HOW DOES WORKING IN INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH SHAPE GRAD ASSISTANTS?

By Priti Kaikolar and Oma Uchendu

ABSTRACT

PROBLEM: Graduate/Research Assistants (GRAs) play a key role in research administration, yet their professional development lacks structure.

INTRODUCTION: This study explores how GRAs acquire skills and knowledge in research administration
.

METHODS: A mixed-methods design surveys and interviews examines current training, mentorship, and networking.

FINDINGS: Results reveal strengths and significant gaps in development opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The study suggests targeted institutional strategies to enhance GRA training, support career growth, and build a stronger research admin workforce.
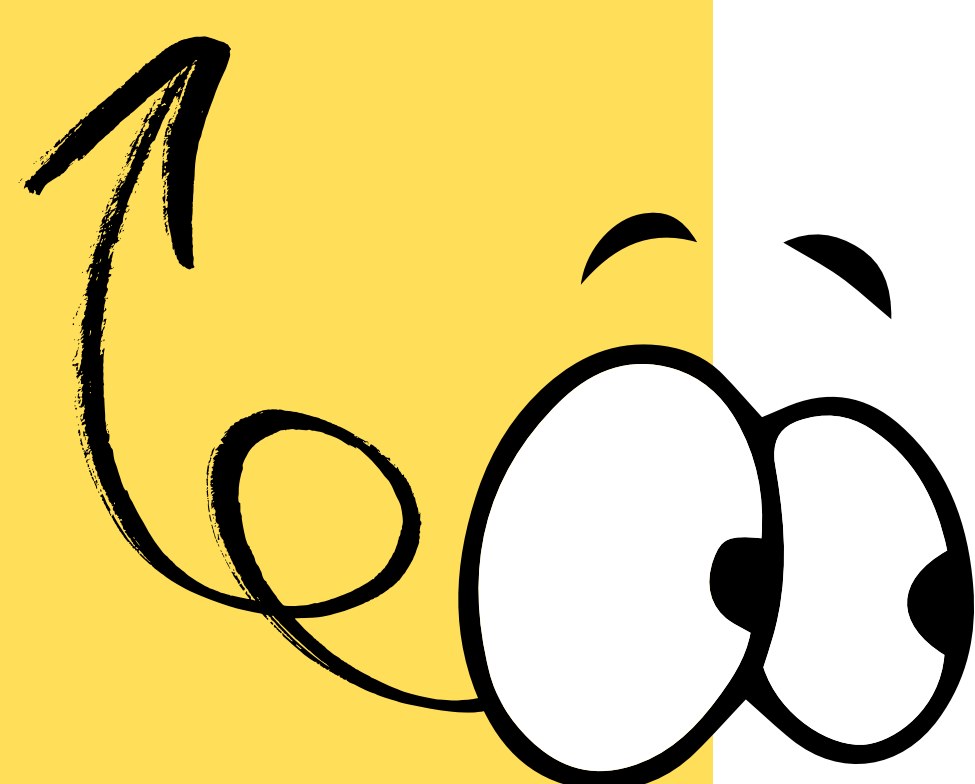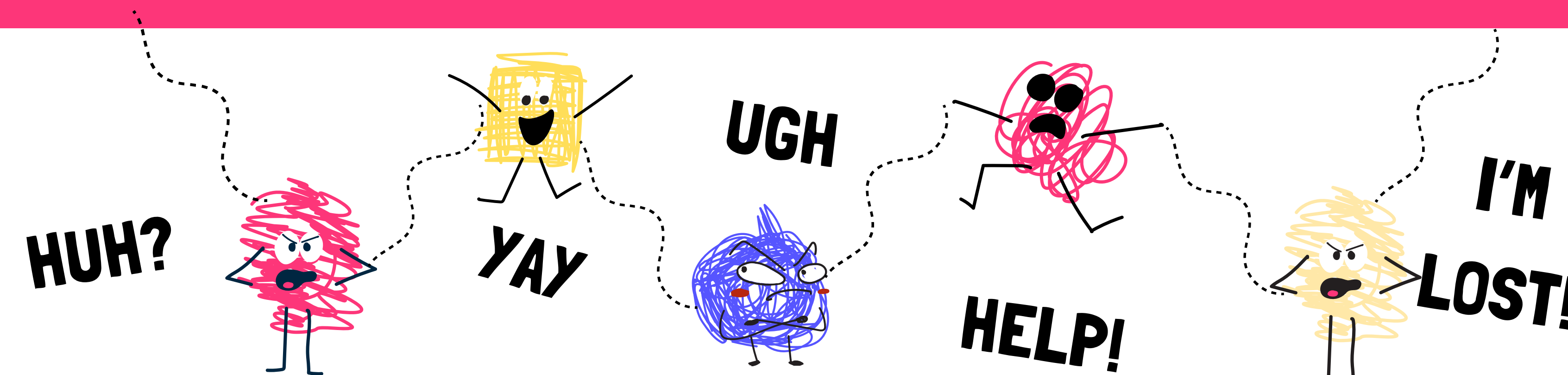
WHO'RE GRA'S AND WHERE TO FIND THEM IN RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS?

GRAs are typically graduate students who work on research projects under the supervision of faculty members. They perform research-related duties and assist with the research activities of a professor or research scientist. They can be found in institutional departments/of service for roles in:

CHALLENGES

- Low Faculty Engagement: 83% avoid GRAs; 47% cite key skill gaps.
- Inadequate Training: Only 34% offer formal programs; generic approaches miss individual needs.
- Career Blind Spots: 58% unaware of research admin careers due to compliance-heavy training.
- Lack of Mentorship: Just 28% mentored, though 72% want careers in the field, only 19% feel supported.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct in-depth interviews with colleagues working across research roles
- Gather narrative-driven insights on what support systems have worked and what hasn't.
- Map the emotional landscape of being a GRA in research admin.
- Propose a peer-informed toolkit that institutions can adapt, built not just on tasks but on real human experience.
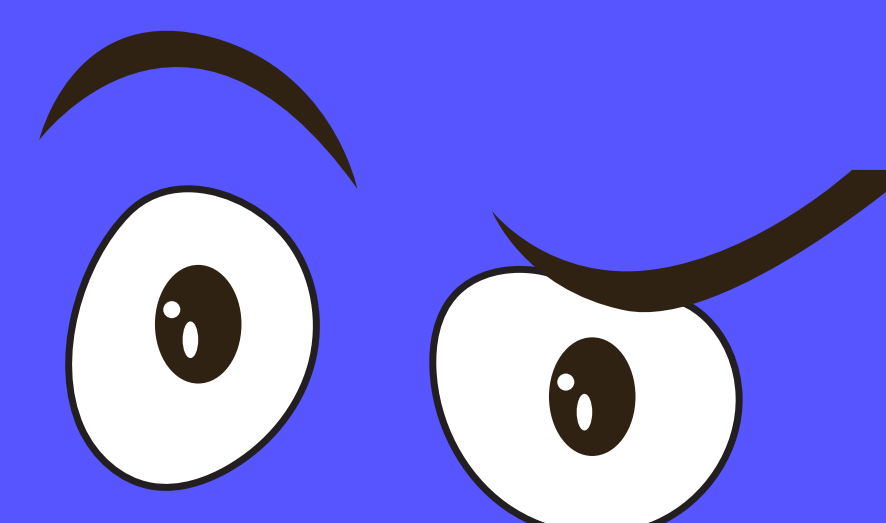
REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- National Council of University Research Administrators (NCURA). (2022). Professional Development Opportunities. Retrieved from
- Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). (2017). Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 2006 to 2016.
- Society of Research Administrators International (SRAI). (n.d.). Career Paths & Career Planning in Research Administration.
- Austin, A. E. (2002). Preparing the next generation of faculty: Graduate school as socialization to the academic career. The Journal of Higher Education, 73(1), 94–122.
- Gardner, S. K. (2010). Keeping up with the Joneses: Socialization and culture in doctoral education. In M. J. W. Lee & E. M. Greiman (Eds.), Graduate education in the 21st century (pp. 167–185). Springer.

Thank You!

CUW GA (IN ORSP) AS A CASE STUDY

At Concordia University Wisconsin, GRAs across research offices described their experience as "a maze without a map." One noted, "What saved me was that one teammate who took the time to show me the ropes." These insights show that effective training must go beyond policies and it must foster emotional support, context, and community. In response, the proposed toolkit will include:

- Templates for peer mentorship programs.a
- Suggestions for check-ins based on emotional well-being.
- A guide for how administrators can listen more actively to GRA voices.

SOME OTHER INSTITUTIONS...

- University of Michigan: Offers a Research Administration Certificate Program; 80% of GRAs report improved skills (UM Research Office, 2023).
- UNC Chapel Hill: Graduate Research Assistant Development Program; 30% higher job placement in research administration (UNC Postdoctoral Affairs, 2022).
- University of British Columbia: Peer mentorship for GRAs increases engagement and learning (UBC Graduate Studies, 2023).

HUH? YAY UGH HELP! I'M LOST!