FIRST STEPS: MINDING AND MENDING THE GAPS

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Fostering collaborative efforts among ethicists, researchers and administrators (including Research Integrity Officers) would certainly seem to lay a direct path to enhancing research integrity at the academic research institution. Before collaborations among these groups of professionals may be explored, however, the cultural and cognitive gaps between these professions must be filled. And a prerequisite to mending the gaps is to acknowledge that such gaps are real and that they pose a problem.

Ask the researcher whether or not she conducts her research in an ethical fashion and she will affirm without hesitation that she does. Ask her how she applies the ethical principle of truthfulness to the coding of electron micrographs of tissue samples she is doing, however, and she would likely be at a loss to provide a comprehensive response.

Ask the research ethicist whether or not ethical principles can be applied to actual laboratory research situations and he is certain they can. Ask him to describe in any detail how Genome-Wide Association Studies are actually carried out, however, and he would likely struggle to answer.

Ask the research administrator whether or not her institution certifies that research conducted under its auspices meets ethical standards as set forth by regulatory and accrediting bodies and she will respond by reciting the relevant certification language verbatim. Ask her to explain who is responsible for calculating the effect of increasing the n for a clinical trial on the risk/benefit ratio and she may very well fall silent.

Do such gaps in understanding indicate that these professionals are insufficiently trained in their own areas of responsibility or incapable of understanding the principles or processes of their colleagues? No. The effective practice of each of these disciplines requires considerable education and experience. However, the very specialized and technical professional qualifications required by each profession may beget
difficulties encountered in, or even resistance to, multidisciplinary collaborations aimed at promoting the Responsible Conduct of Research.

The ethicist or administrator may, for example, regard his own lack of understanding of scientific tools such as laboratory instrumentation or statistical methods such as regression analysis as an impenetrable barrier to professional collaboration with the scientist. And the researcher’s perception of the administrator’s tasks being governed by the [il]logic of institutional bureaucracy rather than by an appreciation of good laboratory practices or the scientific method of inquiry may lead her to conclude that any professional collaboration with an administrator would be futile.

Are there exceptions to the stereotypical administrator or ethicist who knows nothing about science, or the researcher who has no appreciation of administration, compliance or ethics? Of course there are—and many of the more successful RCR programs are likely led by such exceptional professionals. The situation remains, however, that a shared perception of abstract ethical principles and their practical application to the design, conduct and reporting of research will elude administrators, ethicists and researchers who are ignorant of the philosophical underpinnings and the everyday practicalities of one another’s professions.¹

Fortunately, at academic research institutions, the researcher, the ethicist and the administrator frequently inhabit the same campus and are linked by the organization’s infrastructure, even if they are not members of the same organizational unit. It should be feasible, therefore, for the three groups to share professional experiences as a prelude to developing collaborative relationships resulting in the comprehensive integration of ethical principles into the research conducted at the institution.²

Such opportunities for sharing experiences should not require significant new infrastructure or personnel. And they can be approached in an uncomplicated, yet thoughtful way.

Simply observing colleagues in their work environment or shadowing them on the job would be an effective initial approach. Inviting the administrator or the ethicist to spend time with a research technician in a laboratory might initially be regarded as unusual or even unproductive. Likewise, asking the researcher to sit with an administrator as she prepares or reviews the submission of a protocol to the institutional IRB might be met with concerns about being bored by the paperwork or losing valuable time in the lab.³ If the opportunity is seized,
however, both (or all) parties may find the experience interesting as well as useful.

It is, perhaps, the shadowing experience itself, rather than any specific knowledge imparted, that helps to bridge interdisciplinary cultural gaps. This observation simplifies the planning process, suggesting that the transfer of large amounts of technical content is not critical. At the same time, it implies that the experience must be conceived with care. Thought must be given to matching the two individuals (shadower and shadowee) to the extent that they will, by virtue of their positions and personalities, be open to interacting in a constructive way. Beyond that, however, and as long as it is likely that the work period during which the shadowing takes place includes activities or decisions relevant to the learning experience, little coordination is required.

Following the shadowing experiences, having participants share their reactions and what they learned, perhaps in a group setting, will not only help them internalize those experiences, but will validate and reinforce what others in the group have learned. These group sessions can also be used as venues for facilitating the development of activities or initiatives intended to further RCR awareness and training at the institution. And, while such initiatives are central to the themes of this seminar, their feasibility and effectiveness may be inhibited unless and until the interprofessional gaps are mended.

NOTES

1 In addition to all of the above, there exists the common misguided practice of appointing the administratively-inexperienced and untalented (dare I say “incompetent?”) scientist (or, I suppose, ethicist) to an RIO or other senior research administration position, the consequences of which no amount of remediation is likely to reverse.

2 Even if no formal collaborations are established to promote an enhanced RCR culture, surely such shared experiences would further the development of the organization as an efficient research enterprise.

3 Arguably, the shadowing of academic ethicist by researchers or research administrators may not be as productive with respect to the transfer of informative experience.