Research Administration Job Families

Insights from Tufts University (Tufts)

and University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV)

Introduction

Agenda: Case studies of Tufts and UTRGV. Benefits and challenges of two approaches to research administration job ladders.

Objective: Share tools and processes used by Tufts and UTRGV for managing research administration jobs in a competitive environment, both with and without formal research administration job families.

Presenters

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Job Retention
Why it is important for Research Administration

Research Administration professionals are necessary to maintain and support increase of research capacity within their organizations

- Research Administration is a challenging job:
  - constant pressure of deadlines
  - ever-evolving knowledge base due to changing research policies

- Retention is key to retaining institutional knowledge

- Understaffed offices lead to employee burn out.

Research Administration Job Retention
- some internal and external factors driving higher FTE turnover rate

- 'Great Resignation' tied to the pandemic
  - Or... the 'Great Reshuffle'

- Employees are often motivated by a positive work environment
  - Wanting to feel like work has a meaningful impact and aligns with personal values while allowing to maintain a healthy lifestyle outside of work
  - Work/life balance is more important.
  - The "what" and now must also include a meaningful "why"

- Remote /hybrid work options open more opportunities to move without moving

- Entry level employees often do not have long tenures (around 2 years), and are frequently looking for the 'next thing'
  - Employees must move "up" or move "out" to find their path.

Poll Question: Career Advancement

Question: Do you (or does your staff) have a clear understanding of career paths in research administration?

- Options:
  - Yes, it is clear what skills and experience are needed to progress
  - Occasionally, there is a feeling of being stuck
 - No, There is not a clear path to progress
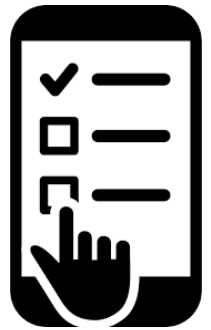
What are Job Families?

- **Definition of Job Families:** Organizing related job positions within an organization.
  - Based on similarities of job functions, skill sets, and the nature of the work performed.
- **Structure of Job Families:** Can be highly structured or less formal.
  - Less formal set of guidelines may exist for multiple career ladders in a single job family.
- **Importance in Research Administration:** Facilitates career progression, additional knowledge/education, and skill alignment.

Poll Question

- **Question:** Does your institution have formal job families / career ladders?

- Options for Answers:
  - Yes
  - No
  - Unsure
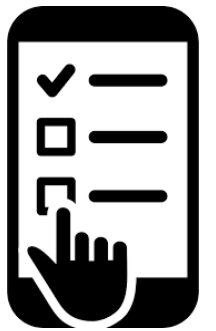
Tufts Case Study - Background

Tufts Overview:

- Tufts is a private mid-sized university founded in 1852

- > $247 million in research expenditures in FY23 (HERD); member of Association of American Universities (AAU); institution with very high research activity (classified by the former Carnegie classification as an R-1)

- 10 schools with 4 campuses spanning the greater Boston, Massachusetts area.

Research Administration at Tufts:

- ~90 staff in research administration jobs, including central and local

- Pre-Award reports to VPR, Post-Award reports to Finance, matrix reporting for school-based staff.

Tufts Research Administration Job Family – established in 2015, enhanced in 2019

Six positions:

- Research Administration Coordinator (entry level, hourly)
- Research Administrator-I
- Research Administrator-II
- Senior Research Administrator
- Research Administration Associate Director
- Research Administration Director.

Except for Coordinator, all positions are exempt

The Associate Director and Director roles have supervisory duties.

Tufts RA Job Family: Implementation

Competencies-based job descriptions Using Korn Ferry Leadership Architect™ Framework:

- Selected competencies required to successfully perform the role from 38 core competencies grouped into several factors available in the framework
- Designated a weighted score for each competency, based on the organizational values and vision, then chose relevant ones.

Involvement of HR:

- HR-facilitated focus groups to create job profiles and competencies
- Recommendations for recruitment and talent sourcing strategies
- Updated university-wide pay ranges for positions within the research administration job family.

Tufts RA Job Family: Benefits

- Clarity of responsibilities at the different levels within the job family
- Common vocabulary, perspective, and consistency of expectations across units.

Hiring process:
- Having standard job descriptions expedites posting new positions
- Interview worksheet and questions that use the competencies in the framework are available to hiring managers.

Career mobility and retention improvement:
- Staff can seamlessly apply for positions at the next level of seniority if vacancies open outside of their unit.

Access and permissions in the university systems:
- All positions with the same title have the same job code.

More effective identification of training needs:
- Easy to know how many staff are at each level across the university.

Tufts RA Job Family: Challenges

Balancing Seniority Levels:
- Periodic pushback that there is not another position level between Sr RA and Associate Director
- Occasional pushback to have Sr RA perform manager duties (not allowed by our job family).

Cost Considerations:
- Increased costs but greater parity in compensation.

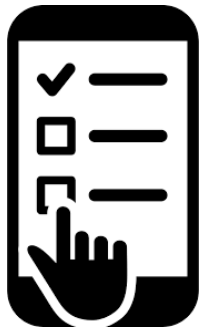**HR's Role in Sustaining the System:**
- Crucial. Ensuring alignment across decentralized units.
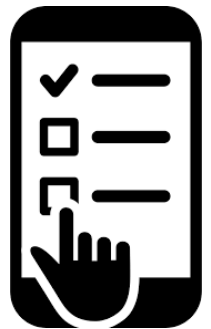
Poll Question

Promotion and Career Growth

- **Question:** Would you prefer a system with more levels of seniority or fewer, clearly defined ones?

- Options for Answers:
    - More levels for incremental growth
    - Fewer levels with clearer distinctions between roles.
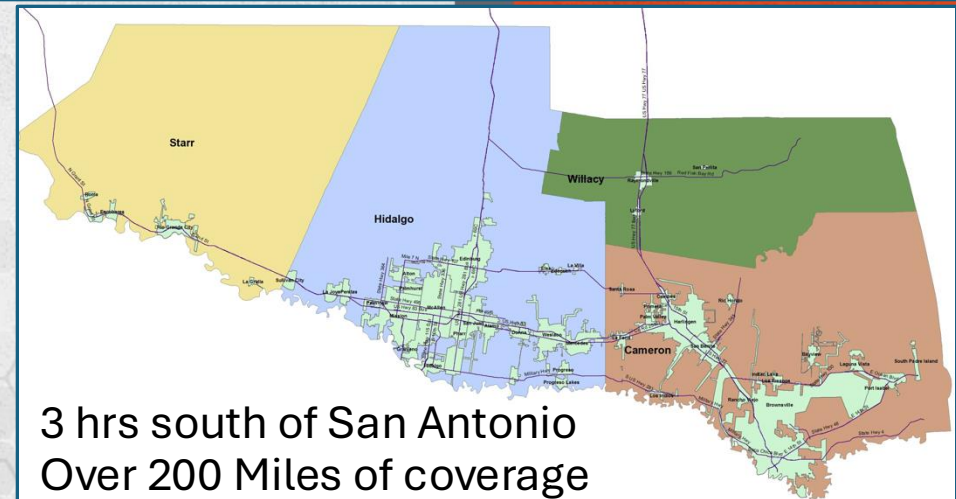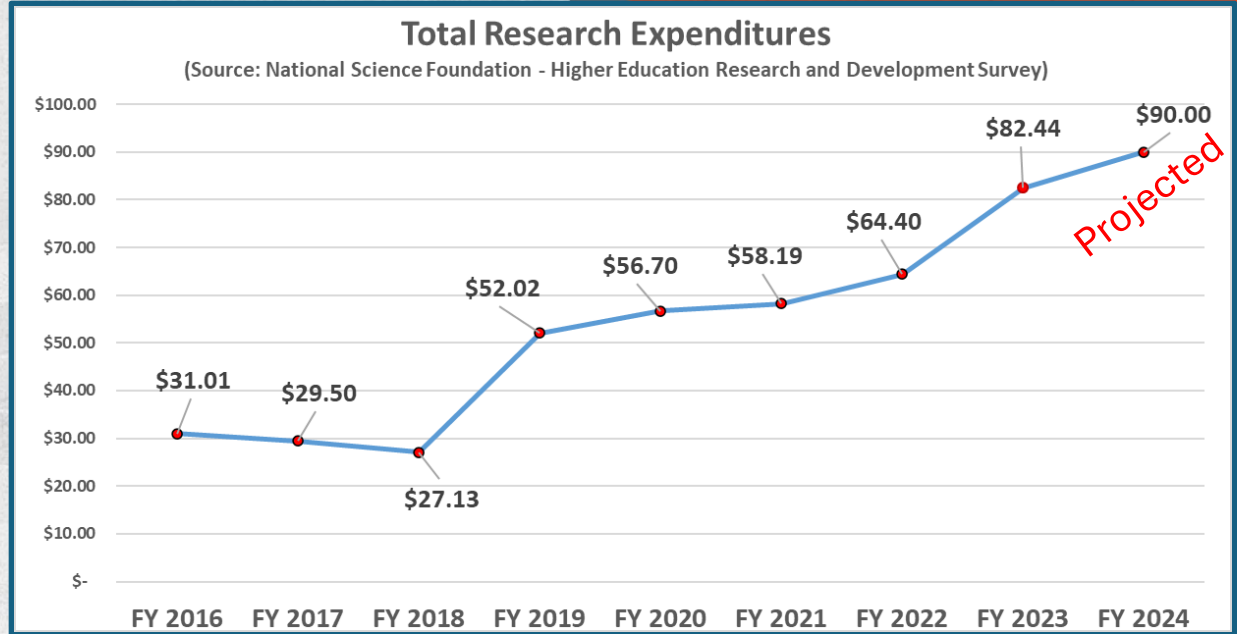
UTRGV Case Study - Background

UTRGV Overview: A newer institution with rapidly growing research expenditures.

- Created by the Texas Legislature in 2013

- Two legacy institutions, UT Pan American and UT Brownsville, plus a new School of Medicine.

- Enrolled its first class in Fall 2015, and School of Medicine started in Summer 2016.

Research Administration development:
Adding research to the university mission in 2020

- Goals:
- Emerging Research Status (ERU)
- Carnegie R1
- Community Impact

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Total Research Expenditures
(Source: National Science Foundation - Higher Education Research and Development Survey)

FY 2016: $31.01
FY 2017: $29.50
FY 2018: $27.13
FY 2019: $52.02
FY 2020: $56.70
FY 2021: $58.19
FY 2022: $64.40
FY 2023: $82.44
FY 2024: $90.00 (Projected)

3 hrs south of San Antonio
Over 200 Miles of coverage

Operational Metrics: From Effort to Outcomes

Metrics	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
1. No. of Proposals Submitted	82	602	505	467	425	454
2. No. of Awards Received	27	257	247	263	200	201
3. Restricted Research Expenditures	$2,643,014	$42,640,123	$42,412,698	$27,389,198	$24,192,826	$23,139,021
4. Total Research Expenditures	$7,490,034	$86,902,473	$78,777,880	$60,739,921	$54,298,634	$53,663,366
5. No. of Faculty on Proposals	121	416	359	343	234	226
6. No. of Faculty on Awards	39	223	206	227	170	145
7. No. of Faculty with Sponsored Project Expenditures	261	377	347	326	227	221
8. No. of Faculty with Restricted Research Expenditures	182	240	212	194	118	111
9. Total Requested Amount	$77,201,159	$777,617,028	$460,840,450	$384,882,343	$388,270,238	$380,168,209
10. Total Funded Amount	$7,111,471	$200,130,228	$98,789,747	$97,222,150	$254,623,853	$124,215,997

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HR Opportunities at UTRGV

- **Collaborative HR Partnership:** Supporting hiring, job postings, and onboarding.

- **Customized Job Families:** 49 job descriptions, some generic, some specific.

- **Flexibility in Roles:** Adapting to research needs but without strict career ladders.

- **Large Population:** 1.4 Million local population and over 34,000 students

Sample Job Family
Pre-Award Manager
Sr. Research Services Coordinator
Research Services Coordinator
Research Services Associate

UTRGV Case Study - Example

- Student was hired as a student worker in Division of Research

- Student was hired directly out of a Bachelor of Business into Junior Coordinator Role at UTRGV

- After 3 years was promoted to Senior Coordinator

- Sought and completed MBA degree and CRA

- No direct line of promotion as manager and director were occupied

- Supervisor and HR worked to identify opportunities in Division of Research

- Candidate was given opportunities to demonstrate needed skills

- Candidate applied for and was hired for Manager in Office of Compliance

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HR/Research Challenges at UTRGV

• **Balancing Flexibility and Structure:** Flexible roles, and non-standard naming, can limit career advancement and confuse career pathing for staff.

• **Collaborative HR and Research Efforts:** Ensuring roles fit research needs while **maintaining internal equity**.

• **Leadership Changes:** Leadership changes during the early days of the Division of Research did not allow for the needed attention to review job roles

• **Starts & Restarts** during the growth of the university

• **Population:** Large population, but few trained to support research administration which means we can't hire SMEs locally.
   •Internal growth is desirable and supported

Key Takeaways: Comparison of Tufts & UTRGV

We are different, but we have similar goals

• **Similarities:** Communication between research administration and Human Resources is frequent

• **Differences:** Formal job family vs. flexible approach

• **Success Factors:** Both are focused on talent acquisition, development, retention and organizational growth

• **Looking Forward:** Supporting the evolving nature of jobs in research administration and development of the profession

Thank you

Questions

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