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By Anthea Lipsett

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# Making a BRAKE for international collaboration

**Denise Clark and Beth Brittan-Powell from the University of Maryland run an innovative scheme to increase international collaborations. Recently the BRAKE initiative team scoped out potential partnerships in Australia and New Zealand.**

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The Borderless Research Administration Knowledge Exchange initiative (BRAKE) stems from the pairing of Denise Clark's extensive central research management experience and Beth Brittan-Powell's experiences combining science and departmental research administration roles at the University of Maryland in the United States.

The pair hold training workshops on US federal funding and compliance at international institutions. While on site, they tour facilities and meet faculty researchers, scoping out research strengths that might match those at UMD.

The team

After completing her degree, masters and PhD in neuroscience at UMD, Brittan-Powell served as the lab manager in the Laboratory of Comparative Psychoacoustics before taking on a role in grants development for the UMD Neuroscience and Cognitive Science Program (NACS). She talked researchers through the process of applying for grants, making sure that the science they wanted to do matched the proposal's budget.

She moved from a departmental role to college level, then university-wide. Now director of joint research collaborations, Brittan-Powell still acts as the voice of the researcher or the administrator, and an interpreter between the two. The partnership spans across most viewpoints touched upon during the course of basic research.

"Researchers and research administrators don't always speak the same language and Beth became the interpreter," explains Clark, who herself has more than 30 years of central research-administration experience. She is now responsible for all aspects of research administration at UMD, including pre and post-award services.

"Beth brought her reputation and interpersonal skills with her. Her network still trusts her and even leans on her more because she can help them with the budget review and navigating the waters, that sometimes seem political, behind administrative decisions," Clark says. Brittan-Powell can advise researchers on when and how to seek support, whether in the form of cost-sharing or letters of support from the vice-president for research.

"We are now starting to see the reward, in that people are understanding the value. When I first started to work at NACS people didn't call me or just wanted me to fill out their forms, but once one or two people allowed me to become involved in their projects then word of mouth spread."

The initiative

Realising how potent their combined expertise could be, the pair set up the BRAKE programme to help build a culture that encourages both joint proposals and joint exchange programmes between research administrators and researchers within the university and beyond.

The administrative training programme, founded by the UMD division of research, helps build international partnerships by reducing administrative hurdles for researchers. BRAKE not only helps people understand what research administration is but also works effectively as a reconnaissance trip to check out potential research partners for UMD.

"I look at the institution's administrative infrastructure, its knowledge base and culture of compliance. Beth looks at the research infrastructure and whether we have people at UMD who could use a particular facility or partner in a particular field of discipline," says Clark.

"When we come back we try to couple up individuals and initiate Skype introductions to attempt to bring together the scientific areas of expertise. Researchers may meet at conferences but relationships sometime don't come to fruition because administration isn't invested to help navigate the next steps.

An old-fashioned approach

BRAKE hooks us into it by embracing the old-fashioned approach of making business personal by building personal administrative relationships with our counterparts. The more we become invested and break the perceived barriers the more we become part of the project versus an obstacle to the research enterprise."

For instance, Clark went to Australia and New Zealand four years ago and met Robyn Hill, research management director at the University of Auckland, who subsequently put UMD in touch with researchers in the university's Centre for Addiction Research.

"What's different about what we're doing is we're adding a layer below researchers. The administration side adds the impetus or a reminder to do Skype 'dating' for a little while." Auckland raised money for researchers to visit Maryland and the combined research teams visited the National Institutes of Health officers for a face-to-face meeting.

The results

"We are 20 minutes from the NIH, the National Science Foundation and the Food and Drug Administration and several other federal agencies. While we were at NIH, they mentioned an international scholarship fund that we didn't know about. We went for that in January and we got it," Clark says.

The trip has already resulted in the NIH's National Institute on Drug Abuse funding a proposal to bring David Newcombe, senior lecturer in alcohol and drug studies, to the US for seven weeks to work on an early-warning system for drug abuse with Eric Wish from UMD's Center for Substance Abuse Research. This is something that the New Zealand government is interested in implementing. "David knows European satellites and we know US satellites so we can talk about how to broaden the network," says Clark.

"That's the thing that's different about this. It allows me to have that time with the researchers," says Brittan-Powell. "It took 16 to 18 months to bring in that proposal. We are in it for the long run. We now have three seed grant programmes we're running to get researchers together and this has all come from this idea of BRAKE."

Where next?

So far, UMD has held onsite trainings in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Denmark, Israel, Mexico and the Netherlands. The plan is to extend BRAKE training to South Africa, Ireland, Chile, and Hong Kong in 2017.

After a 2015 trip to Lund University in Sweden, administrators helped researchers set up Skype discussions, followed by a trip to UMD in February 2016 from Lund administrators and a call for research workshops that went out in July with a September deadline.

"Denise gets invited everywhere and then through that we've been able to hook up with so many more researchers, that face-to-face connection that BRAKE allows for us to do. We don't know whether it will work until we meet," Brittan-Powell says.

"It's not a lot of time away from the office either. Because we have completed the federally required administrative risk assessments needed to partner our collaborator during the trip, it decreases the back-end time to bring the partnership to life and helps build interpersonal relationships we wouldn't have otherwise. The host institution pays the travel. Our time is the main cost. We can update our materials quickly because we keep on top of things."

The pair admit that not all institutions have the resources that Maryland has to set up a similar scheme. "But from a big picture perspective it's really not a lot of money," says Brittan-Powell. "It's being good at what you do, being able to translate that knowledge to others and having support from institutional leaders. The costs of on-site trainings and campus visits are only travel, accommodation, and food."

*Beth Brittan-Powell is director of joint research collaborations at the University of Maryland College Park responsible for providing support for the management and promotion of research collaborations. She has more than 20 years of experience as a researcher in UMD's Laboratory of Comparative Psychoacoustics.*

*Denise Clark is the associate vice-president for research administration in the division of research at the University of Maryland College Park responsible for providing support for research, creative activity, and outreach initiatives. Denise is a past president of the National Council of Research Administrators.*

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**Royal Society tender for provision of a Career Pathway Tracker of its research fellowship alumni**

The Royal Society Career Pathway Tracker project will include refining an implementation approach, carrying out initial data collection and reporting on career destinations and progression for the alumni of two of Royal Society's early career fellowship schemes – University Research Fellowships and Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships.

Tender submission deadline **10 April 2017**.

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