

# Work



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Research administrators provide essential support in organizing grants and collaborations.

## ADMINISTRATION CELEBRATION

Academics weary of the tenure grind could excel as research administrators. **By Sara Reardon**

**T**he 2011 earthquake in Japan changed neuroscientist Tadashi Sugihara's career path forever. Sugihara had been working as a senior research scientist at the RIKEN Brain Science Institute in Wako, but the damage to his laboratory and other setbacks from the quake prompted him to reconsider his dream of becoming a principal investigator.

His lab had been partnering with Japanese automotive manufacturer Toyota to integrate brain science into car-safety systems, and Sugihara had learnt that he was good at the intensive budgeting and report writing that such a collaboration entailed. "I realized some of the researchers really did not like these kinds of negotiations with a big company," he says. "I was gradually understanding another side of my skills that made me very useful."

So when the Japanese Ministry of Education launched an initiative in 2011 to fund the appointments of academic administrators,

Sugihara applied for a job as research administrator at Kyoto University. Although he was initially worried about abandoning his dream, he was able to move past those concerns. "I didn't feel bad at all," he says. "The transition was very smooth."

Now a research-grant-application manager, Sugihara helps scientists at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology to apply for funds and manages the budgets of existing awards. Relationships between research and administrative operations can be thorny, but he is pleased with his role. "This kind of job makes us very happy because we feel we are welcome," he says. When researchers receive a grant, they are pleased to be able to call on him and his colleagues for help with editing papers and other support.

Long seen as a supporting role, research administration has increasingly come to be recognized in academia as a profession in its own right. At least three institutions in the

United States offer master's degrees in the field, and numerous professional societies worldwide help administrators with career development and networking. The Research Administrators Certification Council, a non-profit organization in Westminster, Colorado, offers education and testing for a professional certificate that is required for many US government jobs in the field, and the Awards for Training and Higher Education organization performs a similar service in the United Kingdom. The United States has a National Research Administrator Day (25 September) to recognize those in the field.

Universities, non-profit organizations and other institutions hire research administrators for positions that include helping scientists to apply for grants, ensuring scientists comply with institutional policies and federal laws, and coordinating research with international collaborators. Many academic administrators work closely with scientists to manage their grants, whereas others liaise more often with their counterparts in government agencies.

The number and roles of research administrators at a single employer vary widely depending on the type of organization and location, says Simon Kerridge, director of research policy and support at the University of Kent, UK. Large institutions such as his own might have hundreds of administrative staff members, although small, primarily undergraduate institutions could have just one.

In smaller nations, some scientists might split their time between their own bench research and administration. Institutional culture could determine how administrators are viewed, Kerridge says. "In some cultures, the academic is king and the [administrator] is support and must do what they're told," he says. "But if the profession has been around a little bit longer, then you develop that expertise, and the academic staff will trust you to know the things that they don't know." It can be difficult for busy scientists to keep up with constantly shifting regulations and protocols, particularly around grants, and administrators ensure that faculty researchers do not fall foul of any rule changes.

The backgrounds of research administrators are as diverse as their roles. Sugihara's path from research into administration is common, although others come from business-management positions or studied public administration at university. According to an unpublished 2019 survey of 4,325 research-management and administration professionals from more than 70 countries, 28% hold a PhD and 24% hold a master's degree.

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The survey found that about one-third of research administrators think it's important that people in their position have a scientific background, whereas another third say it isn't. People who enter the field from science or technology positions have some advantages when dealing with scientists at their institutions, says Rosemary Madnick, executive director of the Office of Grants & Contracts Administration at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. "You understand the faculty more from the aspect of 'I was there before, I used to write proposals, I know what you're going through,'" she says. But nearly all the survey respondents agreed that the most important attributes of a successful research administrator are soft skills, such as the ability to resolve conflicts among researchers and to multitask.

Some research administrators don't have an academic background. Debra Schaller-Demers has a bachelor's degree in fine arts and worked for ten years as a conflict manager in New York City public schools, helping parents to find non-violent solutions to problems. In 2002, at the age of 46, she applied on a whim to be a compliance officer at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City – and got the job. She thinks that the institution recognized the value of her communication and negotiation experience. She recalls a research-administrator mentor telling her that although scientists might have more advanced degrees than hers, she had the skill set they needed to continue to do their work. "You have a part to play," she remembers the mentor telling her, "and deserve a seat at this table."

Schaller-Demers now runs the research outreach and compliance office at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, where she trains scientists in research ethics and oversees committees on animal care, biosafety and export control. "We do things a scientist cannot," she says. "We grease the wheels so they don't run afoul of regulations. With research administrators doing all that work, scientists can be left to do the good work they do in the world."

Administrators at universities and research institutes frequently work with their counterparts at funding agencies, who help to clarify agency policy, ensure that grants adhere to budgets and provide a line of communication for funded researchers. "Folks think of us as this bureaucracy there, a hurdle to get through," says Erik Edgerton, chief grants management officer at the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), part of the US National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. "What we're really doing on our side is being problem solvers." NIAMS handles some 1,700 extramural grants, and administrators there often have to find creative ways to make grant budgets work across multiple years of funding, or to manage complex international collaborations



Tadashi Sugihara (left), with a colleague at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology.

among researchers at different institutions. "I think of this as a really good career path for someone who likes puzzles," Edgerton says.

The job comes with other challenges as well. Among them is staying ahead of constantly shifting government regulations in areas such as digital privacy, open access to data and publications, and international exports of research materials and information. Conversations about money or regulations can also test administrators' people skills. "Scientists in general don't want to be told 'no,'" Schaller-Demers says. "Without a certain baseline skill set, it can go downhill quickly."

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Cultural differences between a university's research operations and administrative offices can strain relationships. Some administrators struggle with the entrenched idea that scientists who leave academic research for an administrative career have somehow failed. "It's an unhelpful attitude and old-fashioned, and I hope it's changing," says Hilary Noone, a faculty research and projects officer at Newcastle University, UK.

Still, Noone describes a 'them versus us' culture between academic researchers and support staff members, including research administrators. In a March survey, she found that many of the 281 administrators and lab technicians felt undervalued and that their opinions were seen as less important than those of academics. Direct bullying, harassment or discrimination was reported by 44% of respondents. "A lot of this is not intended," Noone says. "It's unconscious and has taken a long time to form."

In truth, Noone says, academics and administrators face many of the same challenges, and recognizing each other's strengths and expertise could go a long way towards building camaraderie. "If we join up, we open the potential for collaboration and more porosity between different sectors." Sharing experiences about bullying and harassment can help foster change, for instance.

Educating faculty members about why certain regulations and procedures exist would also help to improve relations, she adds. "We're not breathing barriers and paperwork," Noone says. "Academics are annoyed about paperwork and processes, but we also share frustration in that, and we don't like it either. Sometimes you can bond over frustration – that can be fun."

Madnick and others encourage junior scientists who are considering careers outside research to assess whether administration would play to their strengths. If a junior scientist feels as though they are at a professional crossroads, it might help to remember why they are working in a lab in the first place. "It's because you enjoy the science," she says, and administrators are able to stay involved in research without having to worry about earning tenure or winning their next grant. They might also have more flexible working conditions than those of research scientists. Plus, Madnick adds, "they've got such a huge impact on what happens, and they get to see the benefit of research from the beginning all the way to when it hits the public".

Sugihara agrees. "There are many opportunities and possibilities," he says. "Even if [junior scientists] have to change their career from research to something else, that's good. They will get a chance to dance on another stage of their life."

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