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Careers in Research Support

Susan Gaidos
United States
1 August 2008

Throughout her graduate training, Elizabeth Prescott had a suspicion that she wouldn't end up with an academic lab of her own. "Initially, my concern was that I would spend my days trapped in an office, writing and begging for money," she says. So today she spends her days--happily--doing exactly that.

In June, Prescott took a position in development and foundation relations at the [Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center](#) in Seattle, Washington, joining the ranks of scientists who have left the bench to help other scientists garner funding and establish the infrastructure needed to move science forward.

Due to increases in external support for research provided to colleges and universities, the number of people employed in grant writing and research administration is increasing. Although these employees are not directly responsible for the advances in science that result from university research, they are facilitators, securing the money and managing the organizational structures essential for the research to move

"[Working in research support] allows me to translate direct understanding of the sciences to help science without actually doing science." --Elisabeth Prescott

forward.

THE RESEARCH-GRANT BUSINESS

People who work in grant administration often help researchers draft grant applications. If the money comes through, they may direct and coordinate the monitoring of the funds and assist with progress and financial reporting. More experienced administrators may spend much of their time on long-range planning, working to identify and define strategies to meet the future needs--including the funding needs--of an institution.

In a 2006 report published in the journal [Research Management Review](#), a sampling of 230 research-administration professionals showed that 12% of the group held doctorate degrees and 32% held master's degrees. Though the report didn't specify how many of those degrees are in science, people in the field say the ranks of scientists are increasing. Those who work in

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grant writing and administration say a growing number of professionals also hold Ph.D.s.

Although their daily routine differs from that of a bench scientist, scientists who work in these areas say the intellectual and emotional rewards associated with their work are similar. And some say the job allows them to use a broader range of talents.

"My biggest fear is that I would have had this wonderful experience in graduate school through my postdoc, and what I learned wouldn't be able to be translated," Prescott says. Fortunately, she now finds that her work "allows me to translate direct understanding of the sciences to help science without actually doing science."

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A LOGICAL NEXT STEP

After receiving her Ph.D. in molecular biology, Prescott went to work as a postdoc for a young investigator just starting his career. "I did that deliberately because I wanted to know what it would be like if I chose that path."

To her surprise, the writing part--including the "begging for money" part--appealed to her more than doing the actual experiments. "I realized that the reason that I didn't want to have an academic lab was because I didn't want to feel the frustration of repeated failures on a day-to-day basis." Following her postdoc, and after talking with others who had left the bench, including a friend who worked in development, she decided that fundraising might satisfy her interests.



Elizabeth Prescott

"I felt like I could be much more productive in this capacity," she says. "I enjoy sharing my enthusiasm for science, and I think I can bring that to the table in cases where maybe the scientists aren't as interested in doing that or not as able to do that."

FROM BENCH TO BUDGETS

Whereas some scientists realize early that they want to move away from the research bench, others enjoy productive research careers before making the transition.

After receiving his doctorate in plant pathology, Ted Knous spent 9 years on the faculty at the [University of Nevada, Reno](#), teaching and studying plant disease and resistance. In 1988, when the university eliminated the department in which he worked, Knous moved into a job in research administration at [Winona State University](#) in Minnesota. He has since made several moves and now serves as associate vice chancellor for research administration at the [University of Kansas School of Medicine](#) in Kansas City.

"Having been a faculty member myself, I understand all the things they're trying to accomplish," he says. "Most scientists have got a lot on their plate: teaching, research, service activities, advising students. At the same time, they're trying to write their grants and get funded for their research."

Knous now works mainly on higher level grant administration. Recently, for example, he helped coordinate and write a grant application for a large construction project on campus. Once a proposal is funded, "I work with the deans and faculty to make sure that we are following rules and regulations that we need to satisfy the different funding constituents," he says.

A TRAILING SPOUSE



After serving briefly on the faculty in the school of occupational therapy at the University of Kansas Medical Center, Ann McGuigan, now



Ann McGuigan

the director of the [Office of Research Development](#) at [George Mason University](#) in Fairfax, Virginia, followed her husband to a new location in Illinois. She taught some courses in the psychology department at [Illinois State University](#) in Normal and then gradually moved into research administration. "It occurred to me that it was a good field to work in because it would be easy as my husband continued to move around to find positions," she says. "Getting a tenure-track position while following a spouse is often challenging."

McGuigan discovered that she enjoyed the variety of the daily tasks her job requires. "I turned out to be somebody who really likes learning new things all the time. And I found

that research administration offered that opportunity and still does." Now in a position to recruit and hire other grant-related employees, McGuigan says she seeks people who share that perspective. "I have found over the years that you need to hire people who like challenges and like not knowing what's going to come across their desk."

HELPING SET DIRECTIONS

Despite some early grant-writing and research experience, Barbara Berg's 15-year odyssey took her many places before she arrived at research administration. A microbiologist, Berg worked as a postdoc at [Harvard Medical School](#) in Boston and then at the [University of Chicago](#) in Illinois. She became interested in teaching and taught undergraduate biology at the latter university.

"I had initially thought when I finished graduate school that I would pursue a typical academic path but then realized during my postdoc years that it really wasn't burning in me," she says. "I was very interested in the concepts and the excitement of learning and discovery, but I found doing bench work rather tedious."

Thinking she would immerse herself in full-time teaching, Berg moved to Seattle in 1996 to take a job as a visiting professor of biology at the [University of Puget Sound](#). While there, she became acquainted with a woman at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center who ran an outreach program for high school science teachers. When her year of teaching at Puget Sound ended, Berg began managing the outreach program and stayed in that position for several years.

She then served a stint in the institution's publications office, writing news stories and articles on science, and began working with faculty members who needed help translating scientific concepts for a lay audience.



Barbara Berg

"I began getting tapped by the fundraising and development department to help with some proposals," she says. "Eventually, I got called by the director of the center to help write a centerwide grant."

As she moved into a hybrid position, working in the communications and fundraising departments, Berg's vision of her ideal job began to form.

"I found myself spending a lot of time writing about new directions for the institution, and I [realized that] I would really like to be on the other end of things, helping to implement and plan for those kinds of initiatives." She carved out a new position that put her in an administration role. In June, she received from the [University of Washington](#) her MBA degree, which she pursued on her own to learn more about management and finance.

In her new role as director of interinstitutional relations, Berg will facilitate a number of formal and informal partnerships and collaborations with other institutions to help the Hutch broaden its clinical research focus. Berg says the new role will allow her, to some extent, to help shape the research direction on campus, taking her close to her original goal of pursuing a research career.

Best of all, Berg says, she has been able to maintain her academic lifestyle. "That's the thing that's really fun for me. I still feel that I have an academic job, and I'm still really driven by what I do."

SKILLS FOR LANDING A JOB IN RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

A growing number of former scientists are finding employment in grant writing, grant administration, and research administration. Although the route to getting a job in these fields is as varied as the work itself, those who have made the leap offer the following tips:

One. Gain some grant-writing experience. During your scientific training or postdoc, get involved in putting a grant together for your major professor. The process helps you learn to develop and critique proposals and budgets, says Ted Knous. "Most people we hire have completed a postdoc, and they have an understanding of grants."

Two. Use your scientific training as an entry point. "We're always looking at the science first, to see what their science background is and assess whether it fits into a program that we either have or are developing," Knous says.

Three. Focus on writing skills. The ability to write persuasively and cogently for a broad audience is vital.

Four. Learn how your research institute or university operates at the higher levels. "Any opportunity to interact with upper-level administration, be it on the animal care committee advisory board or the postdoc union, will help illuminate how grants support research and how complex scientific administration can be," says Elizabeth Prescott. "The experience can also help break down any perceived barriers between research and administration."

Five. Play up special knowledge in areas such as technology transfer or intellectual property. If you have been involved in filing a patent, for example, the experience may help in gaining entry in research administration.

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DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800116

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