



Sounds of eRA Podcast Transcription

Part four of a twelve part series where Edward Johnson Jr. (a.k.a. Eddie) sits down with Sandra Nordahl, President, Society of Research Administrators International (SRA), to discuss the mission of SRA and the effects of sequestration on research administration.

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Conversation Killer

Eddie: Welcome to another “*Sounds of the eRA.*” My name is Edward Johnson, a.k.a. Eddie, and I'm the President of InfoEd International. We're going to be speaking today with Sandra Nordahl. She's the President of SRA. We're going to be speaking about SRA's mission and inner workings and also the effects of sequestration on research administration and its effects on the world around us. Hello, Sandra.

Sandra: Hi, Eddie. Thank you for asking me to participate in your podcast.

Eddie: Glad you were able to accommodate this. One of the questions I love to ask to people is how did you get into research administration? I'm not aware of anybody, as exciting as the field that it is, when they were seven or eight or 10 years old that wanted to be a research administrator. At that age you want to be a fireman, baseball players, or rock stars. So Sandra, how did you end up in the position you're in right now?

Sandra: Well, when I was in college I worked in the office of grants and contracts as the copy person. So I copied all the proposals and got exposed to research administration that way. And then, about a year after I graduated from college, probably nine months, I interviewed for the information person's job where you would disseminate the announcements for proposals, the solicitations, what have you, and I also was working with the Board of Regents.

I worked at Arizona State University from 1983 to 1986, and I was promoted to a pre-awards specialist at Arizona State. And then I moved to San Diego in 1986 and worked in pre-awards here, then was promoted to manage a contract in post-awards, and then became a manager in post-award. And in 2009, I started my current position as co-director of sponsored research, contracting, and compliance, and that's where I'm at now.

So I've been involved in all aspects of research administration. I find it fascinating, it's ever-changing as I like to tell people, and if you're bored it's of your own doing because there is no reason for anybody in research administration to be bored. Everything changes all the time, be it rules and regulations, new ways of doing things..

Eddie: I agree with you, I find it fascinating. I stepped into it, probably when I was seven years old, accidentally because my father was a research administrator. And I would ask him what he does and I would have no idea what he was doing. But he used to describe to me things like indirect costs, which is what they were called then, and he would try to convince me what they were, described them to me, which a seven-year-old, eight-year-old isn't going to figure that out, but I ended up doing some other things, too.

But I agree with you, it's a fascinating industry. It's kind of a conversation killer, though, outside the industry. I love going to these meetings like SRA and so on because you have an audience that understands what you do. You go to a cocktail party and you tell people what you do, it's a conversation killer so I don't even go there.

Sandra: Yes, you're right.

Eddie: I try to come up with something quick, like we build adult websites. And at some point they will just disengage because there is no point going into a lot detail with people that aren't in the industry.

Sandra: Well the funny thing is, Eddie, I actually was explaining what I did to a gentleman who works on a Thunder boat, so I volunteer at our thunder boat event each year.

Eddie: What's a Thunder boat?

Sandra: It's a hydroplane boat, hydroplane racing boats, so we have that on Mission Bay each year. And he goes, what do you do on your day job? And I said, oh, you won't know what I'm talking about, I'm a research administrator. And he goes, now describe that a little bit. And so I went into it and he goes, I think my daughter does that. I said, no, she doesn't; and actually she does, she works at the University of Washington. But she's the only person I've ever met outside of work events who is actually a research administrator.

Eddie: I ran into a similar conversation. I was actually in New Zealand in Auckland, and somebody's car died. And so we were walking out of the restaurant and getting into our car and there was somebody whose car battery had died, and they asked us for a jump. We had a rental car so we didn't have cables but they had cables so we worked it out. And the person being polite, he just started up a social light conversation, they asked me that question, so what do you do, why are you in Auckland? And we described that and I let it go because, like I said earlier, the odds of anybody understanding that are slim and none.

Well, this guy was actually a researcher at the university that we were working with so he was very familiar with what we did. He wasn't in that facet but he absolutely knew what I was talking about. So that's my once in a lifetime, like yours, story where somebody actually gets what we do.

Sandra: You're right, it is a conversation killer for most people, but it is a fabulous, fabulous profession. I really enjoy it, I love the work I do, I know that I'm helping people to get things done, and that really gives me self-satisfaction.

Eddie: I try to do that here, as well, with the employees that we have because there's obviously millions of different jobs you can have. But I love the fact that we support, you support, people doing wonderful things and that's not a trivial thing. And as you see the successes and advances in research and development – and some of that we'll talk about in a few minutes – it's phenomenal to be a part of that.

I can't tell you how excited, I see something on CNN that fell out of the work that we're all doing, I just think that's tremendous. And like you said, it's just very, very rewarding, maybe not in a cocktail party because people won't appreciate it, but I feel very, very good about what we do, just like you said. Because you really are a part of and in many ways you are certainly helping these other things happen.

Sandra, this has been absolutely fantastic stuff. I am very excited about the information we've been able to collect from you here.

I want to point out that on the SRA website, on the home page, there's an entry point to the sequestration resource center that SRA has been able to put together. It is a fantastic place to go look and see some real world examples of the things that are going out of sequestration, but I

encourage you to go and take a look at that as well. Because this information is ever evolving and SRA does a great job of keeping that updated. I would encourage you to bookmark that site and look at it periodically to see what's new in that area.

Well again, Sandra, I really appreciate your time. Fantastic information and I hope you will be willing to do this again if there are other things that we should chat about.

Sandra:

Great, thank you so much for having me.