


Chapter 5.5

The Profession of Research Management and Administration in Canada

Deborah Zornes

 0000-0001-5831-9290, Royal Roads University, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada;

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Abstract

In Canada, the profession known as ‘research management’ elsewhere across the globe, is mostly commonly referred to as ‘research administration’ and encompasses activities and work associated with developing, administering, accounting for, and complying with sponsor requirements, guidelines, procedures, and laws relating to funded projects. Canada has a robust and active research administrator community through the Canadian Association of Research Administrators. As a result of changes beginning primarily in 2000, research administration has evolved to a complex, multifaceted profession with high demands for skills and expertise. Since 2000, there have been increased calls from research administrators in Canada to look at more formal professionalisation and certification of the research administrator role and to the evolution of the role to a profession. This chapter focusses primarily on those significant changes to the visibility and importance of research, and the subsequent growth of the profession of research administration in Canada.

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Research Ecosystem

In Canada, the formal establishment of a professional society, originally the Canadian Association of University Research Administration (CAURA), occurred in 1972 with 56 members from 30 universities, and 21 associate members from various government funders and foundations. The post-secondary landscape at the time was reflective of the expansion and massification of post-secondary education that was occurring throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Monahan et al., 2023, Chapter 1.2).

In the year 2000, there was a marked change around how Canada as a country saw the importance of research in Canada. There were massive increases in research funding to each of the three main funding councils: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), as well as the establishment of the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) which funds research infrastructure, and the establishment of the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) programme which included funding for 2,000 research professors across the country. The CRC programme has expanded since to include Canada Excellence Research Chairs (CERC) and the Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF) and the Canada 150 Research Chairs. While support has continued for basic/pure research, there has also been an emphasis and additional support for partnerships and relationships between universities, and with the private, public, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors in areas that provide potential economic benefits. Some funding programmes, such as the CFI, which funds research infrastructure, require partnerships. In cases where proposals are recommended for funding, CFI provides up to 40% of the funding for the project. Provincial governments generally fund 40%, and industry or other partners must be secured for the remaining 20%. As part of the shifts of the early 2000s, knowledge transfer (KT) and knowledge mobilisation (KM) became key for research.

Areas that provide support for the research enterprise experienced considerable change as a result of the shift in the year 2000 and increased focus on research and its importance to the Canadian landscape. New administrative requirements by funders meant increased administrative staff and new tracking, monitoring, and reporting processes. University–industry liaison offices, offices of technology transfer, contract specialists, development coordinators, and research accountants became commonplace in the years following these changes (Rasmussen, 2008). As the *Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada* (2008) noted, universities now require robust and professional administrative structures to support researchers and provide assistance from the identification of basic problems and developing a research programme through to the application of solutions discovered. The need to measure the impact of research was, and is, increasingly brought to the forefront of discussions – journal impact factors and citations are questioned in terms of how they relate to real world issues and make a difference in society as initiatives like the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) gain traction. More recently, there have been requirements for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Action Plans to be in place at institutions for programmes like the CRC programme, and a requirement to include meaningful EDI plans in research proposals. Critical to the success of the research enterprise, these

additional services have expanded in number and scope over the last two decades, further adding to the costs and complexity of the research landscape and the research administration landscape.

In 2015, CAURA changed its name to the Canadian Association of Research Administrators (CARA) to acknowledge the diversity of roles in the Canadian landscape. While the bulk of research administrators are located in universities, there are administrators in the private sector, in colleges, hospitals, and charities across the country. With the change in name, CARA also updated its stated purposes to:

foster research administration and management expertise in Canada by facilitating a strong and vibrant community; provide and facilitate robust career and professional development programmes and services for members; and enable synthesis and dissemination of information and knowledge on research administration and management with a view to developing individual and organisational excellence. (CARA, n.d.)

CARA's mission is to be the authoritative body of knowledge and expertise on research administration and management in Canada. The stated values of the organisation are: inclusivity; integrity; authentic collaboration; relevance; and sustainability (CARA, n.d.). Priorities from the most recent (2020–2023) strategic plan include: communities of practice; professional excellence; sustainable CARA; and professional development.

The key funders of research in Canada continue to be the Tri-Agencies – NSERC, CIHR and SSHRC – as well as the CFI. In most fiscal years, we have seen an overall increase in research funding. The CIHR for example has seen funding increases from \$727 million CDN in 2003–2004, to \$1.134 billion CDN in 2019–2020. NSERC has seen an increase from \$759 million CDN in 2003–2004 to \$1,359 million CDN in 2019–2020 and SSHRC has seen an increase from \$242 million CDN in 2003–2004 to \$325 million CDN in 2019–2020. Taken together, from 2015 to 2020, the three funding agencies have seen funding grow from \$2.36 billion CDN to \$2.81 billion CDN. In addition, other funding has been provided for the CRC programme with commitments in 2018 of \$210 million CDN over 5 years and ongoing funding of \$50 million CDN per year; the Canada 150 Chairs programme in 2017 with a commitment of \$117 million CDN; the CFREF with a 2022 committee of \$1.4 billion CDN over seven years; and the CERC programme with a commitment in 2022 of \$155 million CDN over eight years. Since its inception in 1997, the CFI has committed almost \$8 billion CDN towards research infrastructure with those funds being mostly matched by provincial governments.

Universities have been and continue to be the main employer of research administrators in Canada with approximately 75% of 2019 Research Administration as a Profession RAAAP-2 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022) respondents noting their place of employment as a publicly funded university. Another 10% identified that they worked in hospital settings, and 8% in the college sector. The remainder of the participants were employed by research funders, charities, government departments, and research institutes. Most recently, 80% of 2022 RAAAP-3 (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022) respondents noted they were employed in a university setting with another 5% in hospital settings, just under 6% in the college sector, and the remainder in charities, government departments, research institutes, and the private sector.

Most research administrators are permanent employees (81%) of their organisations (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022). Canada has 223 public and private universities, and the sector comprises 213 public colleges and institutes, including polytechnic institutes (Council of Ministers of Education, n.d.) and at least 40 research hospitals (Research Info Source, n.d.).

Evolution of the Profession

Within Canada, those working in the profession are generally referred to as research administrators. When CARA was first established (originally as CAURA, focussing on the university sector until the ‘U’ was dropped in 2015), professional development was not part of the stated purposes of the Association. As research grew in prominence in Canada after the year 2000 and the corresponding establishment of programmes such as the CRC programme and the CFI and increased commitments in terms of government funding, CAURA members turned their attention to professional development and to CAURA as a professional organisation (CAURA, 2007). In 2007, CAURA offered its first regional professional development opportunity at the CAURA West conference. By 2014, the Association had launched an informal professional development programme focussed primarily around webinars. In 2015, now as CARA, the association established a more formal certification programme in partnership with Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA), with the first cohort of students starting in November of 2015. The Association created a mentorship programme in 2015 and ramped up its webinar offerings to members with more than 75 scheduled offerings, garnering more than 1,000 registrants by the mid-point of the year.

While the certification programme with ARMA met the needs of many members, others asked for certification designed in Canada and through a more traditional mode of delivery rather than fully self-directed. In response, in 2017, CARA launched the Certificate in Research Administration¹ in partnership with Mohawk College. There were 40 registrants for the initial course offerings. In 2018, CARA had both the programme with Mohawk College, and continued the certificate programmes through ARMA. By 2019, the certificate programme through Mohawk College had 100 students enrolled and 12 graduates from the inaugural intake. CARA also continued its more informal webinar programme with registrations exceeding 1,000. In 2021, professional development opportunities included webinars focussed on areas of interest with 2,600 registrations; and the Certificate in Research Administration with Mohawk College with 351 registrations and a total of 56 graduates. Going forward, CARA has launched a Graduate Certificate in Research Management and Coordination² through Mohawk College with the first intake beginning September 2022.

Current Community

In Canada, CARA is the only national organisation focussed on research administration. While CARA members may also have memberships in other similar international organisations, there are no competing associations. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on communities of practice which focus on collective learning – on sharing ideas and information towards a common goal. CARA supports numerous

¹<https://cereg.mohawkcollege.ca/certificate?certificateCode=CP0988>

²<https://cereg.mohawkcollege.ca/certificate?certificateCode=CP0953>

special interest groups (SIGs) and regional groups, all led by volunteer members of the association. In addition, the key funders – NSERC, SSHRC, CIHR, CFI – each have a representative on the CARA Board. CARA also reaches out and works with other organisations such as the Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO), the Canadian Association of Research Ethics Boards (CAREB), and the Association des Administratrices et des Administrateurs de Recherche Universitaire du Québec (ADARUQ). CARA members are active in various committees through the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS) and communicate with colleagues throughout the global research administration and management community.

Keys to the CARA community are the annual national conference and the regional conferences. More than 50% of members attend the annual national conference which includes a day of pre-conference workshops, and 2.5 days of concurrent sessions. Selection of presentations is done by peer review following an open call. The national conference also allows for time to meet new colleagues, renew friendships with existing colleagues, and gather and share information. Conference feedback revealed members repeatedly indicate the benefits of the conference as being, from highest to lowest: the sessions themselves; connecting with federal funding partners; meeting new colleagues; connecting with SIGs; listening to plenary speakers; and attending pre-conference workshops.

Demographics

Since its establishment in 1972 with 56 members, CARA has grown to having around 1,000 members in 2021. CARA members participated in the three Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP) surveys with data from 2016 (243 Canadian responses), 2019 (337 Canadian responses), and 2022 (177 Canadian responses). Members identify mostly as female, with 81% in 2016 (Kerridge & Scott, 2018b), 85% identifying as female in 2019 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022), and 81% identifying as female in 2022 (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022). With regard to age, most research administrators in Canada are between the ages of 35 and 54 (69% in 2016; 71.5% in 2019; 70% in 2022) (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022; Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022; Kerridge & Scott, 2018b).

Data through the RAAAP surveys show that the majority of members note two or three roles before joining research administration. While some survey respondents were very clear regarding what those roles were (e.g. admin support – project manager – research facilitator), others were more focussed on the progression of their career noting a ‘promotion to other positions within the research admin landscape’.

When asked why they joined the profession, we see some significant changes from 2014 to 2020. The CARA (2014) members’ survey notes that 62% of CARA members said that they had little or no awareness of the profession and only 9% had definite plans to become a research administrator. In the CARA (2015) members’ survey, 71% of those who responded said they had no awareness, or ‘not really any awareness’ of the role and only 7.5% had a high level of awareness. This was echoed in the 2016 RAAAP-1 (Kerridge & Scott, 2018b) survey where research administrators in Canada confirmed that for most, working in research administration was not an intentional choice. Whether these results are connected to the past history/growth of the profession in Canada isn’t clear. One respondent in 2016 noted that they ‘did not plan to go into research administration’; another noted that it ‘just sort of evolved’. In the RAAAP-2 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022) survey in 2019, respondents from Canada noted a

more intentional decision to join the profession thereby possibly implying that the idea of ‘falling into it’ may no longer be the norm. One respondent noted that ‘I needed a job and I had just finished my master’s degree, so I applied for a job as a Research Coordinator’. Others noted a deliberate shift from conducting research to the administrative support of research. One respondent noted that the ‘academic job market had dried up’; and another stated ‘after receiving a PhD I worked for a for-profit research and consulting company... I felt more aligned with the values of academic research institutions but was unsuccessful in obtaining a faculty position that was not a temporary contract’. Yet another respondent stated ‘I had a long career in basic research, working in both industry and academe. When funding in academe became scarce, I felt my skills were transferable to a research admin job’.

Respondents through the RAAAP surveys focussed on practical reasons (e.g. needed a job, relocation, job security) for getting into research administration, or on the opportunity the role provided. Multiple respondents noted that it was an ‘interesting’ role that provided a chance for promotion. Respondents from Canada saw their skills as a match for the role, citing legal skills, project management skills, accounting experience, grants experience, writing skills, and considerable relevant prior experience or expertise. In the RAAAP-2 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022) survey in 2019, 74% of respondents note a high or somewhat high match of their previous skills to the research administrator role.

When asked why they stay in the profession, survey respondents note there has been, and continues to be, a focus on the bigger picture, the contribution of research to the wider world, the importance of research, and the idea of contributing to society. With regard to the practical reasons, for some, it came down to pieces like: ‘close to retirement’, ‘pays well but I had to fight’, ‘no choice now’ or ‘I am now several years into a great pension plan’. A number of respondents talked about the importance of the work and of research, writ large, noting that we ‘help researchers address the world’s problems’ and that we are ‘able to reduce the admin burden of PIs’.

There were cautions, however, as well. In the 2016 RAAAP-1 (Kerridge & Scott, 2018b) survey, one respondent noted that ‘while I love the work, it is the most stressful job I have ever had, not only due to its complex nature but because of the extremely heavy workload, without a break from constant demands’. Another identified that ‘the profession is challenging, engaging and ever changing. Although it can be difficult it is a very rewarding and positive career’. We see these concerns continuing through the RAAAP-2 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022) survey in 2019 with respondents noting that ‘working for academic senior leaders can be extremely challenging’, and that ‘changes in the last year or so have increased my workload and responsibilities’.

In response to questions regarding when their skills were developed there was a mix among respondents. Some noted that their skills were a good fit upon joining the profession while others noted the development of skills on the job and their growth with regard to the changing environment. For many, it was a conscious blend of the two – an acknowledgment of what they brought to the role, and their own development since being in the role. Through responses in the RAAAP-1 (Kerridge & Scott, 2018b), RAAAP-2 (Kerridge, Ajai-Ajagbe, et al., 2022), and RAAAP-3 (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022) surveys in 2016, 2019, and 2022, Canadian research administrators noted the importance of ongoing professional development and training, recognising the complexity of the profession and the ever-changing nature of the role. In Canada for example, since 2016 there has been an increased prominence regarding EDI, including the requirement for EDI Action Plans for the CRC programme. Building on the Athena Swan programme, Canada has also launched the Dimensions pilot programme.

In Canada, research administrators are well educated with RAAAP-3 (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022) respondents reporting 30% holding a doctorate as their highest credential before they joined the profession, 33% holding a masters' as their highest credential before they joined the profession; and 28% holding a bachelor's degree as their highest credential before they joined the profession.

Directions/Future

The future of research administration in Canada looks bright. Membership in and support for CARA continues to rise, and the value and importance of both research and research administration is widely acknowledged by post-secondary institutions and governments, nationally, and provincially. One of the areas where the research administration community could and should put more focus is on getting information out more broadly regarding the value and importance of research to society. Stories of the impacts and outcomes of research are not told in ways that reach those not in the post-secondary sector; and often not told at all.

A key opportunity to show the value and importance of research is with regard to graduates – our 'bright young minds' and highly qualified personnel (HQP). Many university graduates, at all levels, are not interested in a career in academia. Instead, they are in the private and public sectors in a range of positions. As institutions, often the only follow up and contact with them is to ask them for donations. Instead, it would be worthwhile to connect with those graduates 3, 5, and 10 years post-graduation to follow up on what they did with the research they conducted and the skills they learned and ask what difference that research and those skills have made in their communities and workplaces.

The role of research administration has expanded exponentially in Canada, particularly since the year 2000. Zornes (2012) notes that the profession has become much more complex in part because of the plethora of different funding opportunities and these different smaller envelopes, programmes that focus on a particular research theme, or programmes that focus on infrastructure, or programmes that focus on specific types of partnerships. There is a further point for research and research administrators globally that illustrates a type of disconnect between the discourse of accountability and the discourse of discovery and inquiry (Zornes, 2012). For some research, the whole point is discovery, about answering a question where you don't know what the outcomes may be, or, at least the very least, where you don't know the implications of the outcomes. The discourse of accountability on the other hand is about standards, reporting, and demonstrating what will be done and its value. Accountability includes assessing risk, costs, and benefits before moving ahead, and these are not always possible to assess when considering research questions. Research administrators are caught in those processes of supporting the discovery nature of research and managing compliance and accountability.

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