

INVITED OPINION

# WHAT IS RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT?

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A NORD Invited Opinion Piece



## DEFINING RD

Multiple definitions of Research Development (RD) have been offered in peer-reviewed literature, gray literature, and in public settings by RD researchers and thought leaders.<sup>1 2 3 4 5</sup> Definitions often identify specific activities performed by RD professionals also referred to as RDevs, whereas the authors of this work offer the following definition of Research Development for the purpose of communicating with a broad audience: **Research Development is a function that seeks to grow research or increase the research reputation of an institution.** The authors find this description

<sup>1</sup> Research developers help “people formulate and finance their research” as the “pursuit of large and complex projects...requires money and commitment beyond what many individual researchers are able to galvanize. [Thus] Research-development professionals serve a critical role in guiding... efforts, and helping to forge teams that span disciplinary bounds and institutions” (Levin, 2011, para. 3).

<sup>2</sup> “RD professionals catalyze new research, enable interdisciplinary partnerships, facilitate research excellence, and support a culture of collaboration [...]. RD is a diverse profession driven by a multitude of needs and expertise” (Budescu and Walker, 2012, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> “Research development professionals use their scientific expertise and soft skills to help faculty members get funding and push research forward” (M. Kuo, 2016, p. 1).

<sup>4</sup> “Research development encompasses a set of strategic, proactive, catalytic, and capacity-building activities designed to facilitate individual faculty members, teams of researchers, and central research administrations in attracting extramural research funding, creating relationships, and developing and implementing strategies that increase institutional competitiveness” (NORDP, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> “Research development is the application of personal skill and insight, best-practice and theory from a variety of disciplines, and practical tools in interactive, organized patterns targeting preparation for and encouragement and support of investigations, planned interventions, and analysis of these processes for purpose” (Preuss, Eck et al., 2018).

sufficiently broad to capture the majority of activities RDers perform, reasonably succinct and devoid of jargon, and specific enough to distinguish RD from adjacent functions (e.g., research administration or foundation relations).

## CHALLENGES TO UNDERSTANDING RD

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Defining research development is one step in understanding what research development is.

Understanding RD can be challenging for three key reasons:

1. Many recognizable RD activities existed before the term “research development” was coined, a term which is still not universally adopted.
2. Individual job responsibilities of RDers and the function of RD offices vary based on institutional contexts, resources, and priorities.
3. RDers’ understanding and practice of research development have evolved over time and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

## EMERGENCE OF RD AND TERMINOLOGY

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RD as a profession emerged in the early 2000s when a few RDers realized their work was significantly different from the often compliance-driven realm of research administration. However, RD as a function, one that seeks to grow research or increase the research reputation of an institution, predates this emergence. For example, higher education leadership and faculty who have excelled in securing external research funding have either performed or directed the RD function themselves for decades. Consequently, RD is not always recognized as a distinct profession.

Identifying RD is further complicated by the plethora of terminology used for RD offices and in RDers’ professional titles. Strategic initiatives, proposal enhancement, sponsored research and foundation support, administrative, editorial, integration, and special research programs are a few of the terms used to describe RDers and RD offices (Preuss, Eck et al., 2018).

## COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN RD RESPONSIBILITIES

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The RD function within an institution can be structured many ways, e.g. in an institution-wide office, across multiple offices, or embedded within a larger, multi-function office (Spires, Michael J. “Types of Research Development Offices.” Forthcoming for NORD). Within an RD office, services and individuals may be organized by academic discipline, by activity, or in other ways. Furthermore, the focus and scope of one RDer or one RD office may represent only a slice of the overall RD function at the institution.

However, there are common activities performed by the majority of RDers regardless of title and institution. More than 70% of respondents to a 2017 survey of research development professionals and their responsibilities indicated that they support these four core RD characteristics: 1) find, match, or distribute funding opportunities; 2) provide proposal and award metrics; 3) facilitate collaborations between investigators; and 4) provide proposal development through workshop, editing and supporting large center-level proposals (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

Other activities are performed by fewer RDers but are still quintessentially part of the RD function. Differences in office structure, title, and individual responsibilities are a few of the reasons these activities are less frequently reported by respondents. For example, strategic planning for the research enterprise, identifying institutional research priorities, managing internal funding, organizing visits with program officers, and facilitating partnership with external entities are more likely to be performed by Directors or Executive Directors than Proposal Development Specialists or Grant Writers (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

## VISUALIZING RD

The four core characteristics noted above are central to the RD function, have existed since the establishment of RD, and will likely remain unchanged for years to come. However, other areas critical for RD are either not uniformly performed or only starting to emerge. The authors propose this figure as a visual representation of RD's common characteristics and other less common or emergent areas. The image of the flower allows us to highlight commonalities in the center, while the petals emphasize areas that typify RD and/or are specific to RD (though not necessarily exclusive to RD nor ubiquitously performed by all individuals, offices, or institutions with an RD function). The intent of this image is to depict varied aspects within the RD function. We acknowledge that an individual RDer may not incorporate every characteristic or area. It is our hope that the proposed definition and identified characteristics offer a frame to consolidated important aspects of RD and help foster productive discourse about how RD may continue advancing in the future.

### About the Flower Center

Each of the segments in the center are core characteristics shared by many RDers. These are the common activities performed by the majority of RDers regardless of title and institution. The authors include one core characteristic (Background) that we suggest applies to most RDers. Additionally, based on the 2017 survey of research development professionals and their responsibilities, more than 71% of respondents indicated that they support these four core characteristics (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

### **Background**

Refers to the concept that our experiences and expertise shapes the skills we bring to the RD role, as well as our understanding of and interactions with the world (Fisher, O'Rourke et al., 2015). This is particularly true for RDers, most (86%) of whom hold an advanced degree and have had experiences in disciplines outside of RD (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020). Awareness of our academic and experiential lenses is essential when working across multiple disciplines, something that further distinguishes RD from adjacent profession. RDers' awareness of their lenses may also lead to unique ways to enhance their



Figure 1. Visualizing RD

support of the RD function. Additionally, RDers are sometimes recruited specifically because they have a particular academic or professional background that can enhance the scope of RD activities. For example, an individual with a degree in English might be recruited to work with faculty in the humanities specifically.

### **Funding opportunities**

Refers to activities conducted in order to identify, disseminate, and suggest specific funding opportunities to individuals or groups of faculty based on known interests. Responsibilities may include searching on publicly available websites where opportunities are listed, searching in subscription-based search tools, training faculty and others to use available search tools, ethically acquiring early intelligence on funding opportunities yet to be published, assessing funding opportunity fit with an applicant's goals, and posting funding opportunities to a website or in a newsletter.

### **Facilitate collaborations**

Refers to activities aimed at spurring or strengthening faculty-to-faculty collaborations, typically interdisciplinary, as well as faculty-to-other personnel, depending on the goals of the initiative. Responsibilities may include recruiting participants, organizing events, making 1:1 introductions, and facilitating connections by identifying commonalities.

### **Proposal development**

Refers to a broad set of activities conducted in order to prepare a proposal for funding or a non-monetary honorific award. Responsibilities may include identifying key personnel, developing and maintaining a proposal development schedule, developing budgets, connecting the scientific team to institutional resources and data, rafting on-scientific portions of an application, collecting supplemental documents, negotiating cost share, developing figures, organizing reviews, revising and editing proposal documents, and preparing the submission package.

### **Success metrics**

Refers to capturing and monitoring proposal and award metrics as well as defining and capturing other types of success metrics. Responsibilities may include producing regular reports on proposals and awards, projecting future performance on proposal and award metrics, tracking outcomes of initiative within the RD function, such as institutionally-funded seed grants and mentoring programs, as well as defining and routinely capturing new metrics.

### **About the Flower Petals**

Each of the petals emphasize an area that typifies and/or is specific to the RD function.

### **Internal funding programs**

Refers to the management of internal funding programs. Internal funding programs vary in size and purpose. Some are intended for single investigators to generate preliminary data or pilot a new scientific approach, while others are intended to facilitate teaming with other disciplines or community partners. Internal funding programs may also be sprawling initiatives intended to engage a large swath of the university community. Responsibilities in managing internal funding programs may include drafting funding announcements for such programs, advertising the funding opportunity, hosting information sessions about the program and internal selection process, serving as program point of contact for questions and requests, recruiting reviewers, analyzing review information, selecting award recipients, collecting progress reports, and monitoring success in intended outcomes. In the 2017 survey of research development professionals and their responsibilities, 58% indicated that they manage or contribute to decisions regarding internal funding (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

### **Limited submissions**

Refers to identification, institutional management and, ultimately, applicant selection for funding opportunities that are institutionally-limited. Responsibilities within a limited submission program may include identifying which limited submission funding programs are priority for the institution, drafting internal application guidelines, advertising the funding opportunity, interfacing with sponsors regarding limit guidelines or process questions when necessary, hosting information sessions about the internal selection process, recruiting reviewers, analyzing review information, selecting applicants to proceed, issuing official Notices to Proceed, and monitoring their success in the resulting external submission. There is a NORDP Community of Practice for limited submission programs. In the 2017 survey of research development professionals and their responsibilities, 46% indicated that they coordinate the limited submission process (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

### **Awareness of and engagement in adjacent communities of practice**

As connectors, RDers are uniquely aware of and engage in adjacent professions and functions, including research administration, team science, research impact, corporate and foundation relations, government relations, faculty affairs, and clinical healthcare. This is exemplified by the Strategic Alliances Committee of NORDP which seeks to

establish relationships with external groups, such as Advancing Research Impact in Society (ARIS) and the Network of Academic Corporate Relations Officers (NACRO), that represent some of the aforementioned professions and functions.

### **Technical communication**

Refers to activities where RDers serve as intermediaries in the spaces between scientific, technical, formal, and public communication to help guide or enhance the clarity, utility, understanding, and impact of the information being shared. Responsibilities as they relate to technical communication may include drafting, revising, and summarizing policy and guidelines documents, writing reference guides on available resources, aggregating institutional information and drafting boilerplates for use in proposals, and using expertise with grant proposals as a genre of writing to serve as a nontechnical reviewer (Society for Technical Communication, 2021).

### **Networking**

Refers to RDers' roles as connectors who frequently create and maintain many types of networks that include RDers, faculty, partners, and support resources. These networks may be found within a single institution, geography, or span across the country and beyond. Networks may be formal or informal. Responsibilities may include recruiting members, organizing events, establishing a shared vision or goal, and implementing meaningful activities. In the 2017 survey of research development professionals and their responsibilities 61% indicated that they sponsor research-oriented gathering and events, and 53% indicated that they facilitate external partnerships (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

### **Training for grant seeking**

Refers to programs and informational sessions that utilize a variety of modalities, such as lunch-and-learns, workshops, bootcamps, or recorded webinars, to convey information about sponsors, funding opportunities, or new topics with the intent to improve awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to be successful in securing external funding. Responsibilities in offering training may include designing the curriculum, audience segmentation, advertising the training, leading workshops, providing feedback during bootcamps, evaluating attendees' satisfaction with and achievement of learning objectives, and managing past training records and resources for future use. In the 2017 survey of research development professionals and their

responsibilities, just under 71% indicated that they conduct grant writing workshops (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

### **Mentorship for grant seeking**

Refers to RD-to-faculty and faculty-to-faculty relationships and programs that emphasize 1:1 interactions and professional development with a goal of strengthening grant seeking behaviors and success. Unlike training programs that emphasize a specific learning outcome and are typically unidirectional, mentoring programs for grant seeking are tailored to the individuals involved, their professional goals, and intrinsically include two-way activities and incentives. Responsibilities may include designing the program, soliciting interested mentees and mentors, providing mentorship, matching faculty with mentors, designing and administering incentives, and evaluating program outcomes (Law et al., 2014).

### **Team management**

Refers to the real-world implementation of theories, practices, and tools from team science and project management for the purpose of enabling multidisciplinary research. Responsibilities may include identifying new members, facilitating team meetings, organizing activities to build consensus or integrate new team members, and ensuring that teams understand the goal, timeline, and their individual roles (Roney, Gabrus, 2022). In the 2017 survey of research development professionals and their responsibilities, 67% indicated that they provide guidance and expertise for building and fostering connections and teams, 65% indicated that they develop and/or coordinate resources and tools to promote collaboration, and 53% suggest collaborators for specific proposals, (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

### **Competitive intelligence**

Refers to the ethical collection and analysis of information, which informs decision-making within the research ecosystem. The information type and scale of analysis vary. Reports may be narrowly focused, for example on a single funding opportunity or more broadly, such as a federal sponsor or multidisciplinary topic. Responsibilities within a competitive intelligence function may include refining inquiries, ethical collection of data, data analysis, creating visualizations, generating insights, and developing reports. In 2022, NORDP acknowledged the impact of competitive intelligence on the field by awarding Karen Walker from Arizona State University the Innovation Award for her work in

establishing the competitive intelligence function within RD at ASU and founding the nation Competitive Intelligence Working Group.

### **Strategic planning**

Refers to strategic planning activities within the context of the research ecosystem of an institution or geography. Responsibilities as they relate to strategic planning may include convening and facilitating discussions amongst stakeholders, using competitive intelligence to inform strategies, drafting reports, identifying stories to highlight along a theme, and reporting successes and metrics. In the 2017 survey of research development professionals and their responsibilities, 68% indicated that they support strategic planning activities (Preuss, Eck et al., 2020).

### **Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)**

Refers specifically to DEI work at the intersection of research and RD. This may include RD programs, activities, and commitments to support historically underrepresented groups of faculty or improve disparities in faculty achievement, e.g. securing funding or tenure. This may also include broadening participation activities that engage students, staff, or faculty from historically underrepresented groups in the research ecosystem in a variety of ways. It may also include engaging faculty, students, and staff from minority-serving institutions or emerging research institutions that have limited resources to support research. Responsibilities may include identifying institutional barriers and suggesting path to improvement, developing and implementing programming, building consensus among key stakeholders and decision-makers, serving on committees, or advocating for

appropriate representation in honorifics and prestigious recognitions. The NORDP Consultant Pilot Program, which seeks to increase research capacity at HBCUs through the provision of RD services, is an example of a RD program aimed at broadening participation among historically underrepresented groups of faculty.

### **Grand challenges**

Generally, grand challenges are large and ambitious research and/or implementation projects that may connect up to hundreds of faculty as well as students, community members and leading experts across every field to solve society's most challenging problems. Responsibilities in managing a grand challenge program may include soliciting visionary concepts, identifying commonalities across seemingly disparate groups, building community consensus, executing events and activities, administering internal funding, monitoring progress and success in intended outcomes. Grand challenges and the interface with the research enterprise is well-described in the Report on University-Led Grand Challenges (Popowitz and Dorgelo, 2018).

### **Scholarship**

Refers to the fact that a portion of RDers are scholars who also conduct research themselves. RDers may conduct scholarship on many different topics, within or adjacent to the RD function, and scholarship on the discipline of research development is actively encouraged by the New Opportunities in Research Development (NORD) Committee of NORDP, which offers grant funding and publication venues for scholarship on RD.

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