

University Faculty Value the CRA Designation— They Just Don't Realize It Yet!

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ABSTRACT

The Certified Research Administrator (CRA) certification has enjoyed success and recognition among research administration professionals. However, this recognition is parochial and does not extend much past the walls of research administration. Results of a recent research study showed that Principal Investigators value and expect certain aspects of performance and knowledge from the research administrators at their campuses. These value-added aspects cited by the Principal Investigators are contained in the Body of Knowledge that comprises the framework of the CRA certification. However, these same Principal Investigators did not perceive value in the actual CRA designation held by employees of the research administration office on their campuses. The CRA designation should invoke recognition of equal stature to other professional designations from external constituencies, not just within the parameters of research administration.

INTRODUCTION

In the academic world, clusters of letters following an individual's last name like PhD, EdD, DBA, MBA, MPH, MA, and MS are highly sought after and easily recognizable by the global academic community. The perception of achievement

and knowledge are synonymous when one views the multiple letter clusters that indicate advanced education and research at the graduate level. This quest for additional designation letters has spilled over into the business world where CPA, CFP, and PE, to name a few, are respected

and often give a prospective candidate the weight to “tip the scales” in their favor when it comes to the hiring decision (Lee, 1998). In the opinion of this author, if research faculty were asked whether they know what CPA stands for, the words “Certified Public Accountant” will most likely be the response. However, when research faculty members were asked about the designation of CRA (Certified Research Administrator), the response was significantly different, as noted in the following research study.

BACKGROUND

The Certified Research Administrator (CRA) is a professional designation awarded by a non-profit entity called the Research Administration Certification Council (RACC). The RACC is an independent, private organization comprised of individuals committed to enhancing the quality of the research administration professional. CRA certification is achieved by meeting qualifications to sit for the standardized CRA examination administered by RACC. Education levels and professional experience are factors that regulate eligibility to be able to attempt the qualifying exam. Individuals without a college degree are able to fill out a petition after six years of professional experience in research or sponsored programs

administration to gain access to the examination. The examination questions are compiled from a framework referred to as the Body of Knowledge and cover Project Development and Administration, Legal Requirements and Sponsor Interface, Financial Management, and General Management (RAAC, 2012).

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The CRA certification must be renewed every five years. Renewal is based on employment and/or notable significant participation within the field of research administration along with continuing education credit hours. To assure quality levels are maintained for recertification, contributions of exam-level questions from active participants in the field are required for use in future CRA exams, thus assuring relevance and timeliness in the content of the CRA examination. By adding examination questions from current certified practitioners, the content is continuously updated and both academic rigor and integrity are assured for the common good.

However, research by Shambrook, Roberts and Triscari (2011) indicated that the CRA credential is not positively associated with higher salary for research administrators. Despite the fact that the CRA designation adds significant weight to the standardization of topical knowledge within the dynamic field of research administration, those ascertaining this certification are not being recognized for this professional accomplishment. Continued lack of acknowledgment may well diminish the motivation of professional research administrators to pursue CRA certification in the future. Research administrators routinely self-report a high level of stress within their work environment, working in excess of 40 hours per week, and feelings of under-appreciation (Shambrook & Brawman-Mintzer, 2007; Shambrook & Roberts, 2011). A professional designation should enhance the stature of a profession and promote integrity and knowledge within that field.

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METHOD

The author surveyed 80 research universities on how important certain services were to the faculty or principal investigator in adding value to research administration offices. An equal number of private and public universities that were recipients of grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Science Foundation (NSF) between 2007–2009 were included in the study. Responses were received from 433 Principal Investigators (PIs) representing 66 institutions of higher education, achieving a 95% confidence interval. While responses from distinct universities were slightly greater on the public side (41 public versus 33 private) nearly two thirds (66.3%) of the total responses came from PIs located at private colleges and universities. Yet, there were no significant differences in the findings between PIs at public or private higher education settings.

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The survey contained a list of 22 items that research faculty rated as Very Important, Important, or Less Than Important (Table 1). A link to the survey,

hosted by SurveyMonkey®, was established for the PIs and an individualized email was sent. Distribution of personalized emails with the embedded link to the questionnaire is a cost-effective method to achieve rapid deployment and allows for quick turnaround time (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006). Non-respondents received reminder emails to encourage increased responses.

RESULTS

The average response rate to the survey items overall was 41%. Items #13 and #19, easy access to research forms and prompt response to emails, respectively, received the largest response with 43% answering these two survey items. In contrast, only 31% responses were received to Item #10, the value of the CRA designation. The high non-response rate on this particular item may lead one to wonder if the faculty member was unaware of the very existence of the CRA. When asked how important the CRA designation was to faculty (Item #10) when dealing with their primary contact at the research administration office, only 36% of the

respondents (11.3%) deemed the CRA certification to be Very Important. In addition to being the largest of the 22 items for which no response was registered, the importance of the CRA designation received the highest score (63.3%) in the Less Than Important category. Clearly, the CRA certification itself is not important to PIs in the faculty ranks.

The survey also contained an open-ended question that asked faculty to list other important factors that, in their opinion, would add value to a research administration office. The number of responses was surprising. Of the 433 surveys, 121 or 28% of the research faculty who responded added their own comments in this area. This figure is uncharacteristically high and points to the overall significance of these comments.

Knowledge and competency of the research administration office staff were frequent themes commented upon by several respondents. Quotes from actual surveys are provided to maintain the authentic characteristics of the comments.

Table 1.
Summary—Frequencies and Percentages of Importance Ratings for the 22 Services Items

Service Item	Very Important		Less Than Important		Important	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1.) Funding Notice to Dept. (2)	111	26.0	126	29.5	190	44.5
2.) Training—New PI/DA (2)	164	38.3	74	40.7	90	21.0
3.) Billings & Collections (2)	140	36.1	134	34.5	114	29.4
4.) Personal Fund Notice (2)	148	34.7	158	37.1	120	28.2
5.) Flexible Negotiations (2)	154	38.5	180	45.0	66	16.5
6.) Web List of Funding (2)	137	31.9	157	36.5	136	31.6
7.) Same Person Pre/Post (2)	129	30.4	119	28.1	176	41.5
8.) Confidential Hotline (2)	72	17.6	144	35.1	194	7.3
9.) One Pre/One Post Person	67	16.9	91	22.9	239	60.2
10.) Cert. Research Admin.	36	11.3	81	25.4	202	63.3
11.) Phone Messages (1)	274	63.9	122	28.4	33	7.7
12.) Training—Updates (2)	103	24.6	191	45.7	124	29.7
13.) E-Z Forms Access (1)	306	71.0	113	26.2	12	2.8
14.) Internal Account Set-up (1)	282	67.5	108	25.8	28	6.7
15.) End Date Notices (2)	191	44.7	165	38.6	71	16.6
16.) Friendly Phone Tone (2)	147	34.5	170	39.9	109	25.6
17.) Flexible Hours	59	13.9	112	26.5	252	59.6
18.) Team Effort (2)	176	41.6	184	43.5	63	14.9
19.) Email Messages (1)	312	72.4	105	24.4	14	3.2
20.) E-Z Policy Access (2)	198	46.0	163	37.9	69	16.0
21.) Technical Assistance (2)	214	49.8	152	35.3	64	14.9
22.) Equal Treatment (2)	219	51.5	154	36.2	52	12.2

Note. (1)>90% by PI group

(2)>50% by PI group

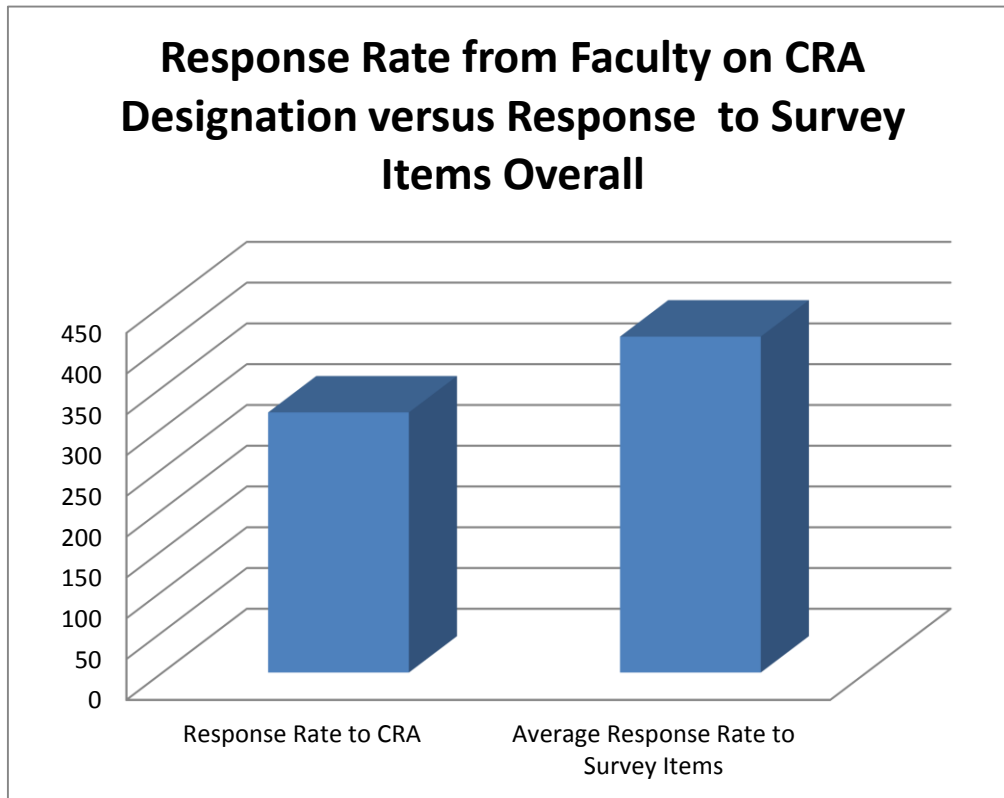


Figure 1. Response Rate from Faculty on CRA Designation vs. Response to Survey Items Overall

Principal investigators commented on the value of the research administrator “to answer questions”, “correct mistakes”, and possess “specialized knowledge of study protocols.”

Knowledge and competency of research administration office staff were frequent themes commented upon by several respondents.

CONCLUSION

PIs are looking for the research administrator to properly understand the

research and to have the subject matter knowledge to deal with complex contract negotiations and budget issues. The ability to be current in compliance matters and with changes in agency rules and prevailing regulations, as well as dealing with sponsors, are attributes valued by PIs. These attributes are embedded in the course of study for the initial Certified Research Administrator designation and also stressed for recertification.

The survey comments from the research faculty from both public and private institutions reflected their wish that research administrators to possess

advanced knowledge in areas included in the Body of Knowledge that is the premise for the testing questions on the CRA examination. Yet, these same faculty or PIs fail to realize the correlation between their 'wants' versus the significance of the CRA designation held by any research administrator, which embodies these 'wants'.

The challenge is to transfer that perception of value-added held by research administrators who actually have achieved CRA certification status to Principal Investigators.

The challenge is to transfer that perception of value-added held by research administrators who actually have achieved CRA certification status to Principal Investigators. In turn, Principal Investigators will become champions of the CRA certification. This action may even lead to increased salary levels for CRAs. Principal Investigators and research faculty generally have the influence (and possible available funds) to demand CRA designations of research administrators who handle the administration of their research proposals and awards.

Based on survey comments, CRA certification would address the majority of the concerns and needs of the research

faculty. Faculty need to realize the value of the Certified Research Administrator certification. A marketing campaign to create awareness among PIs is sorely needed to promote and increase the value and knowledge of the CRA designation. Just as corporations and individuals recognize the necessity to have a CPA for their financial affairs, so should research faculty demand the rigors found in the CRA certification for their research administrators.

Educating the research faculty to the benefits of the CRA certification is a solid beginning. Promotional literature and workshop sessions are offered at conferences and meetings of professional research administration organizations, but attendants do not include research faculty. While professional organizations for research administrators such as the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) and the Society for Research Administrators (SRA) International do promote CRA certification, the promotional campaign must transcend the research administration profession to reach the eyes of research faculty so as to elevate the importance of this certification on a broader basis. Promotion within the confines of the research administration profession is not sufficient. Education in other arenas, such as the community of research faculty to equate their needs and

concerns for research administration with the CRA certification, is strongly suggested. Roberts' study found that nearly two-thirds of the Certified Research Administrators surveyed felt that the CRA experience gave them more confidence in their job performance (Roberts, 2005).

The Research Administrators Certification Council is a relatively young, non-profit organization founded in 1993. The RACC has made significant progress in its efforts to elevate the importance of the role played by research administrators. Roberts' 2005 study recommended a close affiliation with professional research administration organizations such as NCURA and SRA. The RACC has reached out to professional research administration organizations to promote CRA certification among the membership ranks. As the RACC begins its 20th year of operation, the time to market the CRA certification to clientele being served is a logical next step.

The research faculty are not the only audience in need of enlightenment regarding the meaning of CRA certification. Sponsoring agencies should also be aware of value-added by CRA-certified persons

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Miner, Miner, and Griffith noted that among the worst practices in research administration is the "lack of expedient and regular communication among faculty, between faculty and administrators, and among administrators" (Miner, Miner, & Griffith, 2003, p. 17). Let us not see the value of the CRA designation fall prey to a lack of discourse. The global academic community should view the letter cluster of "CRA" and immediately recognize the professional achievement and acknowledge the subject matter expertise of that individual.

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