

The *Journal of Research Administration*'s Author Fellowship Program:
Reflections from a Fellow Advisor
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This report relates the experience of an Advisor/Mentor with fellows accepted into the four cohorts of the Society of Research Administrators International's Author Fellowship Program since its start in 2017. Insights are offered about best approaches for participating in the program and for developing an article for publication in the Journal of Research Administration: manage expectations on work, communications and commitment and take the long view.

Introduction: Fellows in mid-management areas of research administration of the manager and administrator type were mentored during my involvement with SRA International's Author Fellowship Program. They came to the program with lots of ideas and had taken several steps to

***Author Fellowship Program:** The Program serves the research administration field by supporting prospective authors in sharing their expertise as peer-reviewed or refereed journal authors. Prospective authors (Fellows) are paired with published Peer Advisors/ Mentors for a six- to nine-month fellowship consisting of monitored review, regular communication, advice, guidance and periodic (mid-point and closeout) surveys on progress. A hopeful but not expected outcome is a manuscript submission to the Journal. The program began in 2017.*

***Surveys:** Advisors complete closeout surveys at the end of each fellowship period which form the basis of this report (11/8/2019, 10/25/2018, 10/30/2017). Questions asked in the closeouts were identical, with the 2019 survey asking two additional questions not on the previous two. The mid-point survey of the 2020 fellowship was used in lieu of closeout as the program is in progress (as of 6/18/20); most of the questions asked on it although not identical were similar enough to be included in this report. In the interests of privacy all identifying details have been removed from this report.*

prepare for their projects. They had written project descriptions and outlines, described and mapped out a process improvement plan, and developed materials for presentation to their supervisors. One fellow had developed a monitoring tool and was using it; it was to be the subject of the fellowship. For two fellows their preparation was advanced enough on a number of ideas that their difficulties were not in preparation but in short-listing the best topics in order to select one and outline the plan for it. They had enough for more than one publication. A fellow had initiated the approvals process as a prelude to obtaining the go-ahead on a project using ongoing institutional data collection.

Communications Schedule: The initial

"Keep it simple. No technology!"

encounter with my fellows was a telephone call. We laid out the communications plan, usually at six-week intervals. Fellows preferred telephone vs another means of communication such as skype, telling me to keep it simple and not to add any complicated layers of media technology. According to program directives the

program should set up exactly what the parties want. There are no hard and fast rules -- whatever fellows and advisors agree upon for communication is the rule. Two fellows had two telephone updates only, the others had three or four. Email was used for specific questions, to send attachments, or to update me if a scheduled call was missed, not as the regular communications medium. Schedules started out fine but usually lapsed before the midpoint of the program, dropping off from monthly to bimonthly and longer. All fellows experienced the challenge of keeping to the schedule yet most managed to provide project updates. As the program advanced, I queried each new year's fellow whether a more frequent or different style of communication would be better but each new cohort said no, flexible schedules were preferable due to too many work conflicts.

Regular and more frequent communications could be more productive in keeping on task. Schedules are necessary, after all, and are the foundation of the remote learning aspect of the program. Since they depend too much upon fellows' real-life availability, adherence to them can prove less beneficial in practice. In fact, the converse, missed schedules and timelines, can lead to unforeseen benefits which happened in at least one case (probably more). Fellows' projects usually matured. Missing a timeline event produced new thinking by the fellow(s) as to where their projects might go and how to make them better, later, a good example of being caught up in one expectation only to see something else take shape. As a general rule, fellows can get more out of the program by not losing sight of the communications plan and the fellowship assignments. But to manage the fellowship and fit it into their lives better, they should be wary of committing to too much and should set aside only the smallest amount of time and keep to it.

Work Accomplished: As reported on the closeout surveys, the writing support requested and the work the fellows accomplished centered around three main areas, article proposals, literature reviews, and manuscript preparation. Fellows asked for support in two or all three of the areas.

The work accomplished in the three areas was solid but hard to quantify given the spread-out nature of communications. For article proposal I guessed 50% completion if fellows got 'a good start' and up to 100% if a fellow 'completed' one. To guess in this way I looked at the outlines that fellows had either refined or produced within the first month of their time and coached them with regard to their outlines' outcomes, specific findings, clarity, brevity and repetition. To my knowledge no fellow completed an actual abstract for a manuscript and no one completed a manuscript although one fellow made a fair start on manuscript preparation and was on track as of our last communication for manuscript submission. There were setbacks, distractions, changes of personnel, and confusion at the institutional level that affected the fellows' projects, but they persisted, sometimes needing to widen their project's scope. For literature review three fellows described theirs, ranging from six to 30 articles pulled from their library resources and outside databases and it is highly likely that the fourth fellow completed one, too.

The closeout survey comments on the question of accomplishments are significant. The fellows gave as reasons for cancelling most scheduled telephone calls overwhelming work conflicts and professional responsibilities. Some had professional responsibilities within SRA International's own meetings and committee work on the Federal Demonstration Partnership (an initiative among 10 federal agencies and 154 institutional recipients of federal funds to lesson administrative burden). Work and travel were barriers to completion of their fellowships, cutting into their time, which was loosely on the order of an hour per two weeks. One fellow commented

that with notes and an extensive outline, just a few hours of drafting would be all that was necessary to prepare a report. That fellow didn't require the update calls.

Regarding manuscripts, it is important to note that they are a hopeful but not expected outcome of the program. The program exists to support and encourage dissemination of expertise in many different ways and according to individual timeframes. In that light, that three fellows requested manuscript support, and wanted to be accountable for manuscript preparation in addition to the work in the other two areas, was ambitious. They thought long-term. They contemplated a "finished" piece of work in ready-to-read status -- manuscript, article proposal or presentation -- and were not deterred by the short timeframe of the fellowship (six months with one three-month extension). I offered manuscript advice and support to all. One fellow did not want that type of assistance saying that other types of support were more beneficial.

As for assessment, I had expected greater involvement with the fellows for a better sense of where they were in terms of progress toward goal. I also expected more concrete results, that is, more than an outline and a literature review. Possibly, documents that were agreed-upon as milestone assignments but not received were indeed prepared without my knowledge. If this is true it indicates that Advisors need to manage expectations and fellows need to engage them better.

Specific Guidance Requested: Fellows needed specific help in defining their projects. In our telephone updates we touched on ways to define them better and do literature research as a means of further refinement. For example, one fellow needed guidance on how to start and what might help frame the preparation. A project breakdown technique was offered, for dividing the topic into inherently understandable parts (assessment of the resources that will be needed, accomplishment of a literature review, focusing on no more than three things to say, and creation of an outline to say those things), which proved helpful. If a fellow had a topic in a domain related to but not exactly research administration, we had discussions on how to orient it more toward the issues that research administrators encounter in the field. I walked the fellows through the various types of *Journal* articles. If there was uncertainty, I recommended literature searches for the fellow to see how articles of such types had been written and understand what had already been published on the given topic. If there was a change in project direction, we discussed the importance of lining up the actual internal data needed to ensure that it was available. All of these types of specific guidance are appropriate to the roles and goals of the fellowship indeed they are what the fellowship is organized to do. Potential writers can glean from this the "nuts and bolts" of writing and fruitful ways and topics to engage in preparation for it.

Which brings up the question of **SRA Resources**. General SRA International's authorship guidelines and the *Journal's* getting started documents were noted to the fellows as part of the program. I pointed out where materials could be found; I did not directly provide them. Usually on the first telephone communication the practice was to spend some time on the guidelines and the types of articles accepted by the *Journal*, from the Conceptual type, which might bring in a systems approach, to the Reflective, and so forth. More in-depth SRA resources and website location, for example webinars on research administration topics provided through SRA's Author Fellowship Committee, were pointed out along the way.

In the closeout reports there was a question, “Program provided enough resources and assistance”, that I marked as a “Yes” in terms of guidance, availability and web resources. I based my answer on fellows’ comments that what was provided was what was needed and what they sought in the fellowship. Usually fellows wanted guidance only, the opportunity to discuss and ask questions, rather than more documents to read or milestones or assignments. Guidance was available and that’s what they had, and they could avail themselves of other resources as they desired. Prospective authors thinking of writing an article might consider going to the *Journal* website to read the materials themselves first, before even considering whether the fellowship program would be beneficial for them.

Commitment: It was difficult to estimate the fellows’ level of commitment. It was hard for them to stay on course. They wanted to advance professionally to publish a peer-reviewed *Journal* article but couldn’t find the time for writing at the level of even an hour every two weeks given their regular duties. The cancellation of communications and lack of re-scheduling left agreed-upon milestones hanging in the air. Coaching a fellow toward a literature review and an outline revision I had the impression (later confirmed) that the fellow would be ready to submit in the spring but I did not know, and do not know, that for a fact. One might conclude the fellows were not committed. The level of commitment needed to be successful in the Program would seem to be more than what these fellows demonstrated. On the other hand, they took advantage of the opportunity to extend their programs, surely a hallmark of perseverance if not commitment.

The closeout surveys asked no direct question about progress. Had there been one, I might have answered “No” on the spot, which would have been a conflation of progress with work plans and commitment. Those terms are easy to conflate. I would have been answering according to my expectations rather than the fellow’s actual experience. Too much can be made about schedules that might hide commitment, progress and actual program benefits, as noted above. Work was done. Email updates conveyed progress and project status. If we take it on faith that the fellows took the time to prepare an application to a program that has, after four years, established a track record, for which there are more applicants than available spaces, it does not make sense that fellows would squander the opportunity. Rather, as alluded to above, adherence to scheduling is not the right measure.

And that is the crux of the matter. My experience is not unique. It takes time for fellows to develop their projects to the final stage of publication; in fact, it took two years for the very first fellow of the entire program to do thisⁱ. That fellow later went on to write another piece, a reflective article for the *Journal* describing her experience within the programⁱⁱ. Of my mentees, none forwarded an article for publication to the *Journal*. How they followed through with their plans to continue, how they might have changed their projects or what they might have produced independent of the fellowship, has not been revealed but is still in the making. There is no schedule.

Lessons Learned: Managing expectations is the lesson learned. At first there is a pattern of success in the first half of a fellowship in honing down the fellow’s ideas about what they want to write about, the goal to accomplish, and expectations of accomplishment. They start with plenty of energy; one might think that that is how it will finish. But, no one knows how to begin. The program has been helpful in guiding each fellow on how to begin. Breaking down the project to its parts as well as undertaking whatever (small) initial steps to begin -- those are the common stumbling blocks. Each fellow addressed them.

After clarification of the ideas the challenges have been in the latter part of the program, to know where each fellow is at, in their plan, and whether they are arriving at the goal they set. They don't reach the finish line during the (short-lived) fellowship, which raises the question of whether implementation more than advising is needed at this stage. The fellows said they had what they needed to complete their projects but may need a coach to see them through to the outcome of a finished manuscript. Should the fellowship be lengthened? Is it the Advisor/Mentor's job to coach to the outcome or should we stop when they stop? At some point the advising ends and time becomes the only resource necessary. Conflicts come and go but time is a resource the fellows always will have. For the fellowship the major lesson learned, aside from the points made above on schedules, workplans, and expectations, is the long-term perspective. Fellows had the long view. Grooming for writing is a long process that extends well beyond the fellowship period. Fellows and advisors should be open to it and have no short-term expectations of a finished product. To be successful in developing an article as an outcome of the program one needs to view time is one's best and most reliable friend.

The fellowship program is worthwhile. The actual experience has been different than my expectations. In that line of thinking what I would find most useful is an understanding of the experience of other peer advisors. It's a good thing to line up one's experience with others' to set it in context and smooth out the impressions, the negative as well as the positive. In that context a new avenue of mentor support has been opened. Advisor emails can be shared in a sort of cohort support group, for the purpose of easy internal contacts and to act as a sounding board for mentorships, gauge fellows' progress and not least, manage expectations. I have used it once but envision that it could be more helpful in future as a way to capitalize upon and solidify the valuable mentoring experience.

ⁱ Silva, Angela J. [Research Administration Organizations: Results from an Investigation into the Five Disciplines](#). *J Res Administration XLIX*, No 2, posted 09-15-2018

ⁱⁱ Silva, Angela J. Reflections from a Fellow in the Journal of Research Administration's Author Fellowship Program. *J Res Administration L No 3*, posted 12-09-2019.