

Exploring Marginality, Isolation, and Perceived Mattering Among Research Administrators

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research administration is a profession embedded in various academic and non-academic structures ranging from universities with high research activities to not-for-profit health systems and small teaching colleges. Research administrators are the stewards of this profession, and their responsibilities include assisting faculty in preparing grant applications and ensuring departmental compliance with organizational policies. Despite being essential to an institution's organizational success, research administrators are prone to experiencing isolation and marginalization within their workplaces. **Aims:** This study qualitatively explored the interwoven degree to which research administrators feel they matter to others and the factors that contribute to their marginal status at work. **Method:** Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 39 research administrators in the United States. Data were analyzed inductively by two research members. **Findings:** Collection and interpretation of participant accounts supported the development of four themes: 1) the differentiation within organizational systems, 2) the impact of institutional detachment, 3) occupational dynamics of perceived mattering, and 4) the psychological cost of marginalization. Research administrators perceived an increased sense of mattering when they worked at larger institutions that valued research. In contrast, they felt overlooked and isolated in smaller organizations. Participants experienced a decreased sense of mattering when faculty did not understand the role of research administrators. Participants who did not possess a doctorate felt marginalized by faculty, despite specialized knowledge and extensive experience in the field. **Conclusions:** Marginality is common among research administrators. Professional development and mentoring initiatives should be designed to combat marginalization. Future research should explore practical strategies and supportive environments that empower research administrators to negotiate and navigate the socio-political context of their positions and engage as validated participants in the research process.

INTRODUCTION

Research administration is a profession characterized by assisting researchers in the administrative tasks that support the process of conducting research activities (Kerridge & Scott, 2018). This term is commonly used at universities and colleges, research hospitals, and research institutes. A research administrator (RA) is defined as an individual whose job duties include the performance of one or more research administration tasks (Rodman & Dingerson, 1979). These tasks can occur at the department level, the college level, centrally on behalf of the institution, or any combination of these. At institutions with large research portfolios, entire offices may be dedicated to performing these tasks; at institutions with relatively low research activity, tasks can be completed within a single office or any combination in between. Ross and colleagues (2019) asserted that achieving university research goals is significantly impacted by research administration offices, research development offices, and RAs. The authors further contended that these offices provide unique, specialized services that support and improve grant funding success and university research

goals, which no other university unit offers.

Research administration duties fit into one of two common categories: pre-award and post-award (McLaurin & Gray, 2020). Pre-award is defined as anything that happens before an award is received. RAs in pre-award focus on connecting researchers to potential sources of research funding, advising researchers on how to approach and apply to potential research sponsors, and assisting with the preparation of research proposals, in addition to the review of research proposals and the negotiation of research awards (Wolfe, 2017). Post-award responsibilities encapsulate any tasks after an award has been received. RAs in post-award concentrate on assisting with financial oversight and management of research projects; reporting the financial status of research projects; assisting with procuring services, supplies, and equipment necessary for research; and assisting with reporting the progress of research projects (Fife, 2006). They also handle paying amounts due to vendors and collaborators; invoicing and collecting amounts due from research sponsors; management of intellectual property (patents and copyrights) resulting from research activity; and

assisting with managing research protocols (e.g., the inclusion of human or animal subjects, or toxic, biohazardous, or controlled substances). However, it is important to note that while the duties fit into either category, the process of grant management is continuous in nature and thus, at times, tasks may overlap and intertwine with each other, requiring RAs to cover and attend to multiple duties at a time. These duties can range from working together to generate financial reports to remaining in compliance with current federal regulations. Due to the administrative overlap, specific tasks may become burdensome (Schiller & LeMire, 2023) as both pre- and post-award RAs need to work together to solve some of the challenges encountered within the grant management cycle.

The field of research administration is not new and dates to the 1950s and 1960s. After World War II, there was an increased need for research activity at universities (Kaplan 1959; Kerridge & Scott, 2018). To accommodate academics and scientific investigations, institutions relied on specialized knowledge from administrative experts to assist with those needs. Professional organizations

called the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA) and the Society of Research Administrators (SRA) formed over decades, and early studies such as those by Kaplan (1959, 1961) investigated the role of a research administrator and their job duties. In the beginning stages, Kaplan (1959) disclosed an inherent conflict between RAs and scientist and noted that “From the point of view of some scientists, the organization would function more smoothly without research administrator” (p. 30). Where the research administrator's job responsibility requires ensuring compliance and adherence to university procedures, faculty members' efficiency is more likely to be judged on their research output and the number of publications. This is especially important for university faculty members who produce high or very high research activity and strive for successful tenure-track positions.

There is an increasing requirement for faculty to produce research and acquire external funding. Because of this, research administration and RAs continue to play a critical role within universities and institutions (Collinson, 2006). Despite this connection, scholars

have found that research administrators experience life as marginalized professionals in their workplaces (Gaudreault et al., 2023). Marginalization in its earliest conceptualization of the “marginal man” was first introduced by Stonequist (1935) and alluded to being excluded from a part of a group. Since then, there have been numerous definitions and understandings of the term marginalization across several fields (e.g. psychiatry, nursing, physical education). For this article, we follow the definition offered by Hall and Carlson (2016) and describe marginalization as a process of disempowering groups or individuals, whether intended or unintended, and treating them as non-significant members of the institutional system. Thus, the marginalization of RAs refers to the act of discounting their work as important and out-casting them within the university.

Consequently, to support, retain, and enhance the job satisfaction of research administrators, more research is needed to understand their experiences of marginality and identify factors that positively enhance the degree to which they feel they matter at

work. While marginality refers to occupying a position within a particular social hierarchy (Grant & Breese, 1997), perceived mattering refers to an individual's feelings resulting from it. Schieman and Taylor (2001) conceptualized perceived mattering as occurring according to four tenets: attention, importance, dependence, and ego-extension. These constructs contribute to individuals' overall perceptions of how much they feel they matter to those around them in a particular social group. Specific to this study, attention is conceptualized as how much interest research administrators perceive is paid to them. Importance refers to how valuable they believe they and their work are to their institution. Dependence is conceptualized as how reliant they feel others are on them. Ego-extension refers to how much research administrators feel others are concerned with their overall success or failure. Understanding the roles research administrators assume and determining their perceptions of mattering through a social lens will provide critical data that may be used to inform endeavors to address marginality.

Grounded in perceived mattering (Schieman & Taylor, 2001), this study aimed to understand research administrators' experiences of marginality and perceived mattering and how research administrators describe their marginal status, and how it affects their perception of mattering to others in their workplaces. Findings from this study provided insights into the socio-politics encountered by research administrators and provide suggestions to support and develop these professionals within higher education institutions. Taking the challenges that research administrators face within their working environments, this research was guided by three questions: a) How do research administrators assess their feelings of mattering as communicated by those in their working environment, and what factors influence this perceived mattering? b) How do research administrators experience marginalization within their working environment, and how does this interact with their perceived mattering? c) How do research administrators experience socio-politics in their working environment? The broader impact of this study extends to and impacts

universities and institutions, as whole entities, and their research efforts.

METHODS

Research Procedure and Participant Selection

This qualitative study was the second phase of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design in which two distinct phases were completed. For the purpose of this study, we utilized an inductive and deductive research approach. The inductive component was introduced when we explored participants' lived experiences within a marginalized setting, interpreted data, and constructed perceptions based on those overarching themes. The deductive component was established when we used the framework of perceived mattering to design our interview questions and guide the interview process. Specifically, given our design, we followed the framework of perceived mattering to include questions that would attend to the four tenets of importance, attention, dependence, and ego-extension (see the Appendix for the complete interview guide). Another aspect of the interview guide design was integrating open-ended responses found in the survey study (see Gaudreault, 2023). Utilizing

this approach allowed us to obtain a better understanding of our research questions. The combination of both approaches within this study helped us to further understand why RAs feel marginalized and explore how these feelings of marginalization coexist with perceptions of mattering. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the mixed-methods design, including the collection of quantitative data and qualitative data for both studies.

The target population for this qualitative inquiry were RAs at least 18 years of age who were current members of NCURA across the United States. In phase one, the research team distributed an email to all NCURA members (approximately 7,000 adults) with a study description and a link to the e-consent and online survey. Participants provided consent electronically before answering the first e-survey question. Survey items were derived from the Physical Education Marginalization and Isolation Survey (PE-MAIS; Gaudreault, Richards, & Woods, 2017) and the Perceived Mattering Questionnaire-Physical Education (PMQ-PE; Richards, Gaudreault, & Woods, 2017). Survey items were tailored for RAs and

included questions about age, gender, race, educational level, institution type, years in the profession, work region, perceived mattering, isolation, and marginality.

The final question asked the participants to provide an email address. The research team then contacted individuals via email using the address provided to those who indicated a willingness to participate in phase two – an individual 45- to 90-minute virtual interview session via Zoom. To help increase response rates, the research team offered an incentive. Six participant gift cards valued at \$50 were procured and distributed using a random drawing. All participants were at liberty to schedule their session on a day and time that was convenient to them with a member of the research team.

Selection criteria for the in-depth interviews included an expected high degree of marginalization felt by individuals in this profession, a high degree of isolation with varying (high and low) degrees of perceived mattering based on institutional type, years of experience, educational level, and available portfolio size. Of the 72 research administrators, we

purposefully selected 50 research administrators to be included in the in-depth interview process. Seven participants were lost to follow-up, and we achieved data-saturation after completing 39 interviews by identifying commonly emerging concepts and data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The research team concurred after conducting 39 interviews that obtaining additional data would not yield new insight to answer the research questions posed.

Participants

Demographic information was retrieved from the first phase (Gaudreault et al., 2022) of this mixed-methods study. Out of the 39 participants, 29 identified as females and 10 as males. Most identified as

White ($n= 33$; 85%) and were split among public ($n=16$; 41%) and private ($n=23$; 59%) institutions. Years of experience in research administration included 0–5 years ($n=6$; 15%), 6–10 years ($n=8$; 21%), 11–20 years ($n=15$; 38%), and 21 years or more ($n=10$; 26%). Participants’ ages ranged from 26–40 years ($n=6$; 15%), 41–55 years ($n=26$; 67%), and 56–74 years ($n=7$; 18%). Participants held various degrees, with the majority earning a master’s degree ($n=20$; 51%) and had worked in the field of research administration for 0–5 years ($n=6$; 15%), 6–10 years ($n=8$; 21%), 11–20 years ($n=15$; 38%), and 21 years and above ($n=10$; 26%). Complete demographic information is included in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Variable	Sample Size (n)	%
Gender		
Female	29	74%
Male	9	23.7%
LGBTQ+	1	3.3%
Race		
White	33	85%
African American	1	2.5%
Mixed Race	4	10%
Hispanic	1	2.5%
Age (in Years)		
26-40	6	15%

41–55	26	67%
56–74	7	18%
Experience (in Years)		
0–5	6	15%
6–10	8	21%
11–20	15	38%
21+	10	26%
Organization Type		
Public	16	41%
Private	23	59%
Portfolio Size		
< \$10M	12	31%
> \$10M–\$40M	6	15%
>\$40M–\$100M	4	10%
>\$100M +	17	44%
Highest Degree		
Associates	2	5%
Bachelors	8	21%
Masters	20	51%
Doctorate	9	23%

Note. Total number of participants interviewed: $n=39$, Experience= Years of Research Administration Experience, Portfolio= Institutions Sponsored Research Portfolio Size.

Data Construction

After completing the quantitative data analysis and obtaining a general understanding of the research problem, a qualitative semi-structured interview guide was created to gain a deeper understanding of the participants experience as an RA and expand the information presented. In phase two, four research members collected all study data using Zoom video conferencing due to social distancing mandates, differences in work

schedules, varying time zones, and participants' geographic locations. E-interview questions were designed to encourage participants to articulate and expand on the tenets of perceived mattering. Credibility was increased by validating answers during the interview and member-checking by following up via email if further questions arose or statements had to be clarified. Because of the flexible nature of a semi-structured interview, the interview guide provided space to discover other

insights and deviate from the pre-planned questions. Questions in the interview guide included: “how does your current institution view research administration?” and “how much attention is paid to you in your role as a research administrator?”. See the Appendix for the complete interview guide.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The interviews were audio-recorded via Zoom, transcribed verbatim via Temi, an online transcription software, and then hand coded. Two research members inductively analyzed the interview data using the Merriam and Tisdell (2015) protocol including: open coding, axial coding, categorization, and theme development. The duration of the Zoom interviews ranged from 31 minutes to 92 minutes with an average length of 51 minutes. Of the 482 pages of transcripts, 3,862 initial open codes have been developed. Open coding involved applying labels to participant sentiments and passages in the data that best capture the essence of the expression. Axial coding involved coding of groups of open codes to describe the interpretations more specifically in the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Following this, categories were created that served as emergent themes.

The research team utilized four strategies to ensure the achievement of trustworthiness throughout the investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An expert in qualitative research reviewed the initial open codes and categories and served as a peer debriefer to uncover innate bias and challenge interpretations constructed by the first author. To further ensure the study rigor, the senior author and third author met with an ex-officio advisory committee and shared results as the study progressed and collected feedback on the interview questions. The advisory committee was comprised of eight members who were subject matter experts in research administration and possessed a depth of experience and expertise in both pre- and post-award, compliance, and departmental and central administration, both nationally and globally. The last step of the analysis involved the search for negative cases and additional analysis of the categories to flesh out themes for rich description. An in-depth audit trail was used to capture the process for every stage of the research study from the beginning of the inquiry until the

final manuscript. The audit trail also served as a transparency tool to review, revisit, and examine any discussions that occurred during the data analytic process to ensure robust findings.

FINDINGS

The analysis produced four main themes, which we called (1) differentiation within organizational systems, (2) impact of institutional detachment, (3) occupational dynamics of perceived mattering, and (4) psychological cost of marginalization.

Differentiation Within Organizational Systems

Institutional Size Matters

One factor impacting how RAs perceive their importance is the institution's size. Several participants indicated that at a larger organization where research is paramount, RAs perceive their office as being "very well respected" and "receive[s] a lot of support". Some even mentioned that RAs have their research administration enterprise within the college due to the size of the university and its responsibility to produce research. In this instance, RAs believe that they matter because they are perceived as "professionals and experts within the field" by faculty and upper

administration. One RA described how their supervisor looks out for the team and ensures that RAs are treated accordingly: "my supervisors take care of us. They do not want us working nights and weekends, if possible. They put more responsibility on the faculty and how they work with us". In these instances, universities and departments show additional support by creating other positions due to the volume of the workload given to RAs. One RA highlighted her experience and the difference in RA treatment depending on institution size: "The bigger universities make sure that we have all the support and resources needed to make it happen. At smaller institutions, that was rather the opposite. It was more of; we keep taking positions because of budget cuts". This account was one of the first to indicate the impact institutional size has on an RA's perception of mattering, as larger institutions recognize and value the position more significantly than smaller colleges.

Although research administration is valued more at more prominent organizations, research at many primarily undergraduate institutions "feels very overlooked and

underappreciated". Several participants noted that the problem is specific to the nature of the organization, given the different perspectives present at larger institutions compared to smaller institutions. We asked how research administration is viewed by faculty and its implications for the working environment. One participant who had over 21 years of experience in research administration said:

At smaller institutions, you have just really one unit, whereas at the larger institutions, you have various levels of research administration. But the faculty see it as one cohesive unit. And like it's, if one research administrator makes a mistake, everybody will hear about it.

Additional participants at smaller colleges explained that research administration is not valued as a field requiring technical expertise or professionalism. Instead, RAs are seen as generic administrators whose content knowledge is not recognized. They are an administrative obstacle to overcome, not a valued staff member who adds value to research administration and keeps us compliant. RAs also compared their experience transitioning from small to more prominent universities

and how faculty at smaller organizations did not clearly understand research administration as a field: "At smaller institutions, teaching faculty didn't understand what research administration do. The perspective of research administration was more of confusion at the smaller institution". During the interview process, there was almost complete unanimity that individuals at smaller institutions are unaware of the job responsibilities held by research administrators.

Perceived as Roadblocks

When we reached out via email to follow up on a few interviews, during those conversations we asked whether they felt they mattered professionally or personally. We received two styles of messages. Participants described how faculty viewed them; one RA, who worked in pre-award, was perceived as a "roadblock" and "administrative obstacle" when submitting proposals and signing contracts. To mitigate this belief, she constantly reminded both faculty and staff that they are all on the same team, and each brings their specialized skills to help achieve the same goal for the institution. Although research administration is a professional

field, faculty do not perceive it as requiring technical expertise.

In contrast, another participant found herself often being reminded to treat the faculty as “clients” or “customers” rather than “partners”. Research administrators, in this instance, are viewed as “generic administrators” whose content knowledge and professionalism are not recognized for their efforts to keep the university compliant. One participant reported the same experiences and highlighted her feelings that “faculty don't respect research administration and see it as an obstacle to their goals and that by association, they see [her] as trying to slow or block their research efforts”. Research administrators, especially in central offices, are often viewed as impediments to projects, and when their work is noticed, it is almost always the target of complaints.

Impact of Institutional Detachment *Feelings of Isolation*

Due to institutional structures contributing to the small cohort sizes of RAs within organizations and the lack of support and acknowledgment from upper administration, staff, and departments, isolation was a term most participants ascribed to the job. When

asked about what specific situations contributed to their marginalized feelings and how they perceived isolation, one participant said, “I just feel like no one else on my campus can relate to this, and it feels isolating at times”. This participant referred to a general lack of understanding from the faculty regarding “what it takes to and how to accomplish this [type of work]”. This lack of awareness from other staff employees led RAs to feel isolated and marginalized within the organization as perceptions of mattering diminished within the socio-politics of the university. Some RAs internalized their perceived lack of importance and feelings of isolation when not considered in decision-making processes in which they should have been involved.

Additionally, a lack of interpersonal connections and initiative to collaborate with other RAs also contributed to feelings of isolation. For example, one RA described the lack of interpersonal communication within the department and lack of involvement with more extensive policy systems at the university. For most RAs, it was not unusual to email each other with questions, even though their offices

were next to each other. Participants communicated with various colleagues, faculty, and administrators; however, they rarely spoke to anyone in person. This isolation and marginalization were accentuated by constant feelings of being removed from other departments, a lack of involvement in meetings, and the faculty's disregard of their work. Some RAs expressed their lack of opportunity for interaction with other research administrators. In addition, a lack of shared tools to use in completing their work increased their marginalization at their institution. One participant said, "For those at the institution who are not research administrators themselves, I think there's a lack of understanding of what we do and why it matters; to most, it just seems like bureaucratic nonsense".

Some RAs were also able to attribute feelings of isolation to being overlooked. One RA mentioned: "I eat the lunch I bring alone and travel from work alone." That is isolation. Marginalization is not being invited to meetings, hearing about policy discussions after the fact, constantly chasing after faculty who believe university policies do not apply to them, and succumbing to the assumption that

a signed form is an outcome rather than the compliance goal or risk management strategy that makes the form necessary in the first place.

Some participants stressed disseminating information from the central level to directors and further down the hierarchy as a significant problem. In contrast, others felt very isolated because there was "no flow down of info and no availability/encouragement/support for continuing education". Occasionally, RAs felt isolated because they had only a few individuals on their campus doing similar work. As a result, they did not have much opportunity to discuss challenges/issues or any colleagues within the division willing to discuss best practices, updates, and changes. Much of their work remained behind the scenes. Some RAs found great joy in not being in the spotlight and working behind the scenes. However, their frustration arose when the faculty did not understand the importance of their role. When asked about how this impacts them, one RA mentioned, "it's like personally insulting to me, and I do get very upset, and I just have to kind of temper my emotions and try to look at things as a teachable moment." In this

instance, RAs mentioned that they did not have anyone to whom they could express their frustration. This observation needs further investigation and could be another factor in why some RAs experience increased marginalization within their work field.

Gender and Marginality

This study did not actively investigate marginalization based on gender; however, given the nature of the sample and the overall gender distribution in research administration, participants raised concerns about how gender can contribute to marginalization. Despite several years of experience in research administration and proven effectiveness in administrative positions, participants who identified as female felt like they were not adequately represented on search committees, collective units, or advocacy groups. This idea is further accentuated by the hierarchy of research administration, where women are answerable to positions those men primarily hold. At times, RAs from culturally diverse backgrounds experience challenging situations, especially with men in upper administration. One RA recalled an interaction with another member of the

organization, highlighting a negative interaction between herself and a male superior: “He just got really upset and started yelling at me and pointing at me and saying there's something wrong with you. There's something seriously wrong. This made me feel scared. It made me feel upset. It made me feel disrespected. It made me wonder is this happening. Because I am a young Latina female, and he is a middle-aged male.”

Occupational Dynamics of Perceived Matter

Role of Interpersonal Relationships

Occasionally, RAs felt isolated because they had only a few individuals on their campus doing similar work, so they did not have much opportunity to discuss challenges/issues. However, perceived mattering was increased through interactions outside of their organization. Interpersonal relationships play a significant role in the success of organizations. They allow for a strong coalition of individuals to work toward institutional goals and opportunities to recognize each other's work and give productive feedback. However, despite a general awareness of the importance of collaboration within and across departments, many RAs felt they had no opportunities to

form meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. A few research administrators or department administrators with dual roles highlighted the presence of having a strong cohort, but the reality is that most RAs work independently. Although some have research administrator meetings, they don't have various and consistent opportunities for cross-collaboration or discussion with other research administrators. However, perceived mattering was improved by interactions outside of their organization. One RA highlighted the importance of cross-institutional collaboration while discussing expectations and how these overshadow the aspects of mattering.

RAs are not often asked if they matter. We are just expected to do it. When I discovered there was a professional organization for RAs (namely NCURA), then there was a greater sense of validation because there were 'like-minded individuals' in the trenches who understood our 'very necessary' value.

A negative case analysis demonstrated how interactions with faculty could significantly impact an RA's perceived mattering.

There is one faculty member, and it struck me whenever she said it because I think it was the first time, I'd ever heard anybody say it. And it was a year and a half ago, and she just said, well, how are you doing [RA]? And the way she looked at me and I was like, wow, she's really interested in me personally, outside of my work life. And that really touched me.

This moment was crucial for the RA as they felt cared for beyond their job duties. However, we found only four out of 39 cases where this was applicable.

Recognition and Dependence

Research is paramount for the sustainability and longevity of institutions. Although larger institutions' primary focus is to provide a high research turnover, smaller institutions also benefit from departmental support that streamlines the grant process and retains research funding. Research administrators have identified a high level of dependence from faculty and staff when seeking funds to support research initiatives. Participants pointed to multiple layers of research administration at a university, so that one task can move

through many different hands. As one RA stated:

When it gets up to our office in the college, there's been multiple layers of research administrators, at varying experience levels that have touched it. Once a proposal was late, and the faculty researcher was just playing mad and sent a terrible email about how there a problem had been. We should have known about those problems.

They went on to say that without the support of RAs, individuals in need of funding have a greater chance of not meeting compliance. RAs perceived themselves as “gatekeepers” or “guards” of the compliance system. As one RA explained: “The faculty are dependent on us when they need stuff for a grant. Because I control all the submission portals, they are dependent on me. So, it is kind of baked into the system the way that I am dependent on a finance team to get a paycheck. I can't just go and get the money on my own.” Others described an increase in their perceived mattering because they felt their work was essential to faculty success. They said, “[staff] do depend on me to balance my work, meaning that I must juggle three or four projects

at a time so that we don't miss our deadlines. Their careers depend on these things.” Despite this reality, research administrators are not considered contributors to the research conducted at the university by administrators or faculty; rather, RAs are seen as hindrances or obstacles. While many individuals respect and appreciate RAs for streamlining processes and procedures, many question why a research administration office is necessary. Although research draws recognition and accolades to the university and staff spearheading the study, the RAs aren't necessarily included in that overall recognition. The PIs may express their gratitude toward the RA, but “it feels more like they are annoyed RAs made them follow the rules to get their grant submitted.” One participant stated, “the internal deadlines are consistently ignored, and RAs are expected to just make the time to get the grant done, no matter when the PI decides to send information to the RA.” Further, “departmental management does seem to appreciate my work and my contribution to the accomplishments of the PIs. Thank you's are mostly in the form of emails. There is no public recognition.”

Psychological Cost of Marginalization *Misunderstood*

Some RAs found great joy in not being in the spotlight and working behind the scenes. However, their frustration arose when faculty did not understand the importance of their role or the role of their offices. When asked about how this impacts them, one RA said, "it's personally insulting to me, and I do get very upset, and I just have to temper my emotions and try to look at things as a teachable moment." Many participants feel that "The university doesn't really understand what [their] role is. Many faculty think we are arbitrarily creating more paperwork for them rather than seeing flow down compliances." According to RAs, this included departmental meetings throughout the year where specific topics related to research administration were addressed (e.g., sponsored project activities, development of proposals, budgeting procedures). One RA described her frustration: "They're sitting in a meeting of all these professors, and they come up with something, and I'm like, it's never going to work because you're making a policy about research administration and you're not bringing any research

administrators to the table. I feel like that's where my biggest angst is." While RAs feel that the institution has done its due diligence in having an office of sponsored projects to facilitate proposals and maintain compliance, the specific role of research administrators is not considered in a broader research context (faculty expectations, promotion, and tenure, departmental support for grants, incentives to submit grants, etc.). Several RAs explained that information regarding policy and regulation is ignored at levels, and decisions about the department they work in are made without their input. They feel misunderstood, not acknowledged, and unknown by those who rely on their position the most. One RA provided an example: "This summer, a severance payment was charged to a grant without any prior review by a grant staff member which led to the discovery that no such policy covered this situation, so I have proposed a policy, but it feels like such efforts occur in a vacuum, without real institutional understanding or buy-in."

Overworked

Several participants discussed the implications of a small working team in the research administration department. Due to the demand of the position in ensuring the success and propulsion of research within colleges and universities, several participants described the time and effort needed to complete compliance work and write policies and procedures. A senior RA described her research administration staff as “overworked, underpaid, and mentally overwhelmed.” Even those in administrative research leadership positions were frustrated by chasing the “numbers and results to boost research and external funding” without an understanding from the faculty about “what it takes to and how to accomplish this.” Efforts to request support were often met with denial or resistance. Several participants indicated that they seldom receive the support they want and feel helpless when discussing concerns with leadership because they are met with passive aggression or are viewed as “whining.” Participants also explained the consequences of being perceived as “incompetent.”

Although no questions were directly asked to describe the amount of work required of RAs to successfully support

the research initiatives within their institution, discussions of how their position is viewed within their organization led to descriptions of the overload of work and lack of additional support from upper management administration. They feel exploited: “I get all the problems to solve dumped on me at the last minute. If an issue is too complex, they come to me. That's all fine, but not if it requires me to work way beyond reasonable work hours, weekends, or a lower rate of compensation.”

Given this lack of acknowledgment and failure to appropriately compensate RAs for the number of hours put in, some participants felt that they were at the bottom of the university hierarchy. Or rather, they were unimportant and undervalued members of the community. RAs were pressured to “always pick up the slack whenever necessary.” This lack of acknowledgment from administration in areas where additional support was required contributed to RAs’ urgent need to discover new ways to “stay afloat” with minimal resources, leading to increased feelings of isolation.

Frustrated

Several participants expressed frustration with the lack of funding initiatives for professional development despite their efforts to grow continuously as a professional. One RA explained her interaction with upper administration and her frustration about the lack of support. "I do not know. It feels hollow when upper administration says, 'I am sorry, we cannot pay for your membership to be a part of the society of research administration'." More than just receiving the necessary training to advance career capabilities, RAs recognize that a lack of personal development opportunities also impacts the amount of money they make as errors in execution may impact promotion. One of the RA's noticed an influx of needs to receive more certifications based on different skills required to perform all of the job duties in research administration. However, despite earning further certifications, several RAs believed that they had not been compensated accordingly. When asked about additional certifications and their impact on their career, one RA responded, "so even if I got the credential, I'm not getting a higher salary, I'm getting more responsibility, but I'm not getting the higher salary. It

makes me wonder if I want to continue in research administration." Another participant stated, "You start to think about the fact that it is so little to the college's bottom line. Still, it makes a real difference in somebody's pocket."

Along with the necessary training to equip research administrators with the proper skills to meet compliance, RAs were concerned about the lack of compliance awareness by faculty and research staff. According to participants, faculty members and research staff are allowed to disregard timelines and information-sharing necessary to manage their projects within the accounting system, leading to sloppy work and compliance risks. One participant said that "there is little effort spent on compliance and messaging about its importance. They are allowed to shop for answers they want rather than following processes. There is no formal training plan for faculty or research staff." Further discussion revealed that untrainable employees could continue as PIs with little supervisory support, creating more stress. The expectation is that the RA can "make magic" happen to remedy all these problems, whether they are significant enough to deal with or not. A

well-structured Faculty & RA or Researcher & RA team requires access to consistent training; thus, well-designed accounting and compliance processes and an understanding of each stakeholder's roles and responsibilities are critical.

DISCUSSION

In response to gaps in the literature of research administration, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceived mattering and marginality of research administrators in their working environment. Drawing upon the perspectives of the research administrator, inductive analysis of interview data produced four main themes: (1) differentiation within organizational systems, (2) impact of institutional detachment, (3) occupational dynamics of perceived mattering, and (4) psychological cost of marginalization.

All research administrators were purposefully selected based on their indicated gender, institution type, salary, educational background, and age. Throughout the years, the demographics within research administration stayed the same: predominantly female-orientated and White, and with various research

administrators in different organizations (Kerridge & Scott, 2018). When we conducted our inductive analysis and themes started to emerge, we noted a relationship among the organization type, level of knowledge about research administration, and different levels of dependence. Surprisingly, while Katsapis (2012) did not find any significant results for the ways in which organizational affiliation contributes to occupation role stress, we found that the type of institution influences the outcomes of marginality and perceived mattering (Gaudreault et al., 2023). One explanation for this could be that current quantitative survey instruments are not able to capture the concept of marginality and perceived mattering due to the multi-levelled nature of an RAs job position. This is also in accordance with our quantitative study, where we did not detect any significant results based on organization type (Gaudreault et al., 2023).

Qualitative data revealed that perceived mattering was increased within organizations that engaged in high research activity and where upper administration understood and valued the work of research administrators. However, at some large universities,

research administrators indicated that principal investigators and faculty members perceived them as obstacles and roadblocks. Participants who worked at small teaching colleges felt that their work was undervalued and underrecognized. Despite advocating for themselves, they felt isolated most of the time and did not receive any professional development training beyond their initial studies, which invoked additional feelings of marginality.

Our research identified new factors that impact feelings of marginalization and perception of perceived mattering. For example, research administrators at more prominent R1 universities, where more faculty members are required to engage in high-quality research, believe themselves to be perceived as a cornerstone of institutional success. In contrast, research administrators in positions serving smaller institutions (e.g., portfolio size or R2/R3), where teaching, rather than research, is of primary importance, face a reduced sense of perceived mattering. Most RAs in larger institutions experience a deep understanding of worth as a person, feeling “highly mattered, respected, valued, and paid attention to”

(Participant, Large School). In contrast, RAs at smaller institutions feel “frustrated, invisible, lack of control, sole contributor, overlooked, undermined” (Participant, Small School). Collinson (2009) was one of the few studies that focused on proxy measures of marginalization and isolation. In that study, 27 RAs from different UK universities were interviewed; significant themes were identified within the occupational space of research administration. The researcher found that RAs experience negative labeling, rendering invisible, and blaming. Our study supports these findings as well; however, we add to the literature the emerging themes of mattering and marginality based on the nature of the institution and how knowledge of research administration affects the “moral exclusion” of research administration (Collinson, 2009). Depending on the type of organization, one can feel either auxiliary to the university system or complementary to the work that drives the university and research forward. However, while the latter might be true, faculty can only do so much to emphasize the importance of a research administrator's work. Kaplan (1959) characterized the RA as a “man in

the middle”, fighting on two fronts: on one end, dealing with administrative tasks that, no matter how well-executed, either will never be good or fast enough. At the other end, a person who needs to halt the research and embrace compliance collides with faculty where performance and quick turnaround matter more than compliance to regulations and policies.

Waite (2011) described the attributes of servant leaders and how organizations and faculty perceive research administrators. Our study investigated servant leadership from the perspective of research administrators. We found only a handful of RAs that identified themselves as servant leaders to the institutions. Rather, RAs at smaller colleges perceived themselves as marginalized and stranded on an island. This was accentuated by the view of faculty members who were unfamiliar with the job duties and treated them as roadblocks and annoyances to their work. Although differences in perceived mattering are based on institution size, RAs recognize an intersectoral dependence on their position's impact on faculty and departmental success. Intersectoral reliance on research administrators refers to the role the RAs

play that directly impacts faculty, supervisors, and the institution.

Whether knowingly or unknowingly, faculty at institutions rely heavily on the contributions of the RA department. RAs refer to themselves as “gatekeepers and middlemen”, bridging the gap between the lack of knowledge among research faculty and the steps required to acquire grant approval. Although institutional members acknowledge their dependence on the RA's job performance, most fail to recognize the heavy workload associated with the position, leading to adverse outcomes on the RA's overall perceived job satisfaction.

Surprisingly, research administrators identified an essential factor in increasing their mattering — recognition from colleagues, faculty members, and the university itself. Within this context, recognition can be interpreted according to what Ellington (2023) describes as “organizational mattering” (p. 2), where RAs become a part of the community and are valued members of the institution. Recognition thus becomes a construct involving equality and workplaces that nurture and elevate RAs' overall wellbeing. RAs could benefit from the same practices that are

celebrated among other faculty members. For example, rather than receiving “Best Teaching ” or “Paper of the Year” awards, it may be preferable in the landscape of departmental and university policies to highlight the impact and importance of RAs. This could be done via email communication, monthly newsletters, or the creation of similar awards for RAs. Ellington (2023) provided several categories that could enhance organizational mattering, including innovation, creativity, trust, and communication. The praxis of recognition through acknowledgment matters, whether it’s at the department, college, or university level. The RAs in our study reported feeling valued because they were the most knowledgeable within professional and sponsored research programs. Furthermore, they felt a high sense of value because they could solve problems instantly and efficiently. It can be assumed that people depend on the RA's knowledge and expertise as they can quickly fulfill “the needs of others”. It is worth pointing out that most RAs did not take any special training in research administration; instead, they had “to train on their own”. RAs reported that smaller institutions have

limited resources, while more prominent institutions have allocated training and professional development for newer hires.

Our findings also show that perceived mattering is highly affected by extrinsic factors influencing how research administrators perceive their work environment. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that one of the factors that RAs can add to increase their value within these hierarchical structures is to earn a terminal doctoral degree. This professionalization process — becoming an expert within the field through either year of work-related contributions — is not leveraged through a graduate master’s degree or additional certifications. Instead, these additions rather demoralize the research administrator as (a) no financial reimbursement is given and (b) importance is not increased. While Acker and colleagues (2019) pointed out that “identity formation” (p.61) and “sense-making” (p.63) are essential, we argue that this sense-making must include a top-down approach where upper administration and the university system recognize and acknowledge their work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

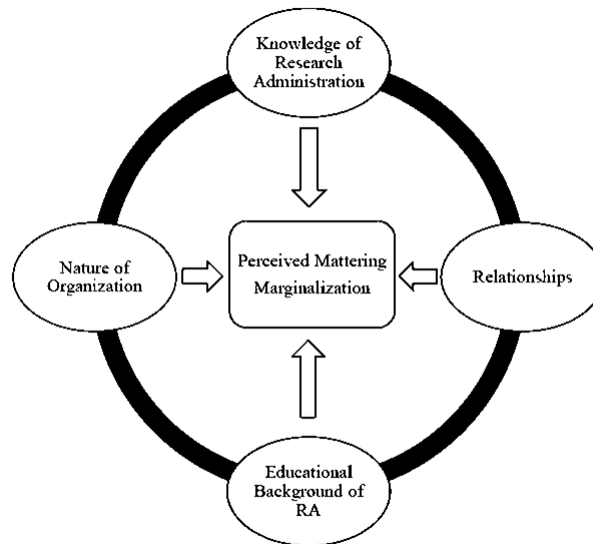
This study suggests implications related to how different variables impact research administrators' perceived mattering and their ability to navigate a marginalized profession. We have constructed a model that summarizes the results from this study. Figure 1 shows the marginalization and perceived mattering depending on institutional size. It also displays the emotions felt by research administrators depending on institutional size. For most, RAs at smaller colleges experience high isolation levels as they feel alone and do not have anyone else to communicate or work with. They often think that their only retreat is collaborating with RAs from previous institutions or attending conferences such as NCURA.

At more prominent universities, while most RAs do not perceive a high level of isolation due to having multiple RAs working on projects, they have a lower sense of perceived mattering as faculty and PIs take them for granted. RAs also felt a higher sense of perceived mattering as they were valued for their work. This model opens opportunities for further investigations for other researchers to explore additional

barriers or facilitators that can be experienced depending on institutional size. This will enable them to proactively prepare and look for solutions or opportunities to engage that propel them further. Individuals who prefer to be in a position where fewer individuals monitor employee turnover may choose to work at smaller institutions given the isolated nature of the role.

In contrast, individuals who enjoy engaging with various members within an institution may find themselves drawn to larger institutions. We have chosen to build a model as it allows us to recognize the different relationships between the constructs and provides fellow scholars to examine these themes further and build upon them. These findings suggest to research administrators the importance of developing collaborative practices within and across institutions. These collaborative practices can be further enhanced through the framework of perceived mattering and its four related tenets. For example, to counteract feelings of marginalization and isolation, departments, colleges, and universities should aim to create nurturing environments that emphasize

Figure 1
Illustration of Factors Influencing Perceived Mattering and Marginality



Note. Marginalization and Perceived Mattering are seen as two different constructs. Both constructs are influenced by the nature of organization, the educational background of the research administrator, the relationships between research administrators and others (faculty, upper administration, other research administrators), and the perceived knowledge of others about research administration (RA). While all four factors can act stand alone, we believe that the combination of all factors can lead to enhanced sense of perceived mattering or marginalization. We also propose that the nature of organization (e.g., teaching or research), the acquired knowledge of research administration (low or high), and the educational background of research administrators (e.g., BS, MS, or PhD) have substantial influences on the socio-political relationships within the working environment.

the value of the work that RAs produce daily. Feelings of importance could be increased through the simple gesture of noticing RAs as individuals “contributing to the greater good of the university” (Acker et al., 2019, p.78), rather than as roadblocks within the grant cycle. RAs who work alone are prone to feelings of isolation and should be included in department meetings to showcase the importance of their expertise and ensure their opinion is

heard about future projects. Allowing room for professional interactions contributes to feelings of attention and may increase the overall relationship between RAs and faculty members. This interaction can lead to faster project turnaround times and a more streamlined and transparent approach to the grant cycle, making clear what is required of RAs and faculty members to have a successful outcome. Based on our study findings we also recommend

raising further awareness about the inequalities that some of the female RAs face. While future studies are warranted to further explore some of the challenges encountered, we recommend that universities acknowledge the lived experiences of female-identifying RAs and create a space that is conducive to constructive and honest job-related communication. Potential on-campus advocacy care centers and wellness programs may contribute to enhancing feelings of inclusion and increase feelings of belonging.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the qualitative inquiry of this study, one limitation is to draw any significant conclusions on the entire field of research administration or the NCURA population with an estimated member count of 7,500 members. Furthermore, interviews were conducted via Zoom rather than in person. While research suggests that in-person interviews relay a more personable environment, given the global circumstances as well as time and financial constraints, we opted to conduct Zoom interviews and make it more feasible for the research team and the research administrators to conduct

the interviews. We had a good representation of the different regions of NCURA, but more research needs to be done that seeks information about research administration at an international level. The study's cross-sectional nature provides only a snapshot of the research administrators' experiences at that time. Another potential limitation was the unequal distribution of participants at different university types. For example, only 11 of our participants self-identified as working at traditional R1 institutions, while others categorized themselves as working at universities like Art & Design Schools, Undergraduate Colleges, or Hispanic Serving Universities. Based on our findings and the importance of institution type, we recommend that future studies include a more equal distribution of the different types of universities as this may directly correlate with feelings of significance as it relates to RAs' perceptions of mattering and marginalization.

On top of that, the interviews were conducted during January to April 2021, when COVID-19 restrictions were in place. Most research administrators were either working from home or had limited access to their working

environment. Hence, most information was recalled and based on their feelings pre-COVID-19. Second, while we had a large amount of qualitative data, one can argue that case studies would be a more appropriate measure for this study to capture the complexity within research administration. Throughout this research, it became clear that not only do research administrators experience different degrees of isolation based on the type of organization but there are also different layers within organizations according to which research administration is differentiated. Furthermore, while the sample represented the general distribution of research administrators within the workforce, primarily White and female, this study provided only a handful of insights into how culturally diverse participants characterize themselves. We acknowledge that our current study is skewed toward the perceived mattering for White heterosexual researchers. Research in other occupations has shown that systemic inequalities and experiences of marginalization are greater for those in the LGBTQ+ community (Beagan et al., 2021; Cech & Waidzunas, 2021) and African American and Latin populations

(Snyder & Schwartz, 2019; Vick & Cunningham, 2018) compared to their White heterosexual counterparts in society. Future longitudinal studies should consider the differentiation of marginalization and perceived mattering within large multi-level and culturally diverse organizations to understand those perspectives further. Moreover, future studies should explore the concept of how professional development workshops contribute to feelings of mattering and marginalization and whether these accreditation workshops and professional trainings have any influence on the RAs' credibility within the institution. According to our study, it appears that earning a PhD had the most impact on feeling valued and respected within the institution, especially at doctoral universities with high research activities. Future studies also should explore nuanced intricacies as they relate to RAs' involvement in pre and post award and the blurred lines between the two. Through our study, we realized that while primarily focused on either pre or post award, RAs are required to look at the bigger picture and work together to accomplish the institutional goal. These specific

duties should be further uncovered and explored as they vary from university to university. We also would encourage future research to expand on what these duties involve and how they tie in with faculty expectations. This is especially important as it appears that RAs are sensitive to faculty comments relating to their work. In other words, the exploration of research administration research should not only focus on RAs but also on faculty members by utilizing a synergistic approach that investigates multiple members from the same institution.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on marginalization, isolation, and perceived mattering among research administrators. According to the primary findings, research administrators at smaller colleges are often overlooked and isolated due to the inherent nature of a teaching university where research administration is not a priority and faculty do not have much knowledge about research administration. The research administration experience varies at larger institutions due to its silo style of research administration roles. While prior studies have shown different job

classifications in research administration, this study captured different experiences based on one's position within an institution. RAs with doctoral degrees feel they mattered more due to the perception that they were equal counterparts to faculty. These specific RAs are in a supervisory position and believe they are being paid attention to and perceive themselves as an essential resource for departmental and university success. RAs with an undergraduate degree and at the beginning of their careers are told that they are impediments and roadblocks within large organizations due to a lack of respect from faculty. Given that research administrators contribute to the process and advancement of research, we recommend that universities, whether smaller institutions or larger organizations, provide (a) opportunities for professional development and cross-collaboration among institutions, (b) upper administrative support for RAs' as they navigate faculty opinions of and expectations for RAs, departmental support for grants, and incentives to submit grants, and (c) systems for faculty where RAs are valued due to their specialized skills and the knowledge that they offer during the

administrative process. Policies that prevent universities from overworking RAs and prevent them from suffering mental exhaustion can help institutions create an environment in which an RA feels that they are part of the team rather than a roadblock during revenue-

generating activities. This, combined with the understanding that RAs have a personal life, can help decrease marginalization and isolation and increase the sense of perceived mattering within small or large organizations.

AUTHOR NOTE

Disclosure Statement

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APPENDIX

Complete Semi-Structured Interview Guide

We will begin with a few questions about you and your background.

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your career as a research administrator.

The next set of questions relate to how research administration is viewed at your institution.

2. How is research administration viewed by your current institution/unit?
3. How do your supervisors/upper administration view and support research administration? What are the implications of this support, or lack thereof, for you?
4. Can you give me an example of a time when you felt as if research administration was important in your unit/university?
5. How dependent are others on your work as a research administrator? How does your work as a research administrator impact other?
6. How much attention do you feel is paid to research administration at your institution?

These next questions relate to you as a person, on a personal level, and irrespective of your work as a research administrator.

7. Describe your personality at work and how you believe different groups of people perceive you.
8. Tell me about personal interactions that you have with people at work. How do these impact the way you feel?
9. Do you feel that you can present your authentic self (on a personal level) at work? Why or why not?
10. Have you developed personal friendships with any of your colleagues at work?
11. Talk about the degree to which you feel like you matter as a person (your personality, who you are as a human) to people at school.

Next, let's talk a little about how you are viewed as a professional within your working environment.

12. Describe yourself as a research administrator and how you approach the job. What are some of your strengths and areas for growth?
13. How do you feel others perceive you in terms of your skills and value as a research administrator?
14. What sorts of things make you feel like what you offer is valued at work?
15. How much attention is paid to you in your role as a research administrator?
16. How dependent are others on what you do?
17. What sorts of things make you feel like what you possess as a professional is not valued at work? Describe a time when you felt like you didn't matter as a professional.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about how much you feel you matter at work?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Denis Schulz received his M.S. in Health Behavior from the University of Florida and his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of New Mexico. He currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Kinesiology within the College of Education, Health & Human Services at California State University San Marcos. He specializes in exploring the psycho-social intricacies of recruiting and retaining teachers, doctoral students, and faculty members in teacher

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Dr. Karen Lux Gaudreault is an associate professor in the Department of Health, Exercise, and Sports Sciences at the University of New Mexico (UNM). Dr. Gaudreault investigates teacher socialization, teacher agency, and how school structures and socio-political factors influence the work lives of physical education teachers. She currently coordinates the Graduate Physical Education Teacher Education program and leads the Pedagogy Research Laboratory, where she investigates the relationships between perceptions of mattering and emotions among marginalized communities. Due to her substantial contributions to the field of teacher education, Dr. Gaudreault was inducted as a Research Fellow in 2019 to The Society of Health and Physical Educators. Dr. Gaudreault continues her high engagement in professional shared governance, including serving on multiple editorial boards like the *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* and being a Faculty Athletics Representative at UNM.

Dr. Ruby Lynch-Arroyo is a mathematics educator with research experience and interest in Complexity Theory, pre-service teacher preparation, disposition, positioning, and identity toward mathematics. While retired from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) due to relocation, Dr. Lynch-Arroyo has continued to actively collaborate with colleagues and peers. As a University of New Mexico (UNM) Center for Collaborative Research and Community Engagement Visiting Scholar, Dr. Lynch-Arroyo participated in multiple projects through UNM College of Education while assuming the role of part-time Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math instructor. Dr. Lynch-Arroyo continues as an adjunct at UTEP as a part-time instructor in the STEM Division of the College of Education and serves on the Coordinating Committee of STEMERS.
