

Overview and General Responsibilities For Administrative Advisors

An Administrative Advisor is appointed for each multistate research project, coordinating committee, information exchange group, and advisory committee. The Administrative Advisor is responsible for facilitating communication, making arrangements for peer reviews of proposals, applying the appropriate national and regional policies, assuring the quality of the governance of that activity, authorizing annual and other meetings, fulfilling the reporting requirements of the activity, and facilitating the conduct of an activity's business.

The Administrative Advisor is looked upon as an individual who knows about Multistate Research rules and regulations, and can share with others the concepts and purposes of the Multistate Research program. Administrative Advisors must be well versed in Multistate Research concepts, and should be able to provide examples of accepted practices as well as those practices that are unacceptable.

One contribution an Administrative Advisor can make to a Multistate Research Project is to suggest strategies for obtaining complementary funding. Multistate Research funding is not a grant to a research project per se, but it is more an authority for forming partnerships among institutions that operate as a "project-without-institutional-boundaries." Often the formation of a Multistate Research Project positions the project's participants to compete better for extramural funding (e.g., the integrated programs within the NRI). But grant seeking can, in some cases, lead to some difficulties when the successful grant expands the scope of the project beyond the original objectives of the activity. Such changes in direction can lead to a need to revise the activity's plan of work.

Another contribution that the Administrative Advisor makes to a Multistate Research Project is to assist the Technical Committee (and particularly its leadership) in both championing the project and helping to get activities completed. Oftentimes the elected leadership of a Multistate Research Project has only limited experience in committee operations. The Administrative Advisor has an important role to play in advising a project's technical committee on topics such as: how to run a meeting; how to bring about decisions; and how to comply with administrative requirements, when functioning as a sanctioned Multistate Research technical committee.

The Administrative Advisor provides the authority for the project or committee to initiate certain activities, such as authorizing a meeting (either by calling the meeting directly or empowering someone else to do it). A common failure of Administrative Advisors is not exercising their authority until it is too close to the meeting time. This can result in some degree of frustration for scientists participating in a project or committee. In the worst-case scenario some of the committee members may not be able to attend because they were informed about the meeting too late. A good guide for an Administrative Advisor is to authorize a meeting at least three months in advance. This is done by e-mail through the National Information Management System (NIMMS).

Some committees place the decision for the next meeting's time and location on the current agenda, and then note the decision in the minutes for better communication. This is a much-preferred method of meeting planning.

The Administrative Advisor needs to plan ahead and in some cases actually "push" the committee to get things done. This is particularly true for setting an agenda for a meeting, which must be done early enough to make sure that the agenda has wide acceptance and does not omit important topics from consideration. Many Administrative Advisors include the USDA/CSREES representative in the process of agenda setting, and this helps to expedite decisions as well.

Another important contribution of an Administrative Advisor is providing a systematic approach to complying with the reporting requirements of the Multistate Research authority. The advent of the National IMSS has greatly facilitated responsibility.

The Administrative Advisor should encourage a project to link with projects in other regions by sharing national perspectives and spotting opportunities for scientific interaction with projects of a similar nature. Linking to other activities sanctioned by other regions may open doors to additional collaborations. Administrative Advisors should also be looking to encourage participation in Multistate Research by other scientific disciplines (e.g., bringing forage breeders together with animal scientists), and whenever possible, expanding a project's scientific expertise. Administrative Advisors should also be on the lookout for opportunities to include extension specialists as members in multistate activities, as appropriate.

Finally, one of the major contributions of an Administrative Advisor is to emphasize the program, not the process, of multistate activities. There is a lot of documentation that is required to get a Multistate Research Project or Multistate Coordinating Committee approved, as well as reports during its normal 5-year lifetime. Some scientists tend to get hung-up on the complexity of the process and forget the enormous advantages provided through the Multistate Research authority. Explaining the benefits of participating in a multistate activity to scientists remains a major responsibility of the Administrative Advisor.

Overview of Duties

The Administrative Advisor to a Multistate Research Project has a number of duties that must be performed, if the project is to succeed.

Administrative Advisors are expected to make a commitment to attend all committee meetings. There are too many multistate activity participants who complain that the Administrative Advisor has failed to regularly attend committee meetings. The Administrative Advisor is also responsible for encouraging the USDA/NIFA representative to attend all Multistate Research Project meetings as well. "Covering" for one another is not an acceptable practice. Both the Administrative Advisor and the NIFA representative should attend all committee meetings.

The Administrative Advisor needs to make a commitment to administering the activity and to developing a full understanding of the nature and purposes of the activity, along with providing a focus to the activity's objectives.

Finally, the Administrative Advisor should follow-up on meeting "no shows" by calling the absent scientists to find out why they did not attend.

Meeting participation - While in attendance at committee meetings, the Administrative Advisor should serve as a resource familiar with the project's objectives. The Administrative Advisor should strive to keep the activity's research objectives as the focus of the meeting. An effective way to do this is to organize the meeting by the activity's objectives. This also facilitates the preparation of the activity's annual report by its objectives rather than Station by Station. (Also see below)

The Administrative Advisor should monitor the activity's progress towards its objectives and the activity's research accomplishments. The Administrative Advisor should work to promote cooperation and maintain a team-effort approach. The Administrative Advisor should also make sure that the activity is doing effective, coordinated planning. In addition, the Administrative Advisor should provide updates to the activity's participants on current regional and national activities relevant to the activity's purposes. The CSREES representative should assist in this duty as well.

Communication - The Administrative Advisor is responsible for maintaining open and good communications with the other Directors of the association on the progress (or lack thereof) of the activity to which he or she is assigned. The Administrative Advisor should inform the Directors of the region (and Directors not of the region who have participating scientists) when the project's direction is drifting, or when problems become apparent.

The Administrative Advisor also has a duty to provide to the committee direct and frequent information on any changes in Multistate Research policy or procedures, and particularly to work closely with the activity's executive body on the organization, operation, and management of the project.

The Administrative Advisor should encourage participating scientists to communicate with their own directors and department heads/chairs about the activity, its accomplishments, and expectations for future activities.

The Administrative Advisor needs to keep information flowing to the other regional associations through their Executive Directors, and to the responsible Multistate Research program people in the USDA/NIFA Partnership Office.

Here are some guidelines to help make decisions on who should get various communications from the Administrative Advisor.

Working documents: (e.g., working drafts of minutes, annual report drafts) should go to all of the ad hoc technical committee members, (i.e., not just the executive committee), and to the CSREES representative as well.

Documents prepared for association approval: (i.e., yet-to-be-approved project outlines) should go to the Chair of the RCIC, with "carbon copies" to the members of the RCIC, all association members, the Office of the Executive Director (OED), the CSREES representative, Directors of Stations outside the region with participating scientists, to administrators of units that (will) have participating scientists (e.g., ARS, 1890 institutions, Schools of Forestry), and to all committee members.

Association approved documents: (e.g., approved project outlines) should go to the CSREES Partnership Office, with "carbon copies" to the Office of the Executive Director (OED) and the CSREES representative. Other copies may be distributed as appropriate.

Project records: (e.g., meeting minutes, annual reports) should go to the CSREES Partnership Office, with "carbon copies" to the Office of the Executive Director (OED), all members of the technical committee, and the CSREES representative.

Additionally, all of these correspondences are greatly facilitated by the National Information Management and Support System (NIMSS). This service is provided to each of the four geographical regional associations. Users of the system have expressed their appreciation for this innovation. All of the National Multistate Research Guidelines and customized exceptions for individual regional differences are directly reflected in NIMSS. Most operations are so automated that Administrative Advisors and SAES Directors are freed for attending to other duties. Project and committee member participants in the NIMSS are relieved of many otherwise burdensome tasks.

Agenda setting - The Administrative Advisor should work with the committee chair or executive committee in preparing the agenda for all announced meetings. As hinted earlier, many experienced Administrative Advisors strongly recommend that the meeting agenda be built around the project's objectives. It is widely acknowledged that this type of agenda takes more time, but it is said to be clearly worth the investment. The reason is that scientists begin to think more about the activity's objectives, and to focus on what they are trying to accomplish when the information is presented in an objective-oriented meeting. Administrative Advisors who have had a lot of experience with committee meetings are often very critical of agendas organized to give reports by state, or by discipline. A research-objective oriented agenda is much preferred.

Resource monitoring - Another duty of the Administrative Advisor is to monitor the resource commitments to the activity. Some institutions commit salaries, technicians, travel and other operating expenses to a considerable degree to support scientists' participation in a Multistate Research Project. Other institutions pledge only a small amount of scientific activity, usually noted in on the Appendix E as 0.1 SYs. Such small commitments are not a good signal and are probably to be taken as lack of institutional commitment to that Multistate Research Project. Some institutions assign no scientist-salary for Multistate

Research Projects, thus intentionally opening up considerable amounts of funding to support their scientists' participation in Multistate Research Projects.

The point of requiring full funding for Multistate Research Projects has been discussed on past occasions by many Directors. Some Directors have argued that minimum levels of support per SY should be set as a standard for participation in a project. Other Directors have proposed that a commitment in "real dollars" be made up-front (i.e., at the beginning of a project) to judge each Station's commitment, and the likelihood of a project's success.

These arguments have been found to be divisive from several standpoints. None of the proposals seem realistic for a federation of autonomous institutions that is characterized by each Director's freedom to operate independently. The allocation of funds to projects is a prerogative of the State Agricultural Experiment Station Director, and each Director may use a different strategy of funding his/her commitments. Thus, as noted earlier, when an individual scientist voices complaints regarding the availability of funding when participating in a multistate activity, it is best for the Administrative Advisor to recommend that the scientist direct the question to the department head/chair or to the director of the Station where he/she is employed.

Orientation - Administrative Advisors have a duty to provide an orientation to new members of Multistate Research Projects. The Administrative Advisor should be able to explain the Directors' intent and degree of commitment to an activity, and the expectations that the Directors have for that activity. The Administrative Advisor should be able to spell-out the regional policies and procedures for Multistate Research management that can be very different among regions. For illustration, consider the situation where a scientist from one region with experience in Multistate Research Projects joins a project in another region where policies and procedures can be sharply different. Thus, there is a need for the Administrative Advisor to provide new members an effective orientation. The Administrative Advisor is encouraged to use as reference material; the National Guidelines for Multistate Research, and the appropriate regional manuals that are prepared by the regional SAES Directors Associations.

New members - Another responsibility of the Administrative Advisor is to facilitate the addition of new members to an activity. This is a time consuming process from some standpoints and can sometimes be even more demanding when the request is for participation by a non-Land-Grant institution (although experiences vary on this point). This often means that the Administrative Advisors must give extra follow-up attention to a request by non-SAES administrators.

When an Administrative Advisor receives a request from a Director to execute an addendum the Administrative Advisor must provide assurances that the request is consistent with project objectives and that the changes are accepted and consistent with the committee's perspectives. The process is facilitated by NIMSS.

Technical committees are reminded that they cannot vote on the admittance of a new member. This is the purview of the SAES Director. In some cases there may be an objection from a committee relative to a particular scientist. In such situations the Administrative Advisor should be prepared to defuse the issue before it becomes a major point of contention.

Monitor duplication - Administrative Advisors are expected to pay close attention to the need to prevent unnecessary duplication of research activities. Administrative Advisors should assure that a CRIS search has been completed before beginning the preparation of a project outline. This search should reveal information about any research activities in the same or similar areas, thus alerting the proposal drafting committee to potential duplication.

The Administrative Advisor should encourage the technical committee to meet with other groups to explore common areas of interest, and perhaps identify any unnecessary overlaps. This effort can be supplemented by the CSREES representative, who should also be working to spot repetition within the system, and provide a national perspective to the evaluation.

Meeting minutes - The Administrative Advisor should work with the committee in developing meeting minutes. These serve as a record of the meeting and all actions. However, minutes of meetings are no longer required by the CSREES. Instead, CSREES requests that the SAES Form 422 be used to record the meeting's decisions, and the activity's accomplishments reported against its objectives and milestones. However, the minutes are a useful mechanism for monitoring attendance of meetings and for judging what has been accomplished since the last meeting and can be linked to the SAES 422. Administrative Advisors should share the meeting minutes and annual reports broadly, to allow others to study them to see if needless research duplication exists. Again, this is facilitated by NIMSS.

Annual report - The Administrative Advisor is also responsible for making sure that the activity's annual report (SAES-422) is completed via the NIMSS, broadly distributed, and officially deposited with the CSREES. The Administrative Advisor should assess what has been accomplished since the last report and to make sure that an accurate documentation of the project's achievements, outputs and impacts are being reported.

Oversight and accountability - Administrative Advisors are responsible for providing accountability through several vehicles. Through his/her oversight the Administrative Advisor maintains a continuing assessment of the quality of the research being conducted.

Some important items to be evaluated by the Administrative Advisor on an annual basis are the degree of research collaboration, as well as the progress being made by the project. The Administrative Advisor also needs to act as a liaison back to the sponsoring association to keep the member-Directors informed of the value of their investments in the activity.

The Administrative Advisor has a duty to set deadlines for necessary activities, especially when those activities are required (e.g., SAES-422).

Record keeping - A primary duty of the Administrative Advisor is in keeping excellent records, especially for all decisions that were made regarding an individual activity. The Administrative Advisor's records are often the only reliable source of what has been decided. Good records prevent frustration and reduce needless repetition.

One experienced Administrative Advisor has recommended that an Administrative Advisor's notes should be prepared in a way that they can be readily passed on to the next Administrative Advisor. Given today's seemingly rapid turnover of Administrative Advisors, this seems to be sound advice. Another helpful suggestion made by an Administrative Advisor was to organize the records by activities: such as 1) project outline preparation and approvals; 2) project membership; 3) meeting minutes; and 4) annual reports.

It is interesting to note that the original processes for managing multistate activities were conceived and approved many years ago when the office of a State Agricultural Experiment Station Director typically had more staff resources available for managing Multistate Research Projects. This is no longer the case, and strong interest has been expressed for the help being provided by NIMSS.

Editorial Duties - Another duty of an Administrative Advisor is to (at least) monitor the document writing process (e.g., drafting a Multistate Research Project outline or Multistate Coordinating Committee proposal, keeping meeting minutes, writing the annual (SAES-422.)) Oftentimes Administrative Advisors do not know the degree to which they should participate in document writing. Administrative Advisors should indicate their willingness to review drafts, and they should set aside time to help meet the various deadlines. In certain circumstances experienced Administrative Advisors have no qualm about becoming directly involved in the writing process, if nothing other than simply to get the job done.

Disseminating the Results - Finally, there is a real need to get the results of the Multistate Research activities into the hands of the users. Every Multistate Research Project, Coordinating Committee or Education/Extension/Research activity should give strong consideration to how it will disseminate the results of its activities. Will it be done through electronic media? Will a partnership be formed with extension? Does industry need to be included? Should some outcome-oriented project objectives be developed? To better address how the activity's research outcomes will be transferred for intended benefits, planning should begin at the proposal development stage. Fulfilling this obligation may require some up-front commitments.

Fulfilling all these duties may represent to the new Administrative Advisor an overwhelming challenge. There is however one useful "trick" that is used by experienced Administrative Advisors for getting tasks done by a deadline. This "trick" is to plan backwards. This is done by identifying what needs to be done by a certain date, and then calculating the intermediate dates that will lead up to achieving that deadline. Each of the above duties of an Administrative Advisor can be approached in this manner.