DEVELOPING DIVERSE AND ROBUST RESEARCH ETHICS EDUCATION: ONE OFFICE’S APPROACH

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Universities with central research integrity/ethics offices have a unique opportunity to provide global support to research ethics education. However, the totality of university effort in this area cannot reside in these offices if the institutions aspire to successful programs. As research integrity staff, our mission is to direct and conduct the University’s program for education and training in the responsible conduct of research, coordinating the implementation of this effort with departments and units within the University, with the objective of ensuring that the responsible conduct of research is maintained at a high priority level in all aspects of research activities. My office develops relationships with units, departments and faculty who have a vested interest in the success of research ethics education at the undergraduate through senior faculty levels. I believe that one of the greatest challenges for research integrity/ethics offices is that of approach. The methodology the office adopts must consider staffing levels, client population and institutional culture.

WORKING HARDER AT WORKING SMARTER

The research faculty is busy. Time is allotted to teaching, research, service, administration, and, on occasion, clinical practice. The research administrators are busy too. Regulations and funding agency requirements are adjusted, augmented, and increased in an attempt by legislators to keep universities and colleges on the straight and narrow. New rules, as is the case with the pending conflict of interest regulations, become a study in negotiation as institutions try to explain to legislators what the operational impacts of the latest regulatory changes will mean. Likewise, accreditation bodies continually revise standards, increasing their scope and monitoring reach.
In light of these changes, research integrity/ethics offices must provide value-added education programs that comply with regulations and accreditation standards. It is imperative for these central offices to remain on top of the changing regulatory landscape and manage the resulting risk for the institution. Likewise, it is critical for research integrity/ethics offices to identify ways to incorporate research faculty into research ethics education initiatives without creating onerous burdens or animosity. A key aspect to developing and solidifying these partnerships is identifying existing efforts and augmenting them. For example, if the Graduate School is scheduling a grant writing workshop for graduate students, research integrity/ethics offices should be supporting the event and offering to provide resources on ethical grant writing, including strategies to avoid fabrication, falsification and plagiarism. The benefit is two-fold as both the target population and presenters appreciate the grant preparation and associated ethical concerns as an integrated product. Research integrity professionals should continually seek avenues to provide contextual exposure to ethical issues. As a result, the perspective that research ethics professionals and ethics professors are the only individuals qualified to discuss these issues needs to be abandoned.

By engaging research faculty in the research ethics education process, research integrity/ethics offices need to recognize that not all quality ethics experiences can be or should be gauged through quizzes. Admittedly, it is much easier to quantify participation with test results and sign-in sheets. Likewise, some researchers prefer to fulfill requirements with the limited interaction of online offerings (more about this in the next section). Less tangible measures, such as improved informed consent processes and decreased instances of suspected plagiarism, may actually be greater measures of successful ethics programs, as they represent an application of ethical principles, not merely regurgitation. This is not to imply that no assessment should occur, just that traditional methods may not apply. The challenge arises in balancing the need to foster true change in the institutional culture and the need to fulfill annual metrics of office performance to justify continued central support. Therefore, while it might be easiest to resort to online training programs and they certain play a part, this cannot be the end goal.
Research ethics programs need to be about more than completing the checkboxes. If the research integrity/ethics office offers seminars in every topic in the responsible conduct of research core, is the program comprehensive? Possibly; it would depend upon the quality of the programmatic offerings. Is the program successful? It would be difficult to measure or confer success merely based upon a seminar calendar and stack of sign-in sheets. Did the attendees personalize any of the presented information? Were they there just to check off another training requirement? What did the attendees expect from the event? Was that feedback elicited? The client population in any given university encompasses individuals who are novices in ethics education and those who hold advanced degrees in ethical theory. To presume that one formalized training program will be successful in this environment is problematic. The nature of the research, the cultural, academic and professional background of the individual and his/her previous experiences are all contributing factors to the type of research ethics education that will benefit the individual. Research ethics education programs must be designed to address a variety of research methodologies. Researchers utilizing animal models have differing needs than researchers with human participants. Education programs that are not able to address these nuances quickly lose credibility in the eyes of the institution.

If a researcher designs a project that will be conducted in the Far East, or Europe or the African continent, she/he is frequently reminded of the cultural differences that exist in those societies and counseled to pay attention to how those differences may impact the project. Participating as a member of most university lab groups is as culturally diverse an experience as conducting international research, yet oft times research ethics programs are not equipped to respond. A good first step, surely, is to provide materials in a student/trainee’s primary language. In addition, as developers of said programs, Research Integrity offices need to identify and secure resources for trainers that speak to the differences in how ethical conduct is manifested. For example, designing educational experiences that explore how the understanding of diversity and cultural issues can positively enhance the design, performance and analysis of research. Within this context, a variety of cultural issues can be investigated, including those less obvious, such as religious diversity.

Equally important as addressing cultural differences is to recognize that the previous experiences of students/trainees can provide a solid
foundation for ethical discussions. For example, consider research integrity/ethics offices working with an engineering department to provide training in engineering ethics. Discussions in engineering ethics are often constrained to a hurried lecture in a career class positioned at the end of the undergraduate experience, after many students have already been out in the real engineering world on co-op assignments. The goal as instructors is to pull these experiences into the ethics discussion. Instead of focusing on ethical theories, the students delve into case studies and are encouraged to share experiences they might have had in the field. Sharing practical steps in resolving ethical dilemmas allows students to apply these skills to hypothetical and some, not so hypothetical, situations.

Despite efforts to design training that is contextual, some individuals prefer completing requirements via online courses. The absence of a face to face experience, in many respects, increases the challenge to make the educational experience relevant. As technology becomes more integrated with the educational experience across all aspects of the university, research integrity/ethics offices must also be poised to incorporate these mediums to engage the research community. Utilizing social networking sites to advertise events and share resources can permit research integrity/ethics offices to leverage non-traditional avenues to reach client populations. Putting a public face on the research integrity/ethics office facilitates engaging the community as well.

**ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY IN THE JOURNEY**

Ethics are developed over years, not in the span of a semester or lecture. Further, our ethical constructs are directly correlated, either positively or negatively, by the society we keep. So, does it make sense then, to develop, implement and support ethics programs that do not incorporate and engage the community? Obviously, to engage the community in our ethics programs demands that we think beyond the online course, the traditional semester class, the afternoon workshop. Universities are quick to invite the community to campus to showcase their work, the fruits of their intellectual labors, especially when the university scholars have “found the answer.” But what about those issues when we don't know? When the issues are more complex and far reaching than the university perspective? More emphasis is paid these days to community engagement and service learning. Conferences and organizations across the nation are exploring ways to enhance and
encourage global citizenship, inter and intra university service and community partnerships. However, we need to think and act more expansively to bring the community into our ethical framework. The education needs to be a two way street. Universities can enrich their research ethics education programs by developing and sustaining partnerships with the community. An added benefit to this relationship is bolstering the trust by clearing the clouds of mystery that frequently seem to exist between the community and the organization.

**THE ROAD AHEAD**

The future success of research ethics education programs will rely on culture changes and commitment from both research integrity/ethics offices and the research faculty. Without dedicated partnerships from both of these groups, universities will not have the resources or guidance needed to implement and nurture robust and effective research ethics education programs.