

The Dimensions of Influence on Research Administrator Behavior: Toward a Theoretical Model of Research Administration as a Public Service Profession

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Authors' Note

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Abstract

As the Society of Research Administrators International enters its 40th anniversary, it will become necessary to critically evaluate the state of the research administration profession to chart new directions and new ideas, and to solidify our educational, professional and scholarly agendas for the future. What follows is a critical synthesis and evaluation of 20th century thought on the sociology of the professions, with integration of research administration characteristics as a public service profession. It is suggested that we establish a modern theoretical model. The model proposed is not the final one by any means, but this evaluation situates research administration in the overall study of the professions, providing an important theoretical stronghold.

Introduction

Problem Statement

Very few empirical studies have been done on research administration. In 1986, Hensley noted, "it is widely acknowledged that research support personnel are essential...to

the achievement of the specific missions of postsecondary institutions, and to American technological leadership, yet this vital group's value to science is largely unrecognized in comprehensive studies; and the field is generally ignored by disciplinary associations in their assessment of the

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science and academic infrastructure” (pp. 47, 48). Hensley’s statement holds true in this century, over 20 years later; with the emergence of the study of research integrity as a scholarly field, it is of vital importance that research administrators define a scholarly model to follow for development, or some other group will define it for us. It is suggested that we establish a modern theoretical model that situates research administration in the overall study of the professions and provides an important theoretical stronghold.

It was not until Roberts (2005) set out to study the perceptions of research administrators toward certification that empirical research design and data collection were applied to research administration professionals. In 2006, Atkinson performed another empirical study on research administrators to determine their overall normative and professional orientation with regard to research integrity issues. The former was a microanalysis; the latter focused on a systemic, or macro-level, analysis. These kinds of studies are good for the profession, and more are needed.

In the recent history of western civilization, the idea of “profession” has expanded beyond the mediaeval constructs of doctor, lawyer, clergy, and professor. Organizational expansion and institutionalization have effects on behavior that cannot be ignored. Students of organizations recognize two groups, (1) governmental units and (2) professional groups, as responsible for developing rules and regulations for managing and shaping the institutional environment (Scott, 2003). DiMaggio and Powell maintained in 1983 that the professions had become the 20th century thought leaders in organizations, serving to shape and change their organizations. For the most part, these effects have not changed.

University research administration’s behavior is influenced by the entire process of professionalism, making research administrators the thought leaders in the management of research. Goode (1957, 1961, 1969) envisioned this process on a “continuum.” Institutional scholars often refer to this as the professionalization process, which helps establish legitimacy and power. Previous studies of professionalism in higher education administration have demonstrated that comparing a university-based professional group along the continuum of professionalism provides much needed information to establish an academic assessment of the group’s professional behavior, status and legitimacy, both in society and within the university organization (Braxton, 1992, 1999; Bray, 2002; Caboni, 2001). However, as Abbott (1988) contended, the continuum alone is not solely responsible for the behavioral foundations of a profession. The wider organization and the linkages of the profession to other organizational contexts must also be taken into account.

History of the Study of the Professions

Goode (1957, 1961, 1969) might have placed research administration in the class of semi-professions, where protecting the client base was of utmost importance, but the intimacy between the professional and the client appeared diminished or distant. According to Abbot (1988), Bucher and Strauss (1961), Harries-Jenkins (1970) and Wilensky (1964), research administration is a profession positioned within a complex university organization, in a complex research system.

On an historical note, research administrators were installed in universities to rationalize and formalize the demands

of the federal government, private industry and philanthropic organizations. But as research universities grew and the influx of external funds increased, so did research administration's responsibility for making sense of the increasing burden of regulatory requirements. Research administrators found themselves in an open organizational environment, where monetary and information exchange occurs within many different contexts (Kalas, 1987).

The literature of the professions followed its own developmental process, with relevant themes surfacing and evolving along the way. The modern professional continuum includes, but is not limited to, medicine, law, (Abbott, 1988; Carr-Sanders & Wilson, 1964; Goode, 1969), the clergy (Carr-Sanders & Wilson, 1964), the professoriate (Braxton, 1999) and other emerging or semi-professions, such as accountancy, nursing, dental hygiene, social work (Abbott, 1990; Greenwood, 1957), university fund raising (Caboni, 2001) and Deans (Bray, 2002). Research administration should consider itself along this continuum, within and among the vast family of professional groups.

The study of the professions is a sociological discipline with a varied but interesting history. The late 20th century literature is steeped in a classification approach. Sociologists believed that the educated professions were responsible for holding society together because of their education and status. In the 1980s and 1990s, it became apparent that a systems perspective was necessary to balance the classification approach, given that organizations and organizational systems also affect the professionalization of many occupations, including those referred to in the literature as "free" professions, such as medicine, law, and the clergy. These works defined what constitutes a profession in modern society,

both in the United States and Europe. The body of literature in the sociology of professions offers suggestions for areas of study in the field, and suggestions concerning which characteristics are most important for defining a profession.

Scholars regularly identify the comprehensive work of Carr-Sanders and Wilson (1933), a qualitative case study that served as a foundation for identifying the initial characteristics of the professions. Parsons (1939), Goode (1969), and Harries-Jenkins (1970) are also cornerstone works in the sociology of professions, particularly with regard to the characteristics of the "American" linear professional continuum. Carr-Sanders and Wilson (1933) outlined a general framework for the study of professions in the United Kingdom, listing an eclectic mix of professions starting with lawyers and doctors and ending with authors, artists and brokers. Some of the more interesting professions studied were midwives, masseurs, mine managers, and biophysical assistants. The purpose of their study was to review various occupations that claimed the title *profession* and those occupations that adopted some of the notable characteristics of the ancient professions. Carr-Sanders and Wilson used a well bounded qualitative case study approach. The themes resulted in a somewhat consistent set of parameters that have been used to characterize professions to the present day.

Carr-Sanders and Wilson discovered that the term *profession* holds different meanings for different occupational groups; to draw an arbitrary line between professions and non-professions would have only increased the complexity of the study of professions. This view appears to be firmly held into the present day. Carr-Sanders and Wilson also suggested that professionalism is best regarded as a professional matrix made up

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of a myriad of professional characteristics. The “ancient professions” of lawyers and doctors, for instance, landed in the center of the matrix while all the other occupations landed in and around the center, depending on the number of professional characteristics the occupation expressed (Carr-Sanders & Wilson, 1933). The matrix view appears to have been proposed prior to the linear continuum model adopted later by American sociologists, particularly Greenwood (1957) and Goode (1957, 1961, 1969). Nonetheless, these works illustrate how the professions, regardless of their relevant position in society, land somewhere on the professional matrix or continuum. Social status is determined tacitly by society and not necessarily by the position the occupation holds in the matrix itself.

The prominent themes that emerged in the Carr-Sanders & Wilson study were that professions are typically characterized by: (1) long-term and specialized training, such as certification programs and continuing education programs; (2) service to the community, such as educational seminars on topics of specialization; (3) honor codes, such as a professional code of ethics; (4) establishment of professional associations, such as the Society of Research Administrators International and the National Council of University Research Administration; (5) control of access to the field, such as an entrance exam or bar exam; (6) a specialized body of knowledge, such as law or medicine; (7) and an acknowledgement that occupations within bureaucracies (or public life) can be considered professions to a certain degree on the matrix.

Also, it is important to note that Carr-Sanders and Wilson spent a considerable amount of time studying the significance of a profession’s relationship to the public, and the responsibilities that go with it.

This notion is relevant because research administrators have a responsibility to protect an extremely broad client-stakeholder base. Although Carr-Sanders and Wilson might have disagreed that research administrators have a direct responsibility to the public, the United States taxpayers actively provide funding, and research administrators are obligated to be good stewards of these funds.

Parsons (1939), an American contemporary of Carr-Sanders and Wilson, appears to have been one of the first of the prominent sociologists to demonstrate the importance of the behavioral process of the professions within the entire social structure. Parsons was very interested in the motivation behind the people in the professions, and studied whether these people were self-serving or truly dedicated to service without self-interest. Parsons was concerned with human action and the struggle between egoism and altruism. For instance, businessmen have often been associated with the ego and professional men (doctors and lawyers) with altruism, but Parsons felt it was difficult to separate altruistic behavior from selfish motivation because, after all, the professions command more compensation than other occupations.

Although not stated explicitly, Parsons did not deny the philosophical frameworks of the social influences on a profession’s behavior. He noted that rational behavior is affected by day-to-day patterns of interactions; these patterns were not necessarily a single human function, but the function of society’s nuances. He contended that the professions are under “subtle social pressures” to behave a certain way or “ways and means” (p. 459).

The relevant themes to emerge in Parsons’ work were that professions: (1) are controlled by social control mechanisms

and technical competence for the sake of the client; (2) act on a certain level of authority afforded by society, (3) typically have a high level of specialized technical competence; (4) are considered professional in a bureaucratic structure, in the sense of power and authority wielded over others within the organization and within society and, therefore, must carry some level of social control; and (5) must sacrifice their own needs for the sake of the client's needs, no matter who he or she may be. The themes at this stage of the literature begin to take form with some overlapping identifiers, particularly with regard to the development of the factors that comprise the professional "ideal of service" (Goode, 1969).

Greenwood (1957) noted that a profession is an organized group that functions continuously in society on an "informal or formal" basis and forms its own subculture within the larger society. With this comes the responsibility of self-regulation. Greenwood noted five themes of the professions which appear to have been a distillation of Parsons' notion of professionalism: (1) a systematic theory, (2) authority, (3) community sanction, (4) ethical codes, and (5) a culture. These characteristics serve as a litmus test for demonstrating a profession's position within the system. The study of research administrators must also consider these parameters because research administration possesses all five of these attributes.

Greenwood (1957) seemed to agree with the Carr-Sanders and Wilson (1933) determination that clear-cut classifications were a near impossibility and that occupations exist on a continuum. Greenwood appeared to be the first to propose the linear continuum that placed the prominent, highly skilled professions at one end, with the lesser-skilled occupations relegated to a lesser scope of contribution. It is interesting to note, too, that Carr-Sanders

and Wilson envisioned a professional matrix or sphere, while Greenwood equated skill with social class.

Relevant to the study of research administration is Greenwood's (1957) discussion of codes of ethics, which he said are "explicit, systematic, and binding [and] possess more altruistic overtones and are more public service oriented" (p. 51). Parsons also mentioned professional codes, and Greenwood further noted that professional associations influenced the members of the profession. Research Administration has followed this path. There are two prominent professional associations governing the practice of research administration, the Society of Research Administrators International (SRA) and the National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA).

Goode (1957) set out to define the theoretical limits of professionalism for a research agenda, and appears to have had the greatest impact on the field of the sociology of the professions in the later years. Goode was concerned with the relationship between "contained communities" and the larger society, noting that professions were in and of themselves small communities that can have an effect on the larger society. The contained community that the research administration subculture follows is within the complex university organization set in the inseparable research system. Goode was most concerned with (1) "socialization and social control, and (2) client choice or evaluation of the professional" (p. 194), both of which are relevant to a study of research administration given the broad client base and the stakeholders involved.

Goode (1957) noted that the "community of profession" is characterized by: (1) a collective sense of identity, (2) a very low attrition from the practice, (3) a sharing of

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a common value system, (4) an established set of roles, (5) a common esoteric language, (6) power over other members, (7) limits that are primarily social limits, and (8) strict monitoring of the entry of members into the community. Vaughn (1990) later asserted that these characteristics also carry with them the characteristics of isolation, monitoring, and masking of control. To explain this further, he noted that the *Challenger* disaster was marked by a lack of information sharing between professional groups.

Goode (1957) also contended that society as a whole tends to create the need for a specific profession. For instance, he asserted that increased industrialization resulted in the need for a new set of knowledge and skills, and that communities developed around these needs. Applying this approach to research administration, if a societal field becomes research-oriented, it depends increasingly on professional skills centered on the management of research. Given this specialization of knowledge, the professions have an opportunity to take unfair advantage of the larger communities in which they function, but one of the hallmarks of professionalism is the denying of self for the sake of the common good. Philosophically, this does not mean that professionals are typically more virtuous than non-professionals, but as Goode noted, the attitude toward exploitation serves to increase or decrease the status of the profession as a whole. During the socialization process of the most prominent professions, Goode said, new recruits are informed of the punishments or sanctions that would befall non-professional behavior.

Goode's (1957) work is defined by the importance of larger societal influences as well as the influences within the professional community: "[I]n its bid for respect from the larger society, the professional

community must justify each provision in its [formal or informal] code of ethics or etiquette by invoking ethical notions that are also accepted by the larger society, even when certain provisions seem to the lay eye at least potentially exploitative" (p. 197). Professional bureaucrats, however, are controlled by the bureaucracy, the larger society or system, and professional associations. Advancement and prominence are directly proportional to the level of professional behavior and success.

In 1960, Goode expanded his eight-point professional continuum to 10 points to address the aspirations of psychologists and other emerging professions to be recognized as professions. He noted that specialization is a process by which a profession must: (1) determine standards of training, such as certification councils; (2) possess an extensive socialization process, such as medical or law school; (3) possess a licensure process, like the bar exam or medical exam; (4) control the licensing of members of the profession, such as a state board of medical licensure; (5) shape legislation by members of the profession; (6) increase prestige to the best students, such as strict admissions processes; (7) be free of lay control; (8) have a set of norms enforced by the profession; (9) have members who identify strongly with the profession, and (10) have the characteristic of long-term service in the profession by members (in particular, medicine).

Clearly, the literature focused on socialization, referent group expectations, and society's needs. Goode (1960) noted that all these characteristics are dependent on one another, and each serves to benefit the client and the profession. Inherent denial of self-interest or disinterestedness was developed as the cornerstone perspective of professionalism. The development of the professional continuum by Goode was in

flux at this stage, but by calling attention to the interdependence of the traits, Goode set the stage for further distillation of the traits, which all appeared to have socialization as the underlying construct of the transmission of professional behavior to the rest of the group and into the organizations in which they work.

The literature on professions reached new maturation when Etzioni (1969) set out to extend the sociology of professions among some “new” or emergent professions. The use of the term semi-professions -- with no apologies toward those who might belong in a semi-profession -- was coined as: “A group of new professions whose claim to the status of doctors and lawyers is neither fully established nor fully desired” (p. v). Scholars at this stage appear to hold tight to their classification and class notions. Etzioni admitted that by introducing study of the semi-professions, by default, one must consider the organization and its environment. As a practical matter, most of the semi-professionals he studied were employed by some kind of organization. By classifying these as “semi-profession” and their position within society, Etzioni highlighted the fact that organizations cannot be ignored in the development of behaviors among professions themselves. He maintained that some of the semi-professions that aspire to the status of physicians would never achieve that status because they lack strict controls to the entry of the professions and many do not stay in the field as long as physicians. Etzioni’s approach is extremely rigid. It is not suggested here that research administration should control the entry and exit of members. A study should first be done to determine if people believe this would damage research administration or help it.

Goode (1969) contributed to Etzioni’s discussion, and proposed the theoretical

limits of professionalization. It is here that Goode distilled his prior work on professions into two “generating” traits: (1) professions possess a basic body of abstract knowledge and (2) professions profess an ideal of service. Society and its organizations influence the ideal of service within a professional community, and that ideal of service should naturally be geared toward protecting those served. As discussed in the institutional context, this concept includes what have come to be known as stakeholders.

Academic life supports skepticism; the study of professionalism did not go without effective criticism. Bucher and Strauss (1961) theorized that classifying professions and their “fit” into society relative to class was limited. Wilensky (1964) argued effectively in their favor. Moore (1970) proposed that dividing occupations into the category of “professional” and “non-professional” is too “rigid in view of otherwise interesting ranges of variation” (p. 5). Abbott (1988) synthesized the study of occupations and personnel into a systems approach, again bringing in the inescapable organizational factor.

Bucher and Strauss (1961) proposed a study of the professions that more closely resembles a process. Their work led to a call for more study into the “arenas,” or organizations, as an important area of the professions: “[organizations or institutions] constitute the arenas where [professional] roles are forged and developed” (p. 333). In other words, professions do not work in a vacuum but must be molded by the influence of organizations and society, and this serves to develop different specializations and different segments within the profession, each with different sets of parameters. The elements of specialization are important to the study of research administrators, both because of the complex organization within

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which they work and because of the complex environment with which they interact. Research administrators have begun segmentation into pre-award and post-award specialists, institutional review board and compliance administrators, technology transfer officers, and contracts negotiators. Also, as professions become specialized and segmented, the fate of a person's career or occupation is explicitly tied to the professional segment (Bucher & Strauss, 1961).

Indeed, Wilensky in 1964 predicted that future studies of professionalism would have to take into account the lives of professionals working in organizations. He concluded that the notion of an "ideal of service" belonging to an exclusive class was a "sociological romance." On the other hand, he asserted the importance of following professional norms, noting that administrators must naturally increase their "professional" competence and standards. Moore (1970) commented that professionalism was a phenomenon of modernization and economic growth. He seemed to reduce the study of professionalism to a kind of legitimization strategy more than a classification scheme, but it was nonetheless a way to achieve increased status in society -- a view held strongly by others (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991; Myer & Rowan, 1977, and Scott, 2001, 2003).

Moore (1970) noted:

Just as representatives of occupations seeking enhancement of collective status have devoted much time and energy to the enterprise, so academic scholars have devoted uncounted hours to the definition and characterization of profession. Neither form of activity can be dismissed out of hand as entirely wasteful or inconsequential, though some of it undoubtedly is. (p. 4)

By this measure, Moore set out to demystify the classification method as the sole method of studying the professions. Classification methods, it seems, were beginning to lose favor among scholars. Moore proposed that professions progress along a scale rather than a continuum of attributes because the mere attainment of attributes is not an entirely accurate test to apply to a human being who might hold some inherent virtue. In other words, "professional" acting people work in certain occupations that might not be considered professional on the continuum or matrix; yet, these individuals exhibit more professional behavior than some individuals who actually do occupy certifiably distinct professions. Echoing Bucher and Strauss (1961), Moore (1970) suggested that scholars focus equally on the professional process so that the particular "strategies" toward attaining professional status are not ignored. This is a classic example of a scholar making sure all of the variables are accounted for so that the picture of reality is not skewed one way or the other.

Moore's (1970) professional scale, therefore, followed a more inclusive pattern: (1) professionals are full time workers, and this work is the sole source of income; (2) professionals are distinguished by distinctive good behavior; (3) professionals create professional associations; (4) professionals have specialized training; (5) professionals have a definite service orientation; and (6) professionals are distinguished by autonomy. It is important to note that Moore did not believe that these traits had equal value and that many occupations exhibited these traits in one form or another along his scale.

Moore (1970) noted that having a set of norms is a distinguishing factor in and of itself, and society notices these norms whether they are formal or informal. These boundaries exist and influence behavior both inside and outside the profession,

whatever occupation it may be. In other words, the professionalization process most likely creates in each member of the profession a special identity, and this sense of identity is at its most powerful when professional associations gather to discuss the concerns of their field. Moore provided a turning point in the study of the professions, urging scholars to stop creating the perfect classification scheme and to begin understanding the mechanisms involved in becoming a “professional” actor in society. As for the study of professions within organizations, Harries-Jenkins (1970) stated:

The professional of today is often a salaried employee, performing his activities within the structural framework of a bureaucratic hierarchy, in occupations as diverse as teaching, government, social welfare, medicine and industrial management. [H]e participates in two distinct, irreconcilable systems. He is a member of two institutions – the profession and the organization. Each attempts to control his occupational activities, and the manner in which the former establishes the norms for the conduct of the professional activities, contrasts with the way the latter specifies task objectives. (p. 53)

Abbott (1988) noted that the term “profession” had lost much of its glamour in the literature, with signs that inclusiveness and postmodern thought had begun to weaken studies focused specifically on social status and social structure. Although these notions are still important, the term profession has come to mean more of a mode of behavior than an occupational status. Abbott urged scholars to probe the “system of professions” and transcend some of the rigidity brought on by earlier approaches. In other words, just about any occupation can be a profession within

the system at a given point of time. The conditions of professionalism are contextual. Research administration does not need to prove its professional status, but simply understand how its professional mode of behavior is connected to its institutional system. As Abbott stated, “History is not a simple pattern of trends and development, but a complex mass of contingent forces” (p. 316).

Conclusions

The word “professional” has come to mean something more than doctor, lawyer, or professor. Professional means working within a defined field of knowledge with an attitude toward protecting the individuals who are dependent on the professional’s expert knowledge, clients and stakeholders. Expert knowledge is derived within the organization and organizations like it in the same business. Specialization promotes expert knowledge within the profession and within an organization. As we have seen, protecting the knowledge and the client are hallmarks of a true professional. Professional ethics, therefore, is an intrinsic characteristic of all those who would call themselves professional. With this specialization comes a diffusion of behaviors within the organization’s organizational chart and outside the chart down to the level of human-human interaction. The literature concerning the sociology of professions answered this question very well and brought the organization back in. This is satisfying to the institutional theorist who has fundamental problems with studying a group as if it were isolated from the influences of the rest of society. Physicians and attorneys, the classic professions found in “private practice,” are influenced by factors in the broader society even when these professionals operate apart from a complex organization such as the

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university. Managed care has demonstrated its effects on professional behavior. After Abbott (1988) urged sociologists to move beyond the study of professions in isolation, empirical studies seem to wane or lose favor

among sociologists as indicated by the lack of any new studies in the major publications. Perhaps research administration should revisit these theories for solid grounding.

Figure 1. The proposed model of research administration normative behavior. (Atkinson, 2006)

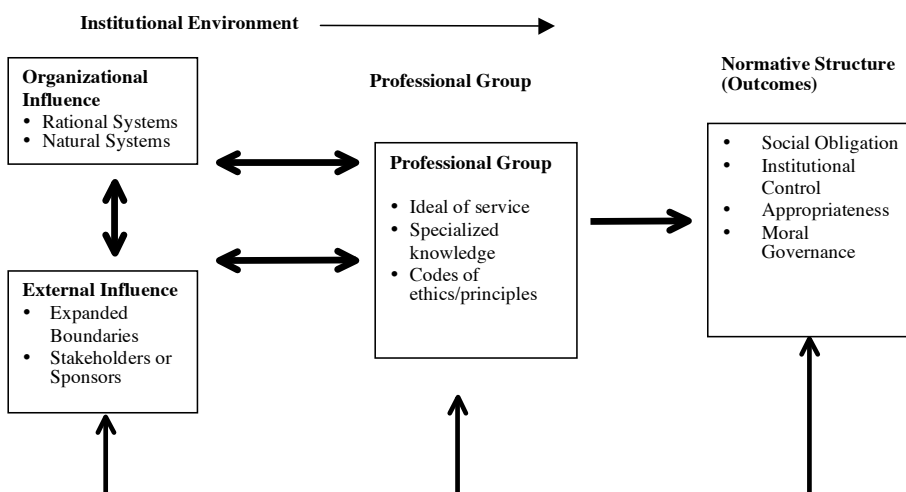


Figure 1 brings the organization and its environment back in to thinking about research administration. An explanation of these dimensions is presented in Table 1. The model proposes that factors in the research environment, the institution, and the professional associations dictate how research administrators respond to issues. In turn, a simple behavioral structure emerges that demonstrates the overall organizational structures encountered as research administrators perform their role. The model is comprised of elements in the organization's operating environment and the professional group, all acting to produce a behavioral structure. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) noted that this is a continual process of becoming like-minded, where the environmental factors and the

professions behave the way they behave and eventually the whole group acts this way without any noticeable effort. The organizational influences are those day to day organizational structures, such as bureaucracies, formal lines of authority and rules and regulations (Scott, 2003). Natural systems are also at play in the organization, which is where we create our own goals by meeting together, examining our own desires and needs, even if these desires counter the desires of the rest of the organization. It is within this natural system that innovation occurs, expanding the boundaries of the university, allowing in the culture, informal norms, networks, and differentiated goals, all serving to construct the norms in the environment (Scott, 2003). These processes are illustrated by Table 1.

Table 1. The Dimensions of Influence on Research Administrator Behavior (Atkinson 2006)

	Variables	Definitions
<i>Institutional Environment (Complex Research System)</i>		
<u>Organizational Influence on Behavior</u>		
Rational Social Structures	Authority systems, hierarchies, routines	Conformity to the principles, policies and procedures of the organization.
Natural Systems	Values, expectations	Conformity to the informal expectations of the organization.
<u>External Influence on Norms (Sponsors and Community)</u>		
Boundary Spanning	Protection of organizational boundaries.	Respect for the organization's boundaries during negotiations.
Stakeholders	Response to external demands.	Respect for sponsor's boundaries and demands during contract or grant negotiations.
	Responsibility to protect individuals in the organization's realm of influence	Respect for community research participants and the research sponsors.
<u>Professional Group (University Research Administrators)</u>		
Ideal of service	Responsibility to clients/stakeholders	Duty to protect internal and external clients.
Specialized knowledge	Control of normative processes	Duty to communicate rules and regulations both internally and externally and changes to those rules.
Codes of ethics/principles	Ethical responsibility to the organization and society	Duty to avoid conflicts of interest. Duty to represent the institution accurately.

At the same time, there are external influences constructing norms (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, 2003). The organization expands its boundaries, examines expectations of stakeholders, and finally makes decisions about whether to adopt or reject these behaviors into the organization proper (Donaldson & Preston, 1999; Scott, 2003). One cannot ignore that the professions are also responsible for creating and communicating behavioral structures in the environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 1991; Goode, 1960; Moore, 1970). In the end, a model appears that is not the product of any one individual group, but of the combination of all these factors. The outcomes of studies of research administration should be considered to represent some aspects of social obligation, appropriateness, moral governance (Scott, 2003), and in many respects a philosophy of following the norms (Deverterre, 2002).

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