A dozen and more years ago, the few of us with jobs in what would become known as research development felt like we were making it up as we went along. We came to the work through various directions—researcher, foundation relations officer, writer, research administrator—usually at the instigation of someone in the university administration who had some version of the following thought: “Wouldn’t it be great if we had some way to help faculty get funding?”

The underlying philosophy of research development centers on the idea of removal of barriers and the creation of opportunity. Typically this translates to creating structures to provide support for faculty members to pursue large, high-value proposals. This was the work that kept me busy when I entered the field, first as a consultant and eventually as the founding director of the office of proposal development for my steadiest client, Tufts University. The transition from bench neuroscientist to research development professional contained many lessons in organization, “managing up”, and federal relations. The biggest lesson, however, was the realization that proposal development, valuable as it was, did not sufficiently describe all that we did, or all that the university might need.

My experiences at Tufts were not unique, and what is now referred to as research development tends to cover four basic areas:

a. Comprehensive support for “high-value proposals”, such as center grants or infrastructure grants, from finding the opportunity, project management, writing where needed, and even helping to create the research and administrative team.

b. Faculty development, including finding funding opportunities, helping with individual applications, grantsmanship instruction, lab and time management support, etc.

c. Strategic planning for what the university needs to have in place to increase competitiveness.

d. Communications, both within the university and for promoting the university’s research.

Institutions embarking on capacity-building in research development tend to start with an emphasis in one of the four areas. Sometimes it begins with one staff member in research administration or in the library tasked with helping faculty search for funding opportunities. Sometimes it begins with hiring a consultant or grant writer to help with a large proposal. And sometimes it starts at the top, with a vice-president-level administrator taking on the strategic planning and identifying needs. Ideally, however, these functions are integrated so that when a large funding opportunity is announced, the institution has both faculty and research development teams in place with the capacity, experience and collaborative structures necessary to create a competitive proposal in line with the university’s goals.

Tufts University originally brought me in as a contractor to help faculty on center grants and training grants—essentially any kind of application where the individual benefit for the PI might seem to be outweighed by the work involved, but where the grant would benefit the institution. One of my own early successes involved partnering with a faculty member who saw the center grant application as simply overwhelming. Even highly successful researchers often find complex RFAs daunting, and don’t have a clear notion about how to set up a governance structure, or how to write the business plan for a core facility. Good grant writers and proposal development staff can provide support that enables good scientists to head up competitive applications for research centers, training programs, or infrastructure projects. My support removed the barrier, and I learned on the job how to help organize the right teams, draft descriptions of core facilities, and to make sure all of the RFA requirements were met. Coming from a research background, the regulatory requirements were eye opening, and I had to learn how to interact with research administration.

Some institutions start from the research administration direction, creating proposal development support for the administrative parts of the application. This is very helpful for the faculty, but additional value can come from someone with a research background who knows how reviewers think and how to write for them. An understanding of peer review from the insider’s perspective pays large dividends in creating a compelling, readable application.

Not all research development is the same, and every institution has a different approach to accomplishing its mission. “We generally try to do anything that promotes and supports research activity among our faculty,” says University of Oregon’s Lynne Stearney. She directs the Office of Research Development Services, and as part of

Research Development: Where to begin?

By M.S. AtKisson
Faculty development programs can be centered within the research development office, or can be undertaken in partnership with other areas of the university. At Tufts University, the Office of Proposal Development holds workshops on writing strategies for grant proposals, as well as strategies for team building and team science with a focus on developing proposals, developing strong peer review skills, and strategies for finding funding. Director Amy Gantt says, “My office also collaborates with the Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI) to offer a 5-week workshop focused on developing a ‘specific aims’ or equivalent page, offered to faculty and post-docs, and in some cases advanced doctoral students.”

Faculty development can cover more than just grant writing. “We also promote Honors and Awards for which our faculty members are eligible, and assist with letters of nomination and self nomination, reviewing CV’s, and interpreting guidelines,” says Stearney. Faculty members with such awards on their CVs are more competitive both for their individual grant applications, and for the larger, team-based applications. Raising the national profile of faculty members is one aspect of the kind of strategic planning that goes into a good research development office.

While building the office at Tufts, the need for strategic planning became clear as we worked on the larger proposals. Reviewers find it more convincing when they read about existing structures and practices than when they read about plans to create them. Similarly, teams of researchers with a track record of working together have a better chance of convincing reviewers that a large project or center will succeed. For example, if a large funding opportunity had a community outreach component, the application would be more competitive if the university already had infrastructure to support community engagement. Sometimes small investments can create needed university structures, and someone with an overview of the entire university and a solid familiarity with large, federally funded programs can offer strategic advice on where to place such small investments.

Strategic analysis and planning must always start with the larger goals of the upper administration. Although there are exceptions to every rule, in my experience, research development does not thrive well when placed under research administration. To quote the vice-chancellor for research at a major state institution: “You don’t put creation and regulation under the same heading.” Talented directors of research administration may not yet understand how the approach differs from the regulatory support provided by offices of sponsored programs. “When I was director of sponsored programs, we had a research development position,” says New Hampshire’s Cateno, “but it didn’t get the respect and support it deserved. The upper administration did not see the value for the longer-term development of faculty until it became a separate unit.”

Holly Falk-Krzesinski, the founding director of Research Team Support and Development at Northwestern University, once floated the ideal research development team. It would consist of of a Vice Provost level leader to set institutional priorities, a Director of Research Development to manage the team, grant writers with advanced degrees in a quantitative discipline to help write the proposal, administrative support for gathering information such as biographical sketches and tracking the project, and research administrative support for creating budgets and satisfying regulatory requirements. A true ‘dream team’ would also have graphic artists and copy editors available, and staff devoted to outreach. In most institutions, the team members wear many hats, but with good planning it can all come together in a competitive proposal.

Institutions that have created this capacity—no matter if it started as support for high-value proposals, faculty development, or strategic planning—consistently find that it adds value. Oregon’s Lynn Stearney sums it up nicely: “No one else is paying as much attention as we are, on a daily basis, to what is happening both ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ in the world of research and funding.”