



Research development professionals use their scientific expertise and soft skills to help faculty members get funding and push research forward.

Being the Enabler

By [Maggie Kuo](#) Oct. 17, 2016 , 11:00 AM

Jennifer Reininga-Craven admits to being nervous when she accepted a job in the [research development office](#) at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, North Carolina, where up to that time she had been working as a postdoctoral researcher in genetics. Along with the anxieties of starting a position with day-to-day tasks quite different from the bench work she was accustomed to, she was worried that, as an administrator, she would not contribute to societal goals as meaningfully as she would as a researcher.

Now, 5 years after making the transition, she's never looked back. The job is the perfect outlet, she found: Every day, she helps make cutting-edge science happen.

So, what is research development?



Jennifer Reininga-Craven

Courtesy of Jennifer Reininga-Craven

Research development professionals like Reininga-Craven help faculty members at their institutions get research funding. They stay up to date with calls for proposals from funding organizations and tell principal investigators (PIs) about funding opportunities that are appropriate for them. They edit grant proposals to make sure the text is clear, the concepts are explained accessibly, and the content addresses the themes of the grant. For large team-based interdisciplinary grants that include several PIs—which many funding bodies are becoming increasingly interested in—they act as project managers, guiding the team through the application process and making sure everything and everyone is on track.

Research development officers also take a big-picture view of the research activities at their institutions so that they can identify potential collaboration opportunities between PIs who may not know each other and connect them. Another part of this work involves acting as a translator when introducing groups from different fields, says [Casandra Rauser](#), who does a lot of this big-picture thinking and matchmaking as director of the Sustainable LA Grand Challenge project at the University of California (UC), Los Angeles. It's similar to translating between languages, she jokes. She often has to chime in to the conversation with "I think what they mean is" and rephrase it so that researchers from other disciplines can understand.

For some scientists, working in research development is an appealing way to continue exploring their scientific interests and apply the soft skills they developed in previous jobs. Reininga-Craven, for example, was attracted to research development because she enjoys the opportunity to see disciplines interface in new ways. [Gretchen Kiser](#), who worked as an industry scientist and a research lab consultant before going into research development, found the field to be the "perfect fit" because it combined the management skills she picked up during her time in industry and the inquiry-based environment of academia, which she missed during her time away.

Although scientists in research development are not driving the science themselves, they find immense satisfaction in being part of the effort to make it happen. Kiser, now director of UC San Francisco's research development office, recalls the first grant she worked on there: a tobacco regulation grant sponsored by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the National Institutes of Health. With [the awarded funds](#), her institution is working to provide scientific evidence to help the FDA regulate tobacco use more effectively. "I get to be part of enabling that," Kiser says, "and that's very rewarding." When [Peg AtKisson](#), a neuroscience Ph.D. who has been in research

development for 15 years, thinks about the number of grants she has helped get funded, she says, “I probably had more impact on science doing research development than I ever would have had if I had stayed in bench research.”

If this all sounds appealing, you’re in luck: More and more institutions are establishing research development offices or expanding existing offices to adapt to the increasingly competitive funding environment, according to veterans in the field. Over her years in research development, AtKisson has seen top-tier research institutions shift from believing that their faculty doesn’t need help writing grants to recognizing that, no matter how talented their faculty members are, funding is “so hypercompetitive that they need all the help that they can get,” she says. What this means for job-hunting Ph.D.s is more opportunities and more hiring, says [Paul Frankel](#), a grants and contracts officer at the University of Utah College of Pharmacy in Salt Lake City.



Paul Frankel
Ashley Malili

And, more institutions are looking specifically for people with scientific training to fill these positions, Frankel notes. When he started in research development in 2014, he says, the institution wanted someone with a scientific background who was not only familiar with the grant application process, but also knew what it’s like being a PI—for example, understanding the desire to include the most current preliminary data or recognizing that a professor’s schedule includes various responsibilities, such as managing lab personnel and teaching. He was a good match, he believes, because of his academic research background in pharmacology and his experience as a research professor at that institution.

Salaries start around \$50,000 and can go up to about \$120,000 for the most senior positions,

with Ph.D. holders tending to earn more than nondoctorates, according to a [survey](#) presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the [National Organization of Research Development Professionals](#).

Winning traits

Working in research development requires a broad suite of skills. In addition to being able to write well, you need to be a good technical editor—which means understanding the scientific concepts enough to not change the meaning when editing. Research development officers often cover a wide range of topics, so you need to be comfortable working in scientific fields outside your own: [Joanna Downer](#), associate dean of research development at Duke University School of

Medicine, notes that in 7-and-a-half years of working in the area, she has yet to work on a grant involving her Ph.D. discipline, chemistry.

Research development professionals frequently juggle multiple projects, so strong organizational skills are another must. And it's critical that you're able to handle deadlines, Downer says. Grant deadlines are firm, and there are often several grants due on the same date. "It's not enough to be calm under pressure," she says. "You really need to be able to up your game under pressure." That means being willing to do whatever needs to be done to get the grant out on time and at high quality, Downer says. People skills are also important, Frankel adds. You interact with a lot of people, and you have to be able to work with all types of personalities, he says.

This may sound like a lot of requirements, but as scientists now working in the field note, your research experience prepares you well. You're familiar with the demands of academic research and the grant application process. You're comfortable reading technical documents and learning and synthesizing information quickly. Plus, you're likely to have picked up at least some of the soft skills that are needed for the job, such as meeting deadlines and working well with others.

So, when it comes to applying and interviewing for these types of jobs, the important thing is to describe how the skills you acquired during your research experience translate specifically to research development, Rauser advises. For instance, having published a paper with multiple other authors or coordinating a symposium can be used as examples of successfully working with others. Highlighting your relevant experience will not only show that you're qualified; it will also demonstrate that you've put thoughtful consideration into your career choice, Rauser says. This is important, she adds, because when she hires new staff to support her office's research development activities, she looks for applicants with a genuine interest in the field, not people who see it as a second-choice option.

Challenges of the job

Even though going into the administrative side of academic research is a logical move for some Ph.D. holders, the job still presents some challenges. For one thing, starting out can be slow—which was a surprise for Reininga-Craven. "I thought I would hit the ground running," she says. But, even though she had an interdisciplinary background, handling the range of science the office covered and expanding her expertise beyond experimental science, which was her research area, to include clinical sciences had steep learning curves, she says.



Casandra Rauser
Jazmin Barajas

The job also doesn't escape the work-life balance challenges that are common in academia. Because of the on-call, deadline-driven environment, many scientists in research development work late nights and weekends when grants are due. Rauser says her schedule follows the hours of the faculty members and researchers she is supporting, so it's not clock-in clock-out 9-to-5 days. Guilt from not spending enough time on personal life often conflicts with guilt from not working enough, she says, but "I try to be disciplined about both commitments, and I've learned over the years the importance of saying 'no,' asking for help when I need it, and practicing self-care." On the upside, her schedule is flexible, and she has control over when she comes in and leaves work.

Leaving the science routine is also hard for some scientists. As a graduate student, you think about, for example, what site on a protein is being phosphorylated, AtKisson says. But as a research development professional, it's no longer your job to think about science at that level of detail, she continues. "That was a hard thing to let go." Kiser misses designing and planning experiments and diving into data, she says. But, she has found opportunities to continue that scientific inquiry process, for example by conducting studies on best practices for managing groups. "It's not that I have to leave my potential to do research behind; it's just a different kind of research that I'm looking at," Kiser says. Plus, through the diversity of new research ideas that she gets involved in, she gets to see the "cool science that's being developed," she says. That "feeds the science geek in me."

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