to help mitigate bureaucratic hurdles was ensnared by the very bureaucracy it sought to alleviate is amusingly notable. If this project were to be attempted again, better preparation, coupled with institutional support and promotion, could potentially yield different results.

Meanwhile, research administrators remain dedicated professionals who are tasked with complex responsibilities. Positioned at the centroid of a triangle of constituencies, research administrators provide support and connection between the sponsoring entities, the research institutions, and the researchers themselves. Departmental administrators, in particular, serve these three constituencies and must do so while ensuring compliance with governmental and institutional policies and regulations, as well as managing the research projects.

Research administrators often find themselves navigating conflicting situations. Consider this scenario: a research project urgently requires a replacement for a delicate machine. However, the cost of this replacement necessitates thorough price justification and sponsor approval. At the same time, the grant is falling behind schedule, and the principal investigator insists on procuring the equipment promptly.

In such a dilemma, the solution is not to disregard established compliance practices, which protect taxpayers or other sponsors, or to dismiss the urgency expressed by the research team. A skilled research administrator adeptly balances these conflicting demands. They seek advice and guidance from colleagues, negotiate with vendors to expedite lead times, and even track down agency program managers during the dwindling business hours on a Friday afternoon.

This capstone project did not conclusively determine whether an online peer support resource would be more or less beneficial to research administrators compared to the existing
solutions they already utilize—such as emails or calls to central offices, web searches, and discussions with trusted colleagues. However, the project identified certain factors that could limit the effectiveness of peer-driven support. Issues like a poorly executed rollout, institutional confusion, false starts, and lack of activity can all deter adoption within the intended user group. Nevertheless, it would be premature to dismiss this solution, given its significant potential to help research administrators navigate the critical moments, when the walls of the triangle start to close in, and they must act swiftly and precisely.

Consider a Wednesday at noon in a research hub like Boston, where institutions from Europe to California are open, and offices are whirring with activity. During such times, the need for a peer-to-peer virtual helpdesk might not be immediately apparent. Now, shift the perspective to late Friday afternoon when a patent provisional needs to be filed, a purchase order must be sent out, or the National Science Foundation’s proposal deadline looms just 59 minutes away. In these stressful—yet all too common—scenarios, assistance from your peers becomes a lifeline—the last call for experience, knowledge, and guidance.

Research administrators (RAs) play an important role in the research enterprise, enabling scientists to be more efficient and effective by allowing them to concentrate on what is happening in their labs and under their microscopes. Additionally, RAs safeguard taxpayer funds by preventing fraud and waste, allowing research institutions to thrive as reliable ecosystems for knowledge. The role that peer-support has in assisting research administrators has not been definitively decided. But what is clear is that RAs continue to fulfill more complex and demanding workloads over time, and research institutions and funding agencies need to be open to new ways to assist RAs and lessen their administrative burden.
Selected Bibliography


Goodman, Ira S. “Remembering 50 Years In Research Administration.” The journal of research administration 50, no. 2SE (2019): 13-.


Shambrook, Jennifer, Comparison of Stress-Related Factors in the 2007 and 2010 Research Administrator Stress Perception Surveys (RASPerS), Journal of Research Administration, v43 n2 p107-118 Fall 2012


Appendix 1: comparison of job descriptions over the last ten years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative Assistant II 2014</th>
<th>Administrative Assistant II 2020</th>
<th>Administrative assistant II 2023</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• providing administrative services to the department(s)</td>
<td>• provide varied and complex administrative support to two research groups.</td>
<td>• perform complex and diverse administrative and financial duties in support of three to four professors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Serve as the initial point of contact for visitors and direct inquiries to appropriate personnel and resources</td>
<td>• Responsibilities include preparing, processing, and monitoring all financial activities (e.g., assisting with budget preparation, monitoring and initiating reimbursements, procurement, and travel expense reconciliation)</td>
<td>• assist faculty and teaching assistants with the preparation/organization of course materials and other course-related activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• assist the financial coordinator with department-related financial activities</td>
<td>• calendar management for professors, research group members, and collaborators</td>
<td>• respond to inquiries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• carry out routine office duties such as filing, mail services, photocopying, and ordering office supplies</td>
<td>• coordinating domestic and international travel and creating itineraries</td>
<td>• resolve problems, including basic computer issues composing and editing internal correspondence and documents, designing PowerPoint presentations, and coordinating mass mailings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• respond to routine inquiries and screen calls</td>
<td>• coordinating and facilitating communications and meetings with domestic and international collaborators</td>
<td>• maintain website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• serve as the ASO representative for community-related activities and as the parking and transportation coordinator for ASO and the department’s faculty and staff</td>
<td>• coordinating logistics for meetings, workshops, initiating and coordinating online conferencing, catering set-up and breakdown, scheduling, and day-of support for event activities</td>
<td>• monitor/order supplies/equipment and selecting vendors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• administrative support to the administrative officer</td>
<td>• acting as the point person for inquiries, group activities, travel, procurement, etc.</td>
<td>• schedule diverse and complex appointments, meetings, and travel updating/maintaining electronic faculty personnel records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• act as the department IT liaison with MIT Information Services and Technology and the administrative computing community,</td>
<td>• collecting, editing, and preparing drafts of documentation for reports and performing other writing tasks</td>
<td>• compile information and submitting requests for visiting and postdoctoral appointments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• work on special projects and provide other assistance as needed.</td>
<td>• performing other general office duties as assigned.</td>
<td>• act as a resource to the administrative assistant role in department including participation in a buddy program to train new staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Requirements:</td>
<td>• Skills Requested: high school diploma or its equivalent at least three years’ office experience as an administrative assistant for multiple senior managers</td>
<td>• create a welcoming, well-organized office environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• three years of office experience</td>
<td>• excellent organizational, customer service, proofreading, editing, and verbal and written communications skills</td>
<td>• develop filing systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• proficiency with Word, PowerPoint, and Excel</td>
<td>• demonstrated proficiency with English grammar and composition</td>
<td>• perform general office duties, e.g., answering phones, greeting visitors, photocopying, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• attention to detail excellent organizational skills good judgment.</td>
<td>• attention to details and accuracy ability to concurrently handle a wide variety of competing priorities in a fast-paced, open-office environment</td>
<td>• acting as backup support for other staff members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Must be able to work both independently and as part of a team</td>
<td>• proactively anticipate needs and quickly and satisfactorily solve sensitive problems discretion with confidential information</td>
<td>Financial duties will include</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• interact with a diverse group of people</td>
<td>• ability to collaborate effectively with a creative and diverse group of people</td>
<td>• processing journal vouchers, requisitions, purchase orders, requests for payment, and invoices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• handle multiple tasks simultaneously in a very busy environment.</td>
<td>• ability to learn quickly and work with critical time demands and proficiency with Microsoft Office (Word, Excel), Gmail, and Google Docs and comfort using new software.</td>
<td>• reconciling accounting statements monthly account projections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• MIT experience and knowledge of SAP preferred.</td>
<td>• Job Requirements:</td>
<td>• authorizing expenditures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1-A (AAII)</td>
<td>• experience with arranging travel, paying invoices, ordering supplies, account reconciliations, and expense reimbursements</td>
<td>• investigating and following up on purchasing/accounting discrepancies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• discretion with confidential information/issues</td>
<td>• Will perform other duties as assigned.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• proficiency with Microsoft Office, experience updating websites, and willingness to learn new software</td>
<td>Job Requirements:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ability to prioritize, handle multiple tasks simultaneously, problem-solve, interact effectively with people at all levels,</td>
<td>• associate’s/bachelor’s degree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• bachelor’s degree.</td>
<td>familiarity with SAPgui, Concur, Bu2Pay, Slack, Salesforce and Dropbox</td>
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<td>FINANCIAL COORDINATOR 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>• assist with management, preparation, review of all proposal</td>
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<td>• oversee the distribution of funds to individual principal</td>
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<tr>
<td>• communicate with the National Project Grant Office on issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Duties include authorizing purchases, invoice payments, and</td>
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<tr>
<td>• maintaining a database for all grant-based project proposals,</td>
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<td>• preparing cost sharing distribution schedules and maintaining</td>
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<td>• assisting in accounting for the complete financial operations</td>
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<td>• developing in-depth financial reports</td>
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<td>• approving and assisting with the issuance and supervision of</td>
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<td>• ensuring that federal guidelines and any other stipulations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• preparing and reviewing proposal budgets, close outs, and final</td>
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<tr>
<td>• assisting with the management, preparation, and submission of</td>
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<tr>
<td>• bachelor’s degree or higher in accounting, finance, or related</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Microsoft Office proficiency and thorough knowledge of</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Experience with Atlas, Grants Online, Grants.gov, and FileMaker</td>
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<tr>
<td>• knowledge of cost sharing, Coeus Lite, and Coeus Premium.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of other accounting and financial applications a</td>
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<td>• MIT experience preferred.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• coordinate sponsored program and gift-related financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Perform diverse financial duties such as preparing, reviewing,</td>
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<tr>
<td>• coordinating the preparation, review, and submission of</td>
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<tr>
<td>• assisting direct supervisor and faculty members with proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td>• coordinating the timely payment of invoices</td>
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<tr>
<td>• handling initial account setups, extensions, and closeouts</td>
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<tr>
<td>• monitoring, managing, and adjusting payroll distribution</td>
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<td>• forecasting account balances and managing delinquent travel</td>
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<td>• approving other duties as assigned.</td>
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<td>Job Requirements:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• bachelor’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>• at least two years’ experience in accounting or finance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• knowledge of federal research regulations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• experience with academic programs and administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>• excellent organizational, interpersonal, analytical,</td>
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<td>• attention to detail, sound judgment</td>
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<td>• proficiency with Microsoft Office</td>
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<th>FINANCIAL COORDINATOR 2023</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Provides “cradle to grave” contract/grant and financial</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Responsibilities include performing all pre-award activities,</td>
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<tr>
<td>• tracking proposals and managing under-recovery, cost sharing,</td>
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<tr>
<td>• tracking and monitoring the financial performance of grants</td>
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<td>• advisory principal investigators, other faculty, researchers,</td>
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<td>• bachelor's degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>• at least five years’ experience in accounting or finance</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strong interpersonal, communication, analysis, and</td>
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<td>• Ability to take initiative and work independently to solve</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of federal guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Advanced-level knowledge of Excel</td>
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<td>• MIT experience.</td>
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<td>• knowledge of federal research regulations</td>
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<td>• attention to detail, sound judgment</td>
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<td>• tracking and monitoring the financial performance of grants</td>
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<td>• advisory principal investigators, other faculty, researchers,</td>
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<td>• bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>• at least five years’ experience in accounting or finance</td>
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<td>• Strong interpersonal, communication, analysis, and</td>
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<td>• Ability to take initiative and work independently to solve</td>
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<td>• Knowledge of federal guidelines</td>
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<td>• Advanced-level knowledge of Excel</td>
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<td>• MIT experience.</td>
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### Appendix 1-B
(Financial Coord.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>PROGRAM COORDINATOR 2018</th>
<th>PROGRAM COORDINATOR 2020</th>
<th>PROGRAM COORDINATOR 2023</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• provide administrative support for and coordinate various activities within department/program&lt;br&gt;• handling routine financial transactions, e.g., journal vouchers, requests for payment, procurement, travel expense vouchers&lt;br&gt;• serving as pro-card approver&lt;br&gt;• conducting monthly financial reconciliations of center accounts&lt;br&gt;• ensuring timely financial review and control and salary report submissions from center-affiliated faculty and support staff&lt;br&gt;• disseminating relevant data to center-affiliated support staff (invoices, Airgas backup, salary reports)&lt;br&gt;• data entry/account projections&lt;br&gt;• assisting with planning and execution of events&lt;br&gt;• handling marketing for the center’s workshops&lt;br&gt;• website management&lt;br&gt;• supporting the center’s assistant director with various projects.</td>
<td>• support the marketing and admissions of global bootcamp programs and participate fully in the evolution of long-term marketing and branding strategy. Marketing duties include identifying and targeting customers through market research and interviewing program participants&lt;br&gt;• developing creative marketing campaigns to bring in target customers&lt;br&gt;• utilizing metrics to assess effectiveness of marketing campaigns and channels and iterate and optimize on best tactics and strategies&lt;br&gt;• leveraging online/offline channels and the MOOC/Bootcamp community to target new users&lt;br&gt;• partnering on cross-marketing promotions to target niche segments&lt;br&gt;• working with global MIT Bootcamps collaborators on optimizing marketing strategies&lt;br&gt;• maintaining/updating program websites, outward facing collateral, and messages. Operational responsibilities include interfacing with program applicants/participants to resolve issues&lt;br&gt;• working admissions team to screen, review, interview, and recommend applicants&lt;br&gt;• helping develop and distribute program materials/resources for program execution&lt;br&gt;• developing new systems/methods to optimize program delivery and admissions&lt;br&gt;• collaborating with international partners to execute global programs&lt;br&gt;• coordinating with internal/external partners to execute global programs&lt;br&gt;• coordinating with staff/faculty/catering/facilities/sponsors/etc. to support live program execution.</td>
<td>• coordinate and perform operational and administrative activities for department&lt;br&gt;• managing the scholar application process&lt;br&gt;• planning and staffing events for community building, recruitment, and retention&lt;br&gt;• performing data analysis and reporting&lt;br&gt;• managing the program budget&lt;br&gt;• organizing speakers and workshops to address personal and professional growth and development&lt;br&gt;• handling event logistics, e.g., reserving space, vendor management, promotion and staffing, invoice payments, etc.&lt;br&gt;• serving as a key contact for updating, reviewing, and maintaining upcoming PEM website&lt;br&gt;• serving as the main point of contact for the UCEM/PEM members&lt;br&gt;• responding to inquiries&lt;br&gt;• compiling, reviewing, and analyzing data to evaluate program metrics&lt;br&gt;• determining and implementing next steps&lt;br&gt;• developing methods for collecting feedback and ensuring tracking of key program metrics&lt;br&gt;• maintaining databases and providing reports and statistics about graduate student records&lt;br&gt;• monitoring program scope and schedule, identifying and reporting issues.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Job Requirements:**

- bachelor’s degree
- three years’ experience as a program coordinator or executive assistant for senior managers
- flexibility
- an aptitude for handling a wide variety of duties
- initiative
- excellent organizational, interpersonal, and communications skills
- ability to maintain confidentiality
- advanced computer skills including proficiency with Microsoft Office
- competent Internet research skills and knowledge of database applications
- and ability to speak English fluently, compose and write basic memoranda, and prepare reports.
- ability to learn quickly and work with critical time demands is crucial.
- ability to function effectively despite constant interruptions and also work independently to solve problems with minimal supervision.
- SAP Web and MIT experience helpful, as is the ability to work in a multicultural and diverse environment.

**Reports preferred.**

Job #18639-6
| Job #10432 | Appendix 1-C  
(Program Coordinator) | Job #18521-6 | Job #23143-6 |
<table>
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<tr>
<td>ability to work with little day-to-day supervision and prioritize and deliver multiple projects with different deadlines in a fast-paced, ever-changing, start-up work environment that focuses highly on both teamwork and individual contributions.</td>
<td>initiative and ability to make independent judgments with minimal supervision for long periods of time.</td>
<td>proficiency with standard data management software such as Microsoft Office, Adobe Creative Suite, Google Suite, SurveyMonkey.</td>
<td>proficiency with standard data management software such as Microsoft Office, Adobe Creative Suite, Google Suite, SurveyMonkey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>international collaboration experience and understanding of global innovation and entrepreneurship communities.</td>
<td>Job Requirements:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Job Requirements:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master’s degree or relevant graduate degree</td>
<td>experience contributing to diversity and inclusion efforts in higher education</td>
<td>experience contributing to diversity and inclusion efforts in higher education</td>
<td>Willingness to staff evening and weekend community building events two to three times per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to staff evening and weekend community building events two to three times per month</td>
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</table>
Appendix 2: Johns Hopkins University Institutional Review Board Approval

Homewood Institutional Review Board
3400 N. Charles Street
Wynman Park Building, Suite N468
Baltimore MD 21218-2685
410-516-6380
http://homewoodirb.jhu.edu/

Michael McCloskey, PhD
IRB Chair

Date: October 3, 2023

PI Name: Saiaq Anne Qureshi
Study #: HIRB00017682
Study Name: Research Administrators Assisting Peers (RAAP)

Date of Review: 10/1/2023
Date of Acknowledgement: 10/1/2023
Expiration Date: 10/1/2024

The above referenced study has been acknowledged.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review Type:</th>
<th>Exempt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding Agency:</td>
<td>Not funded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant or Contract Number:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Sites:</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum number of participants:</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable populations:</td>
<td>JHU Students, Johns Hopkins Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent process:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assent Process:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Board determined that this research meets the criteria for submission of a Progress Report. The Progress Report must be submitted at least 6 weeks prior to the expiration date shown above on this notice. If the Progress Report is not submitted prior to the expiration date all ongoing research activities must stop immediately, including data analysis. Before any research activity can resume, you must submit the Progress Report.

Recruiting Materials:
Recruitment Email.docx

Study Team Members:
Joseph Murphy

APPROVAL IS GRANTED UNDER THE TERMS OF FWA00002470 FEDERAL WIDE ASSURANCE OF COMPLIANCE WITH DHHS REGULATIONS FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECTS
Appendix 3: Questionnaires

Appendix 3a:

Research Administrators Assisting Peers (RAAP)

Colleagues, please fill out the following questionnaire to assist me in completing the Research Administration masters degree program at Johns Hopkins University. My Capstone Project thesis explores a peer-based tool to help research administrators get effective guidance from each other in a time frame that reflects our schedules—which get busier every year. Your honest feedback will help immensely. Though we have so much in common, each staff member finds themselves in an individual, unique work environment.

By completing this survey or questionnaire, you are consenting to be in this research study. Your participation is voluntary and you can stop at any time.

### Approximately, how often do you have a question on procedure, policy, or best research administration practices?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Less than once a month
- Once a month
- More than once a month

### 1. The following five questions (A - E) will create a ranking of suggested solutions. With 1 least often, 5 being most often, please rank the following strategies to find answers to a question on procedure, policy, or best research administration practices?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Least often</th>
<th>Most often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal search of your workplace institution or university’s website</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External search outside your workplace or university's resources (e.g. other institution or government website)</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask a peer / colleague from your own or another Department, Lab, or Center</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach out to the relevant central institution/university resource (RAS or OSP Contract Administrator, Technology Licensing Officer, Sponsored Accounting, etc.)</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training or educational opportunity (linkedin learning, employer training course)</td>
<td>5.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### In the instances where you reach out to central institutional resources, (a contract administrator, travel specialist, etc.) how long

- Instant response
- Hours
- Next day
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>do you normally have to wait for the central office’s guidance?</td>
<td>o Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the longest you’ve waited for guidance from a central institution/university resource?</td>
<td>o Hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Next day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With all things being equal, would you usually prefer to ask a peer or colleague or reach out to a resource at a central institution office for guidance?</td>
<td>o Would almost always prefer a peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Would probably prefer a peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Would probably prefer asking a central office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Would almost always prefer a central office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you choose to go to a peer or colleague, what factor drives that decision?</td>
<td>o Response time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Familiarity with the peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you chose to ask a central institution source, what was the main factor in that choice?</td>
<td>o Expertise on topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Desire for official guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check the research administration topics on which you need guidance often?</td>
<td>o Pre-Award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Post-award</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Sponsored Accounting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Tech Transfer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Clinical Studies/Review</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Corporate Relations/Contracts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>o Foundation Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Academic Appointments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Research Misconduct, Plagiarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please check the boxes of topics you would confidently ask other departmental administrators for assistance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please check the boxes of topics you would only ask central institute offices (RAS, TLO, VPR, VPF) for assistance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 3b:

**RAAP follow-up questionnaire**

*This survey will reveal what did and did not work. All questions are optional and respondent identities will be masked.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you'd like, explain in your own words why you did or did not make use of the RAAP slack channel.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of these most accurately describes your feelings about this resource?</td>
<td>o I do not need another resource to find answers to my questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o I have all the information I need to do my job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| I need ways to find more information but I do not want to use a resource like this. | o I would use this but I never got around to it  
or o I forgot that it was available to me  
or o I wanted to see other people participate first (it was sparse) |
| Choose the answer that most closely reflects your opinion.              | o I would use this but I never got around to it  
or o I forgot that it was available to me  
or o I wanted to see other people participate first (it was sparse) |
| Does this statement describe your experience?                           | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| When I come across a situation where I need information, my current procedures (internet search, contact with central office, discussion with peer IRL, etc) are adequate. | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| Does this statement seem accurate to you?                               | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| I went to the resource and was confused as to why there seemed to be no or little activity. | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| Are you hesitant to ask a question in a semi-public forum like this?    | o Yes / No                                                                 |
| Does this statement accurately reflect your feelings on this type of resource? | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| This resource feels like more work. I already have enough work and I do not have time to answer other people's questions. | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| Does this statement accurately reflect your feelings on this type of resource? | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| I would worry that my question would make me seem unknowledgeable or inferior? | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| Is there a concern that your question would be seen by a supervisor or someone else who could negatively impact your standing at your institution? | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| Does this statement accurately reflect your feelings on this type of resource? | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| I would be comfortable answering questions in a forum like this but not asking them. | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| Would anonymity have made you more likely to use a resource like this?   | o Yes, exactly  
or o Yes, in part  
or o Not really  
or o Absolutely, not |
| Did the choice of platform, i.e. Slack, make it less likely you would participate? | o Yes, I don’t want to use Slack for this  
or o It affected my likeliness but was not a defining factor  
or o No, Slack had nothing to do with my choice to participate or not |
| Would reminders that this resource is available impacted your participation in this resource? Choose most accurate | o Yes, I forgot about it  
or o Maybe  
or o No, it would have not had an impact |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choose any statement that describes a reason you may have been more likely to have tried this resource? (you may choose multiple)</td>
<td>o Reminders would have made it less likely I’d participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o If my institution would have sent out an email from a trusted administrator explaining the resource and encouraging its use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o If trusted peers would have told me of their positive experiences with this resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o If it would have been recommended as an option for information by the central offices (perhaps a link from their webpages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o If I would have seen an active messageboard with active conversations when I visited the resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o If I would have seen trusted administrative authorities from RAS, Travel, VPF, etc. participating on the resource page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did being asked to sign an informed consent form negatively impact your feelings about this resource?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you answered yes, the informed consent form negatively impacted your feelings about this resource, check the bubble next to the statements that describe your feelings. Check as many as you like.</td>
<td>o The Informed Consent made me nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o IC form made project more trouble than worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Form was complicated or long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o I was not expecting a legal document to be involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Rather than make me feel protected, I was suspicious of what I would have been agreeing to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would rather search previous conversations for information rather than participate in a thread directly.</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think more trainings from central offices would be more helpful than a peer-to-peer resource.</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think weekly drop-in hours at central offices would be more helpful than a peer-to-peer resource.</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think improvements to my institution's website would be more helpful than a peer-to-peer resource.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have another idea of how an institution could help research administrators who find themselves stuck waiting for a question to be answered. If yes, explain below</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4: Short Bio

Joseph Murphy has dedicated 17 years of his professional life to research administration at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). His roles have progressed from an administrative assistant to a program coordinator, and finally to the Assistant Director of Administration for MIT’s Center for Bits and Atoms. His journey at Johns Hopkins University culminates with the completion of this capstone project, earning him a Master’s of Science degree in Research Administration.

Prior to his tenure at MIT, Joseph spent a decade as a professional musician in Los Angeles, post his graduation from the Berklee College of Music. He currently resides in the Boston area with his wife, Cheryl, their daughters, Maddy and Ellie, and their pet dog, Chloe.