

# With a Little Help From Our *Friends*



*By Anthony Beckman, Josef Mejido, and Istvan Fekete*

Everyone in the profession of research administration learns early on that to be an excellent research administrator, you must develop key skills. These include an ability to read carefully with close attention to detail; maintain a cool head when up against deadlines and processing multiple applications; and pay acute attention to detail while reviewing a stack of late journal entries, among many others. One critical element above the others, though, has allowed us to meet the demands of research administration. That is leaning in and accessing the collective wisdom of the larger community and the organizations that support our missions. Tapping into the broader community allows us to leverage the knowledge, expertise, experiences, and perspectives of many – helping us solve challenging problems and understand the evolving and complex situations we face.

In this article, we will highlight three examples of how aligning with organizations outside our own helps us survive and thrive in our profession. First, Josef Mejido, Director of Export Controls at the University of Washington, describes how being engaged with professional organizations fosters his career, helps him understand the landscape, and allows him to help serve the research administration community.

I have been working in university export compliance for more than eight years now, which has been an incredibly rewarding experience. The field continues to evolve, making it an exciting and challenging area of compliance. As new export compliance requirements are proposed and implemented, staying on top of these developments is essential to help ensure compliance. Also, the parallel and overlapping area of research security (which includes export compliance) continues to grow. Involvement in professional associations and attendance at conferences is critical to staying on top of regulatory requirements and implementing effective compliance programs.

The Association of University Export Control Officers (AUECO), which is the association for export compliance professionals at higher education institutions in the U.S., has been instrumental in my career. Over the years, I have served as Secretary, Vice-Chair, Chair, and now Past Chair of AUECO. AUECO helps advance expertise in the field of university export compliance, serves as a forum for its members to share information and best practices, acts as a trusted voice to federal regulatory agencies regarding the unique export compliance environments at academic institutions, and also engages with its counterparts in other regions of the world, including the European Export Control Association for Research Organisations (EECARO) and the U.K.'s Higher Education Export Controls Association (HEECA). Also, AUECO works with a predetermined university (or system of cooperating universities) to host the annual Conference on the Impact of Export Controls on Higher Education and Scientific Institutions.

The Academic Security and Counter Exploitation (ASCE) program, spearheaded by Texas A&M University, hosts an annual conference that brings together professionals from around the world to discuss policy, best practices, and regulatory requirements for safeguarding academic research. My involvement on the ASCE Executive Committee and attendance at the ASCE conference has also been critical to my professional development and ability to stay on top of the changing research security and export compliance landscapes.

Next, we'll hear from Istvan Fekete, a research administrator who began his research administration career at a large academic institution, the University of Chicago, and now works with Attain Partners, a leading consulting firm that directly supports research administration.

Throughout my career in research administration, professional consulting organizations have been invaluable partners. My first experience with professional consulting was as a client. They helped us assess our pre- and post-award functions and implement contract management software.

My job at the time was to manage a contracts team in the central research administration office. When we had staff turnover and departures, I encountered a common challenge: limited in-house staffing solutions. I either performed multiple jobs myself or paid high hourly rates for external counsel who generally lacked research contracting expertise. Recognizing this gap in our field, I transitioned into consulting to create a better solution. This is one of the strengths of professional consulting organizations: they can pivot and innovate far more quickly than large institutional bureaucracies, developing new models that address pressing needs.

In my time as a consultant, I've had the pleasure of working with 50+ organizations on their contracting needs, as well as engaging in a wide range of other projects. This breadth of experience allows me to bring industry best practices to my clients, stay ahead of emerging trends, and introduce new ways of conducting business that my clients can benefit from, regardless of what they hired me to do. Many of us in higher education consulting came from the very organizations that we serve. Many of us transfer across that line repeatedly throughout our careers. This symbiotic relationship brings the best out of all of us.

Today, research faces unprecedented challenges. The long-standing models that have shaped our careers are being dismantled, forcing us to rethink how we operate. Navigating this landscape will require ingenuity, perseverance, and a willingness to embrace new ways of conducting business. No single institution or consulting firm will have all the answers. But by working together, sharing knowledge, and supporting one another, we can make informed decisions and help shape the future of research administration in this evolving environment.

Finally, we will hear from Anthony Beckman, a research administrator with more than 20 years of experience, who is the Interim Associate Vice President for Research Administration at the University of Rochester.

In my experiences, which incorporate themes similar to Josef and Istvan, I have found the resources of the research administration community invaluable to my role. While growing my career as a junior research administrator, my mentors—including my former boss Gunta Liders—encouraged me to get involved in NCURA. Being part of a thriving professional organization similar to Josef's allowed me to learn from more experienced individuals and test my understanding when it came time for me to share my knowledge with others. Organizations such as NCURA and AUECO are living examples of the power of having access to experienced people to learn from, a community of peers to share with, and an opportunity to teach and foster those new to the profession. These opportunities cannot be underrated in an ever-changing and uncertain environment.

Having recently transitioned into a new role at my institution, I've come to appreciate more than ever the value of consulting firms that support our profession. We've experienced staffing challenges similar to Istvan and have utilized the expert services of consulting firms to help bridge the gap. Such direct support allowed us to sustain our heavy workloads without risking further burnout from our team. Consulting services also gave us more time to hire a new staff member who would best fit our office. With constantly changing rules, regulations, and requirements, these outside organizations provide a perspective and expertise that any institution would find difficult to develop independently.

We are living in what seems like unprecedented times for the research community. At this moment, organizations such as the Council on Governmental Relations (COGR), Association of American Universities (AAU), Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), and American Council on Education (ACE) are providing collective guidance, leadership, and education that we need to stay informed and in compliance. The pace and volume of change are too much for any person or institution engaged in research to review and respond. These organizations, through their many channels of communication, help me distill what is important from all the noise surrounding us. Their analysis has helped us develop appropriate responses where needed and adapt our existing practices to meet changing demands.

With a little help from our friends, we research administrators can meet the changes and uncertainty of this moment with a collective sense of engagement and shared objectives. We can leverage the accumulated knowledge of a vast array of colleagues to bring awareness and solutions to our institutions, further our missions, and serve the research administration community. ■

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