JoRMA
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

A Holistic Understanding of Challenges for Research Administrators Working in the Research Enterprise at Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

What is new?	Research administrators (RAs) play a key role in supporting, managing, and facilitating research activity at higher education institutions (HEIs). Despite their integral role in the research enterprise, RAs face a multitude of challenges ranging from role clarity to burnout. The literature has yet to contextualize these specific difficulties onto the wider framework of HEIs.
What was the approach?	We applied a holistic approach, using the Ecological Systems Theory, to understand challenges that RAs experience at HEIs. Interviews were conducted in-person and virtually with research professionals working at 28 HEIs in South Carolina (N = 53). Participants were asked about their perceptions of challenges they experience related to research support and/or resources for their role at their HEI.

What is the academic impact?	Challenges emerged across all ecological system-levels and many of them were interconnected. RAs described challenges, at the microsystem-level, when working with other RAs and faculty, as well as navigating a demanding work environment. Mesosystem-level challenges related to working with research leadership at their institution, experiencing a lack of university guidance, and having limited training opportunities. Exosystem-level challenges centred on institutional research infrastructure, budgetary constraints, and the focus of their institution. Macrosystem-level challenges were associated with federal policy changes, while chronosystem-level challenges resulted from the broader societal shift to increase research at HEIs.
What is the wider impact?	This holistic, system-level approach provides a foundation for understanding the complex challenges faced by RAs. HEIs should address the challenges experienced by RAs and identify their organizational needs to grow research capacity at their institution. Based on our findings, we provide targeted recommendations that align with the ecological system level to help HEIs strengthen their research capacity and enhance the RA workforce.
Keywords	Ecological systems theory; Research challenges; Higher Education Institutions

INTRODUCTION

The higher education institution (HEI) research enterprise is a complex, interconnected system that is dedicated to advancing research (Celeste et al., 2014; National Science Foundation, n.d.). The research enterprise consists of a workforce focused on initiating, advancing, and managing research activity, along with maintaining compliance with institutional, local, state, and federal regulations (Celeste et al., 2014; National Science Foundation, n.d.). Research at HEIs has been steadily increasing in volume and complexity (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2024; Schneider, 2020). For example, research and development spending at HEIs in the United States increased 11.2% in fiscal year 2023. This was the largest increase since fiscal year 2003 (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2024). As the volume of research at HEIs increases, the need to support researchers in varying aspects of administrative and programmatic support has resulted in the expanding professional field of research administration.

These professionals, broadly referred to as research administrators (RAs) focus on supporting, managing, and facilitating research activity (Zink et al., 2022) and their role is integral to the

research enterprise at HEIs (National Science Foundation, n.d.; Smith, 2019). Even though research administration is a core component of the research enterprise, there is a lack of a standard occupational definition for RA positions (Martínez & Tejero, 2025; Woodward & Roberts, 2025a; Zink et al., 2022). Therefore, RAs need to have a broad range of skills, abilities, and knowledge due to role responsibilities potentially spanning research development, pre-award, post-award, ethics, compliance, and/or including other tasks within the research enterprise (Goodman, 2019; Kerridge, 2023; Zink et al., 2022). While more established HEI research programs (e.g., R1 institutions) have distinct research administration positions (i.e., pre-award, post-award, compliance), smaller or developing HEIs (e.g., predominantly undergraduate institutions; PUIs) may not have the infrastructure to support individual RA roles (Woodward & Roberts, 2025b). Therefore, RAs' job duties may be comprised of activities that would typically be handled by more than one person in larger institutions with more robust research infrastructure (Schiller, 2022).

Despite RAs being crucial to supporting research at HEIs, those working as RAs and the profession as a whole experience ongoing challenges such as lack of adequate staffing (which can be exacerbated by pipeline shortfalls, no clear career path, and unclear position descriptions). For example, the workforce is not increasing enough to keep up with the rapidly accelerating pace, volume, and complexity of research initiatives (Shambrook et al., 2015), which potentially hinders an institution's research capacity (Smith, 2019). Researchers have started to examine work-related challenges for RAs (Alongi, 2024; Schiller, 2022, 2023; Tabakakis et al., 2020; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021; Woodward & Roberts, 2025a). However, most of these studies have only focused on single challenges for RAs such as burnout (Tabakakis et al., 2020), retention (Alongi, 2024; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021), or administrative burden (Schiller, 2022, 2023). Importantly, these challenges do not occur in isolation as RAs work with and are affected by other HEI employees (e.g., leadership, faculty, other RAs), infrastructure and other resources available, and institutional policies. However, the existing literature does not fully situate the challenges within the broader higher education system. Additionally, while institutions frequently set ambitious goals to expand research, they often fail to scale funding for human capital, infrastructure, and training, leaving RAs to absorb the resulting operational strain. This study provides a holistic understanding of the challenges for RAs working at HEIs. In order to guide efforts to support RAs, and thus the research enterprise more generally, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of RA challenges as reported by research enterprise leadership and staff, as well as university leadership, across 28 HEIs in South Carolina.

Workforce Pipeline and Structural Challenges

RAs face structural challenges that impact entry into and retention in the workforce at U.S. HEIs (Rullman et al., 2023; Stromm, 2023; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021; Woodward & Roberts, 2025b; Zink et al., 2022). A primary concern in the U.S. and internationally is the lack of a professional trajectory into the RA profession. Dutta et al. (2023) used the 2022 Research

Administration as a Profession survey (RAAAP-3) to examine how participants became research managers and administrators (*N* = 3,532). They found that only 21% of participants intentionally joined the research management and administration field, while 59% found their way to the role by happenstance (Dutta et al., 2023; Zink et al., 2022). Additionally, the number of new individuals joining the RA workforce is declining in the U.S., while the fastest growing age group of RAs is > 60 (Shambrook et al., 2015; Shambrook & Roberts, 2011). These findings raise concern about the stability of the RA professional pipeline and the impact on RA staffing shortages.

Recruitment for RAs is further complicated by a limited pool of qualified applicants (The Chronicle of Higher Education and Huron, 2022). These challenges are especially evident at emerging research institutions and minority-serving institutions in the U.S. due to the limited resources to attract and retain qualified applicants (Woodward & Roberts, 2025b). Uncompetitive salaries compared to industry employers (Zahneis, 2023) and compensation dissatisfaction also hinder the recruitment of RAs into the HEI workforce in the U.S. and internationally (Alongi, 2024; Rullman et al., 2023; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021). HEI staff have expressed that they are not compensated adequately for their workload, credentialing, experience, and the complexity of their role (Rullman et al., 2023). Welch & Brantmeier (2021) surveyed 143 HEI RAs and found that inadequate compensation was a motivator to leave their position, while adequate compensation was a motivator to stay. This finding was supported by Alongi (2024), who surveyed 479 RAs and found that inadequate compensation was a main factor in leaving their RA position. Scholars have acknowledged that there is a need to reexamine compensation structures (Rullman et al., 2023) and have proposed how HEIs can provide adequate compensation for faculty and staff to improve satisfaction and retention (McClure, 2024). For example, HEI professionals can create and implement a compensation strategy into institutional budget planning, update classifications and ranges for positions to ensure base pay is fair and competitive, implement consistent annual-pay programs, conduct equity audits, and invest in human resources infrastructure (McClure, 2024).

Training gaps also contribute to structural challenges for RAs in their position at U.S. HEIs and internationally. Martínez & Tejero (2025) examined the top challenges faced by research managers and administrators. They found that the lack of training was a top challenge for research managers and administrators. This is consistent with the RAAAP-3 survey conducted in 2022, which shows that lack of training is still a challenge for research managers and administrators (Dutta et al., 2023). Notably, access to professional development and training is also identified by RAs as a motivator to remain in their role (Alongi, 2024). These findings suggest that training can function as a challenge and a retention factor.

Role Clarity, Identity, and Career Trajectories

While structural challenges impact the entry into and retention in the RA profession at a systemic level, RAs also experience challenges related to how their roles are defined and valued within institutions. RAs in the U.S. and internationally consistently report that there is a lack of consistent job titles for their profession (Martínez & Tejero, 2025; Woodward & Roberts, 2025b; Zink et al., 2022). This lack of a standardized job title contributes to ambiguity in job responsibilities for RAs (Dutta et al., 2023; Stromm, 2023; Woodward & Roberts, 2025b). As a result, RAs face a lack of role clarity in HEIs. Another challenge RAs may experience is limited career advancement (Martínez & Tejero, 2025; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021; Woodward & Roberts, 2025b; Zink et al., 2022). Often, there is a "flat" hierarchy in research administration with limited opportunities for promotion and career mobility (Alongi, 2024; Zink et al., 2022). Constrained promotion pathways can impact career commitment and contribute to turnover (Welch & Brantmeier, 2021). Many RAs report they feel undervalued and do not receive enough recognition for their role (Dutta et al., 2023; Martínez & Tejero, 2025; Rullman et al., 2023; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021; Zink et al., 2022). However, supervisor support emerges as a protective factor for retention (Alongi, 2024; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021). Similarly, Rullman et al. (2023) suggested that leadership skills training is needed to shape the higher education profession to attract and retain talent.

Work Environment, Burnout, and Daily Administrative Burden

In addition to the structural and professional identity challenges faced by RAs, they also experience day-to-day challenges in their work environment (Rullman et al., 2023; Stromm, 2023; Tabakakis et al., 2020; Woodward & Roberts, 2025b; Wray & Kinman, 2021). These everyday challenges play a critical role in shaping RAs well-being (Tabakakis et al., 2020; Wray & Kinman, 2021). RAs report experiencing demanding workload, compromised mental-health and well-being, high stress, rapid work pace, work-family conflict, and poor work-life balance (Rullman et al., 2023; Stromm, 2023; Woodward & Roberts, 2025b; Wray & Kinman, 2021). Tabakakis et al. (2020) surveyed over 2,200 RAs to determine which factors were related to personal burnout (e.g., feeling tired, exhausted, worn out), work-related burnout (e.g., feeling worn out at the end of the working day, work is emotionally exhausting or frustrating), and client-related burnout (e.g., clients are hard to work with, frustrating, drain energy). They found that increases in quality of leadership, role clarity, and rewards were associated with less personal, work-related, and client-related burnout. Similarly, more social support from supervisors was related to less personal and work-related burnout. However, workload, work pace, and work-family conflict were positively associated with personal, work-related, and client-related burnout. A good work/life balance was a motivator for RAs to remain in their role (Alongi, 2024; Rullman et al., 2023; Welch & Brantmeier, 2021). Scholars have begun to propose solutions to mitigate the challenges faced by staff at HEIs (Rullman et al., 2023). Rullmen et al. (2023) emphasized the need to invest in well-being initiatives, acknowledge staff for their contributions, make positive changes to the work environment,

and address leadership skills training to shape the higher education profession and attract and retain talent.

RAs also face an administrative burden in their role. Schiller (2023) surveyed 122 RAs and found that federal research grant management was a particularly salient task burden. Federal sponsors that were associated with the most administrative burden for RAs were the Department of Defense, Department of Justice, Department of Education, National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Energy. The most administratively burdensome tasks reported by RAs were effort reporting, updating internal policies to reflect federal regulations, cost share tracking, monthly portfolio reporting, and invoicing/cash collections (Schiller, 2023). The inconsistency and frequent changes across federal grant management systems and processes are challenging for RAs (Schiller, 2022, 2023). Additionally, RAs expressed that they were not prepared to train others (Stromm, 2023). Training others was reported as a burden for RAs in their role, contributing to job dissatisfaction and turnover (Stromm, 2023).

Ecological Systems Theory (EST)

Research has indirectly discussed that the challenges experienced by RAs are not independently related to the structural infrastructure, leadership relationship, role identity, work environment, or administrative burden. Rather, challenges arise at multiple system levels and interact to influence job satisfaction, burnout, and retention. To directly address this issue and better understand how multisystem factors interact to influence RAs' lived experiences at HEIs, we use Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). EST emphasizes that individual development is influenced by the interconnection of environmental factors. The EST consists of five systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. First, the microsystem refers to an individual's immediate environment, including peer relationships, family, and work environment. Second, the mesosystem refers to connections between the different microsystems (e.g., RA – leadership support relationships). Next, the exosystem refers to the indirect influence on an individual, including local governments and mass media. The macrosystem refers to broader cultural influences and public policy. Finally, the chronosystem refers to shifts that occur over time, including societal changes and historical events. While EST was originally developed to explain child development, research has examined how multisystem interactions impact workplace settings in various populations (Bone, 2015; Bury et al., 2024; Yang & Sanborn, 2021). The EST has been applied to HEI contexts such as college students' development and experience (Patton et al., 2016; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Renn & Smith, 2023) and to guide programs aimed at enhancing student success and outcomes in specific populations (e.g., first-generation students, (Kitchen et al., 2021)). Recent research has begun to integrate EST with research design and human development pathways to examine leadership in organizations (Abbas et al., 2025).

RAs at HEIs have different experiences from others at HEIs such as faculty, staff, and students. Research has examined singular challenges within the HEI research enterprise for RAs, such as role clarity, identity, career trajectory, work environment, burnout, and administrative burden. However, researchers have not situated these challenges within the broader HEI system context. Further, HEIs' ambitious goals to increase research often fail to back these ambitions with the necessary infrastructure—such as personnel, streamlined systems, robust policies, and targeted training. Consequently, the operational burden of this gap falls squarely on RAs. The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges research enterprise support staff face in their role at higher education institutions, using the EST, to gain a holistic understanding and explanation of the common challenges faced by RAs. The EST offers a systematic approach to understanding RA challenges described by research enterprise leadership and staff, as well as university leadership, across 28 HEIs in South Carolina using a multisystem approach.

METHODS

RECRUITMENT

A primary list of research enterprise professionals from 34 South Carolina (SC) HEIs with a Carnegie Classification of Baccalaureate College or higher was used for recruitment, including executive leadership (e.g., provost, vice president for research), leadership (e.g., director of sponsored research, dean), and RAs (e.g., grant administrator, research development, compliance). The primary list was created from website searches of SC HEI departments or divisions of research and office of sponsored programs to identify research enterprise professionals. Inclusion criteria for the study included working: 1) at one of the 34 SC HEIs; 2) in a research enterprise role. Research leadership and RAs were initially recruited by email, with two follow-up emails. Additional recruitment methods included phone calls, in-person at conferences, and recommendations from participants. Of the 34 SC HEIs identified, no interviews were conducted with six: one HEI closed during the study, one HEI used their main campus for all research related activities, and four HEI did not respond to recruitment attempts.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected, February 2025 to August 2025, through individual interviews with SC HEI research enterprise professionals (N = 53). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Clemson University (Protocol # IRB2024-0824) on January 7, 2025. Interviews were conducted either in-person, at the participants' HEI, or virtually, based on participants' preferences and availability. A semi-structured interview guide was used with each interview. The interview guide was created with guidance from research enterprise professionals and pilot tested with three RAs. The pilot tests were not included in the overall results.

Prior to each interview, participants provided informed consent. To ensure a shared understanding of the research enterprise, the interviewer presented a standardized definition and an accompanying figure depicting its components at the beginning of each interview. Figure 1 presents the image of the different components in the research enterprise. During the interview, participants were asked open-ended questions about their research enterprise role, how research was managed at their institution, and their perception of what was needed to advance the research enterprise at the HEI. This study sought to capture research enterprise professionals' perceptions of challenges experienced by RAs. This study focused on the question: "What challenges exist related to existing research support and/or resources at your college/university for RA staff?"



Figure 1. The different components in the research enterprise

Interviews lasted, on average, 59 minutes (*SD* = 21, Range: 22-115 minutes). Interviews were audio-recorded. One of the participants requested to not be audio recorded; therefore, notes were taken manually during that interview. Interviews were transcribed, initially by a secure transcription service and then edited by members of the research team. After participating in the interview, each participant had the option to enter themselves in a participation drawing for a $45 Amazon e-gift card (one drawing per 10 participants), with the knowledge that their contact information would not be associated with their interview.

Data Analysis

Most participants (85%, 45/53) in this study were employed at emerging research institutions, HEIs that have undergraduate or graduate programs and conduct less than $50 million in federal research and development funding (U.S. Department of Energy, n.d.). At emerging research institutions, research leadership often hold more than one research-related role (e.g., faculty member and research support professional (Brantley, 2021)). For example, the majority of the leadership participants (81%; 17/21) in this study had work responsibilities that included pre-award tasks, in addition to their research leadership responsibilities. Given this role overlap, we opted to include research leadership participants in the analysis. Although some quotes in the results section are by research leadership, every challenge reported was also discussed by at least one of the RA participants.

During the initial reading of the transcripts, the coding team (AMS, JS) realized that the challenges described by participants were multi-layered. For example, in discussing how their electronic research administration (eRA) system did not work holistically, one participant explained that effort reporting was a challenge for them. With further analysis we found that the eRA system not working holistically affected the RA's other work areas such as when working with faculty and other university staff; these challenges were further compounded by a limited digital infrastructure, as the eRA system did not function in an integrated manner, ultimately increasing the RA's workload. To understand the multi-system complexity of the challenges that RAs experience working at HEIs, we thematically analyzed the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017) using the EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005), so that we could accurately capture the themes and interpret them within a theoretical model.

First, the data was thematically analyzed. To generate initial codes, the coding team independently reviewed five transcripts and created an initial list of codes from the data. The coding team met to discuss the initial codes and to create an initial codebook. We repeated this process weekly with both members of the coding team independently coding transcripts and then meeting to review and revise the coding and codebook until all the transcripts were reviewed. Through this iterative process, we were able to strengthen the depth and robustness of the analysis and ensure the analysis was based on the participant narratives and coding team interpretation. Next, we searched for themes by collating codes to determine how they linked to form a theme. Once the data was themed, the coding team determined how the themes fit within the EST model. Preliminary findings and model were presented during team meetings. Outputs were refined, based on team member feedback.

Results

The 53 participants represented 28 HEIs in South Carolina and worked in executive leadership (e.g., provost, vice president of research; n = 14), leadership (e.g., director, dean; n = 21), and RA roles (e.g., pre-award, post-award, compliance; n = 18). Most of the participants (74%; 38/53) were female and had been in their current position, on average, five years (SD = 6.0).

This aligns with the 2022 RAAAP survey, where 80% of participants worldwide reported their gender to be female (Oliveira et al., 2023). Participants in RA roles were responsible for pre-award tasks (e.g., grant crafting, helping draft and/or edit proposals, processing proposals, drafting budgets, submitting proposals), post-award tasks (e.g., grant management and coordination, administering funds post-award), and grant compliance (e.g., financial compliance). Five RAs worked in only one area of research administration; however, most of the RA participants (72%; 13/18) worked in more than one area of research administration (e.g., being responsible for pre- and post-award) and/or other HEI roles (e.g., budget office, faculty). A third (33%; 6/18) of the RA participants were responsible for compliance as it related to their institution's internal review board (IRB), such responsibilities included compliance with federal regulations, creation of policies, review of protocols, and maintenance of records.

Figure 2 presents the ecological systems model applied to RA challenges in HEI and the following sections present the findings for each of the five EST systems.

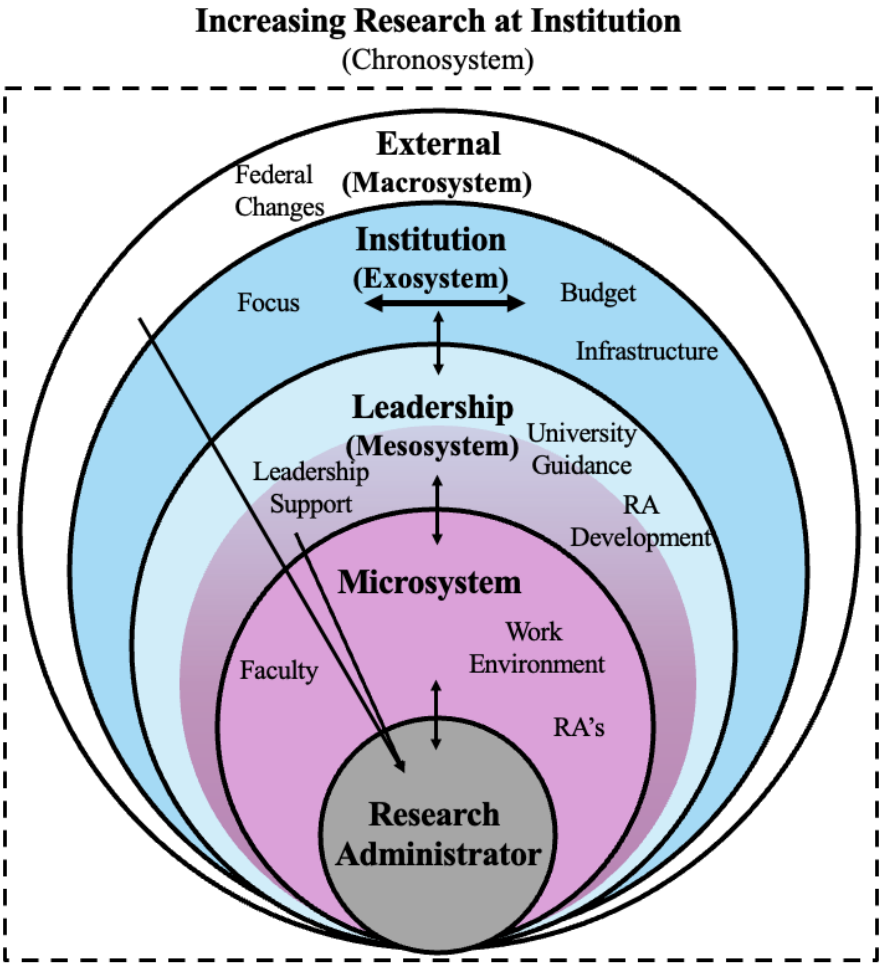

Figure 2. Ecological systems model applied to research administrator challenges working in higher education institutions

MICROSYSTEM

RAs' research challenges were directly affected by who they worked with, other RAs and faculty, and their work environment.

RA - RA

Daily challenges experienced by RAs when working with other RAs included RAs withholding information, tension between RAs in different positions (e.g., pre-award and post-award), and minimal collaboration among RAs. P31 (RA) explained, "It's almost like a possessive ownership, 'I've been here 10,000 years, and this is how I've done it, and this is how I'm going to…'" In addition, participants noted that some RA's lack of research knowledge in their role acted as a barrier for research activity at HEIs. P43 (leadership) described, "I went to the business office to ask what our overhead rate was. They had never heard of an overhead rate."

While not a daily challenge for RAs, participants explained that they worked with RAs who had a wealth of institutional knowledge, although it was undocumented institutional knowledge. P27 (RA) stated:

> *There's a lot of institutional knowledge at [University] between our office, and also, we have a lot of faculties (sic) that have been in the research enterprise or in the grant world for a while…The flip side of that is that it's not very well-documented.*

As a result, participants explained that without proper documentation of this institutional knowledge, when the RA leaves the institution – due to retirement or career transition – their research knowledge goes with them, which would create challenges for other RAs. P25 (RA) explained, "I think the loss of some people that are retiring is going to be a big problem."

RA – Faculty

RAs described being frustrated when working with faculty who do not understand or ignore institutional or grant policies and procedures. P25 (RA) shared, "You have investigators that tend to want to push the limits sometimes with what they're asking for, and I could argue with them. Sometimes they'll believe me, sometimes they won't." In addition, participants explained that due to their institution's goal to increase research in tandem with limited research development training opportunities for faculty, RAs found it difficult as they were providing more spontaneous one-on-one training with faculty. P16 (RA) noted, "It is definitely very much one-on-one, somewhat repetitive in the moment instead [of] being a resource upfront." Participants also found it frustrating when faculty did not understand what services were available to them, which varied by institution. P21 (RA) explained:

> *At this school, the faculties are expecting the staff, or the grant accounting staff, to provide them with the budget and the writing… We are not prime*

> *recipient to most of the grants unless it's been just given to us. That tells me the lack of training, the lack of understanding of what being a prime means, and as well as the resources that we cannot provide to the faculty after the award has been granted.*

An ongoing annoyance noted for RAs, which ultimately created more work for them, occurred when faculty sent incomplete forms, forms with errors, or did not return forms on time. P6 (executive leadership) shared:

> *I don't understand faculty who are getting federal funds, when they get their time and effort template, why they just can't fill it out and send it back in a timely fashion. We have less than 50% return, which means we have to send out more emails, sometimes, go knocking on doors. Then the percentage of which are correctly filled out on the first time around is low. Even on those who have filled them out before.*

Work Environment

The majority of participants described excessive workload as a central challenge faced by RAs. P5 (leadership) stated, [RAs are] "never not busy". RAs were required to prioritize time-sensitive activities, which limited their capacity to complete other role-related responsibilities, such as faculty professional development or training. Additionally, challenges related to monitoring deadlines and submissions contributed to an already overextended workload. P1 (executive leadership) shared: "I think keeping track of all the different proposals and their due dates and making sure that everything is ready to be submitted on time is probably the greatest challenge that [RAs] have." Ultimately, the heavy workload limited the depth of support that RAs could provide to faculty. P41 (RA) explained, "The growing workload has reduced my ability to provide good service to my clients [faculty]."

Mesosystem

Research challenges were directly connected to leadership (mesosystem), including working with leadership and the decisions made by leadership.

Leadership – RA

RAs found their research roles particularly challenging when they perceived a lack of leadership support, especially when problems arose without clear guidance or assistance from leadership. P37 (RA) highlighted, "I feel like we don't have the senior-level support. Especially when something goes wrong, and then everybody shuts down. Seemingly, they don't want to have anything to do with it until it looks better." Inconsistent adherence to university policies was perceived as a form of limited leadership support and contributed to increased stress amongst RAs. P46 (leadership) shared:

> *We have a timeline policy of when proposals should be submitted and routing for final review. There is a policy, but it's not adhered to from college to college. It's a strain on the pre-award office when we have a deadline of draft documents five days before the deadline, and final document, according to the university policy, should be routing in final submit form. It's hard to police that if the ADRs in the college will let faculty come in day of, 2 o'clock with documents. That does not give the pre-award office considerable time to review for compliance. It's stressful and it's frustrating, because we don't feel like we're able to do our best work under those types of rush situations.*

Finally, limited understanding among research leadership regarding grant processes, leadership roles, and available research support services posed a significant challenge for RAs and contributed to the microsystem level work environment challenge. P40 (RA) explained:

> *I would say leadership [are the most challenging, or most stressful for RAs]. Their lack of understanding of the process and all that's required. The reason I say leadership and not faculty, is that when faculty has an issue, they report it to leadership. If leadership doesn't have the knowledge or awareness of what all is involved, then they tend to guide the faculty in the wrong direction. I think if they had more awareness and knowledge of the process and all that's involved, I think they can help us in our process reducing our stress and reducing our workload by, again, holding faculty accountable to their job responsibilities.*

Leadership – RAs' work environment

University guidance and trainings are implemented by leadership but affect RAs' work environment. A lack of university guidance, especially regarding research policies and procedures at the institution creates challenges for RAs in implementing their research responsibilities. P2 (executive leadership) shared:

> *She [faculty member who leads the compliance and IRB] has said to me, there's just been a lack of administrative guidance. A lack of a feeling that this was part of the strategic plan of the institution. The other staff member [new hire working with grant development] … mentioned to me that there just aren't any policies or procedures here guiding grant writing. It feels like we're starting from scratch.*

A lack of training opportunities, such as comprehensive onboarding and professional development, created challenges within RAs' work environments, resulting in difficulties performing research related tasks. Participants shared that a challenge for RAs is that they receive inadequate onboarding training. P31 (RA) explained:

> *What I've experienced coming through the door is when people have been there so long, they really don't know how to train you. They really don't know how to give you the necessary information that's needed from start to finish. They don't know how to have procedures in writing that a new person, like me, can come in. It's been very difficult.*

Participants also indicated that RAs need more training on specific topics such as effort reporting, uniform guidance, finding funding opportunities, or the life cycle of a grant. P30 (RA) shared, "One thing that I haven't brought up is effort reporting, and the lack of understanding of what that is." The majority of the participants shared that they do not receive any continued training or professional development provided by their institution. P50 (RA) explained:

> *For training on my end, I mean, because I am not from grants administration or anything at all, and I sort of had a career change. I don't really know a lot of the resources that are out there. Most of what I've learned has sort of come from [Associate Provost for Research] and his suggestions that he's given me. And I've watched some, like, YouTube videos that other institutions put out for, like, what they do for things. I've done some of my own research, but I don't really have the time a lot to just go out and look for stuff in work hours.*

EXOSYSTEM

RAs research challenges were connected indirectly to the institution-level (exosystem), including institution infrastructure, focus of the institution, and institution budget.

Institution infrastructure

Challenges related to organizational structure and human capital, including insufficient numbers of RAs and the need for additional staffing, emerged as significant issues for RAs. A lack of RAs was an issue at R1 institutions as P46 (leadership) shared, "The pre-award area is understaffed… We're running bare bones, and everyone's exhausted." It was also an issue for emerging research institutions, where there may be one or two dedicated RAs. P48 (leadership) explained, "There is only one person solely responsible for pre-award and post-award." Six of the HEIs did not have any dedicated RAs, therefore research leadership were "having to do the roles for the staffing… they're carrying too many hats" (P39, RA). Insufficient RA personnel posed a significant challenge for institutions increasing research capacity and attempting to support researchers. These staffing challenges at the institutional level impact RAs' workload. P33 (RA) elaborated, "We are so understaffed with the volume of research we do and the volume we are expected to do. It's just critical mass. We need more people."

RAs reported several digital infrastructure challenges, including the absence of an eRA system, the presence of non-integrated eRA systems, outdated computer equipment, and, in

some cases, the absence of an updated institutional website. Eleven of the institutions in this study did not have an eRA system. As a result, RAs at these institutions were mainly using Excel spreadsheets to track research activities. A lack of an eRA system created a manual, labor-intensive process for RAs to track research activities, which ultimately generated more work for RAs. Additionally, it made it difficult to have easily accessible research-related information. P49 (RA) shared:

> *The lack of an electronic research administration system, like [eRA system] or something like that, it makes it very hard for us sometimes to have accurate information. When deans or chairs or PIs will ask for us for certain help with certain projects or whatnot, we can't provide that help, because we don't have the infrastructure to support, especially reporting capabilities. We can't really generate the kind of reports that they want, at least not very easily. That takes a long time.*

Eight of the institutions in this study used an eRA system, but the system did not work holistically throughout a grant's lifecycle; it was used specifically for pre-award activities or specifically post-award activities. P30 (RA) explained, "Now, [Colleague] does some reporting out of [eRA system], but mainly it's from a pre-award perspective on proposals that have been submitted and awarded. As far as post-award, and projects ongoing, we depend on that spreadsheet." Not having an eRA system, or not having an eRA system that worked holistically, was seen as a major risk for RAs. P30 (RA) stated:

> *Everything we do is so piecemealed, and you don't have all of the information in one place. That is our biggest challenge, and it's our biggest risk. Like I said, you could forget something in a heartbeat. It's all dependent on a row [in Excel] not getting deleted, a calendar reminder not getting done. The risk there is just huge to me.*

Research leadership at five institutions in this study had recently purchased eRA systems with integrated functionality, while one institution was developing an in-house eRA system in an effort to alleviate these challenges for RAs and strengthen the institution's research enterprise. P50 (RA) shared, "I would say that's one of the biggest issues, is that lack of a system that we can use to do that [tracking grants]. Along with that, it's also our financial system, which hopefully the [eRA system] software will help." However, integration of the eRA system created a new challenge, which delayed the new system's operation. Other digital infrastructure challenges were outdated computers and issues with websites. Not having modern technology can impact RAs' ability to complete their work effectively. P41 explained, "We need to be on a PC replacement schedule. My loaner warranty expired in March 24, and it is getting cranky. So slow." Website-related issues included not having any websites with information, or not having updated or easy to access websites.

Another infrastructure-related challenge that emerged from the interviews concerned physical infrastructure, specifically RAs' office spaces. P44 shares, "We're all spread out over campus, and I think that has been, in the past, a challenge to have a cohesive post- and pre-award office."

Institution budget

The institution budget, particularly, the limited institutional funds, influenced the decisions leadership made to administer the budget (mesosystem) including how much to allot to the institution's infrastructure (exosystem) or to the research enterprise, which directly impacted the RAs' salary. A common issue shared by the RAs was feeling inadequately compensated for the volume of work they performed. P28 (RA) shared, "There's just been financial constraints with it being a small institution… Not for the amount of hours we put in [salaries are not commensurate with the work they do]. No, not even close." Salaries also affected the RAs' perceptions of their value within the research enterprise, which ultimately affected recruitment and retention. P40 (RA) elaborated:

> *I don't think we're valued as much as we should be with the amount of work that's required of us. It's very time-consuming. In order for staff retention, having to be competitive in salary would be … I think would help.*

Focus of the institution

Most of the institutions in this study were historically teaching-focused institutions. For example, P35 (executive leadership) explained, "We're not a research-heavy institution. We're a teaching-heavy institution. We have a very low research requirement." Institutional priorities shaped university infrastructure, human capital, and compensation at the ecosystem level. At the mesosystem level these priorities influenced decisions made by research leadership, particularly regarding investments in the research enterprise. P52 (executive leadership) shared, "No one school [departments within the HEI] does stuff they can justify full-time [RA] person."

MACROSYSTEM

RAs' research challenges were indirectly affected by external factors such as federal changes.

Federal changes

Throughout the interviews, participants identified federal-level changes as an external factor that created challenges for RAs. Abrupt federal-level changes, occurring directly to and during the interview time period (i.e., January 2025 to August 2025), were disruptive to participants' workflow and added stress to their day-to-day workload as RAs attempted to keep up with the sudden new regulations and guideline changes. P49 (RA) shared:

I think sometimes trying to keep up with all of the new regulations can be kind of stressful. Trying to make sure that we're in compliance with everything on a federal level, on a state level, on an institutional level… I think that has been something that's been very stressful, especially in the past couple of months. All of the federal changes have definitely been the most stressful part of it

CHRONOSYSTEM

Many of the challenges experienced by RAs were indirectly associated with the shift made over time by HEIs to engage in more research.

Institutional shift to increase research

Historically teaching-focused institutions were often not equipped with the resources to support this shift. Thus, they were stuck in an "in-between phase" where they knew they wanted to increase research but were not exactly sure how to support the growing research, which impacted all aspects of the growing research enterprise, including RAs. This shift affected the exosystem as institutions struggled to accommodate the growing research capacity while also lacking the budget to purchase an eRA system or hire additional RAs. P50 (RA) explained:

The difficult part of where the [institution] is, we have too many grants to manually track everything. I don't think that we're necessarily at the point yet, or maybe close, where we can really pay for all these software systems and the staff that I think was probably necessary. I don't think we have the financial resources. In my perspective, we're sort of in this in-between of not enough and too many grants to really have a good setup.

Additionally, as the focus of the institution evolved to engage in more research and research leadership (mesosystem) were encouraging these changes, there was a lag in applicable university policies and guidance detailing how this shift could be accomplished, which created challenges for RAs. In addition, some RAs didn't feel supported by their research leadership. P22 (RA) explained, "It's weird, because I hear things like, 'the administration wants more grant proposals, they want more awards, they want more extramural funding.' But we haven't really seen a lot of action on supporting those things." Finally, the shift to increase research affected RAs at the microsystem level, including not having enough staffing to support the amount of time it takes to work with faculty and the additional workload this increase creates for RA staff. P49 (RA) elaborated:

One of our biggest areas that we're having challenges with is with our PIs. We have more and more PIs that are wanting to submit grants and

proposals, which is amazing, but we don't necessarily have the staff to support that.

EST Interactions

There were several interactions present across RA ecological systems. RAs experienced frustrations working with other RAs (microsystem) and faculty (microsystem), in addition to managing a demanding and constantly fluctuating work environment (microsystem). Research leadership may decrease or exacerbate many of the challenges experienced by RAs depending on their level of support (mesosystem) and/or research knowledge, including their implementation of university policies (mesosystem) and training opportunities (mesosystem). The RA challenges are further affected at the exosystem-level depending on the institutional research infrastructure, budgetary limitations, and the research focus of the HEI. Abrupt changes to federal policies (macrosystem) concern the entire HEI system, including the workload for RAs (microsystem). Finally, as HEIs focus on increasing research (chronosystem), RAs must cope with the additional workload (microsystem) due to the lag in developing relevant research policies and guidance (mesosystem) and as hiring additional RAs is contingent on the HEI budget (exosystem). As these examples illustrate, pressures travel across and interact between levels of the EST.

Discussion

With HEIs increasing research spending amid strategic goals to grow research further (Labuschagne, 2021), it is important to identify the major challenges faced by RAs, to be able to address these challenges and meet research goals. In the U.S., research growth is frequently dependent upon competitive sponsored funding from federal agencies. This model requires institutions to develop, build, and maintain administrative infrastructure to support these activities. This growth in research portfolios requires a parallel investment in research administration capacity. Although scholars have undertaken efforts to document the challenges HEIs face when increasing research and research administration simultaneously, most research has focused on singular problems. In using the EST to identify the major challenges experienced by RAs across levels of the HEI system within which they are situated, we found that HEIs in the U.S. were facing challenges to increase research and their ambitions to increase research were not always matched by their investment in people, systems, policies, and training, with much of the resulting pressures ultimately being carried by RAs or research enterprise professionals completing RA tasks in addition to their other job responsibilities.

Our interview findings align with other studies in this area while extending some new insights as to where HEIs can and should direct resources and attention to advance research. Further, using the insights gleaned from this study, we present recommendations for HEIs to address these challenges. Targeting various aspects of the system within which RAs reside, that

compound their challenges, can overall strengthen HEIs and contribute to developing an innovation-oriented culture (Leron & Baconguis, 2021) to meet goals and grow in research capacity. Table 1 presents our challenge categories along with recommendations for HEIs to address these challenges.

Table 1. Recommendations for Addressing Research Challenges

Research Challenge	Recommendations
Federal Changes	1) Stay up to date on recent policy changes by navigating government & national research enterprise organization websites and resources 2) Leverage a research enterprise listserv to communicate with other RAs about local, state, and national changes 3) Prioritize communication within your institution (and outside) to ensure you are up to date on compliance policies
Focus of the Institution	1) Integrate research into the classroom to get students involved
Staff Salary	1) Provide professional development opportunities where additional compensation is not feasible 2) Create a compensation strategy and include it within the budget planning 3) Update RAs' role classifications to ensure that the baseline rate is fair and competitive with other institutions 4) Conduct a pay equity audit to identify potential gaps and areas to improve
Digital Infrastructure	1) Invest in an electronic research administration system 2) Create a centralized document drive/shared repository for information 3) Develop a clear policy for grant tracking and provide necessary training to RAs 4) Create a shared calendar with grant deadlines with RAs
Physical Infrastructure	1) Leverage technology software to create an online meeting room/space (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams)
Human Capital	1) Attract talent by offering adequate and competitive compensation 2) Provide professional development opportunities to attract and retain RAs 3) Recruit RAs from adjacent occupations with similar knowledge, skills, interests, and values
Limited University Guidance Working with Leadership	1) Leaders can be intentional with their RAs by creating an environment that fosters open communication and questions 2) Leaders can receive training to better understand the role responsibilities of their RAs and learn what will best support their needs 3) Additionally, leaders can leave intentional time for feedback and discussion on how to improve the research enterprise at their institution

Research Challenge	Recommendations
RA Training	1) Where funds are available, provide task-specific training 2) Provide more general training that covers the full life cycle of a grant 3) Ensure that RAs are receiving adequate onboarding training 4) Employ a coaching/mentorship model for new RAs 5) Utilize free workshops and trainings online and create a shared repository with free training resources 6) Develop internal training workshops 7) Advocate for training, professional development opportunities, and memberships to be included in the budget
Working with Faculty	1) Ensure that faculty are up to date with general grant policies 2) Provide training for faculty on RAs' job descriptions 3) Foster an environment that prioritizes communication 4) Hold office hours for faculty to come and ask questions 5) When working with faculty, rely on institutional and federal policies
Working with RAs	1) Prioritize social connection during onboarding 2) Host events for staff to engage with one another 3) Develop policies against possessiveness 4) Seek out collaboration with others
Workload	1) Set clear boundaries with leaders, faculty, and other staff 2) Create a work environment that prioritizes work-life balance 3) Continuously monitor RA satisfaction to identify when burnout may begin to occur 4) Focus on recruiting more RAs into research enterprise roles 5) Use accessible technology to automate routine tasks 6) Offer mental health resources for staff & ensure they are aware of the resources at the institution 7) Invest in software that will reduce the manual, labor-intensive work
Undocumented/Limited Institutional Knowledge	1) Leverage technology to create a shared repository to store information 2) Engage in training opportunities to stay up to date on institutional, federal, and grant policies 3) Communicate and share information with each other (and document it in the shared drive) 4) Additionally, work to create an environment that emphasizes communication and collaboration

Note: RA = Research Administrator.

Our participants raised similar concerns to those documented in the literature, with U.S. and internatinal samples, regarding difficulties in retention (exosystem) and insufficient training opportunities for RAs (mesosystem) (Alongi, 2024; Dutta et al., 2023; Martínez & Tejero, 2025). Further, we found that while salary (exosystem) was described as a contributing factor affecting RA retention, it was ultimately the decisions made by leadership and their support, or lack thereof (mesosystem), which influenced how the institutional budget (exosystem) was administered for RAs' salaries and training opportunities. Additionally, the tensions between institutional expectations for research growth and available administrative resources may be particularly pronounced in U.S. HEIs, where RA positions are often supported through a combination of institutional (state/federal) funds and indirect cost recovery from externally-funded sponsored projects. Along with prioritizing adequate compensation, recognition, and training, there are additional avenues through which HEIs can address these challenges. Less resource-intensive solutions include ensuring thorough onboarding training and leveraging freely available workshops and trainings to develop an institutional repository of professional development resources. If additional compensation is not feasible, leadership (mesosystem) can support opportunities for professional development. Further, in planning for the research growth at an institution (chronosystem), leadership (mesosystem) can conduct a pay equity audit to identify potential gaps and areas to improve and update RAs' role classifications to ensure that the baseline rate is fair and competitive with other institutions. Existing literature has largely emphasized the stressors and negative well-being outcomes for RAs (e.g., threats to work-life balance, burnout, (Tabakakis et al., 2020)). By contrast, our system-focused study highlights the structural and organizational sources of these stressors for RAs.

Another major challenge revealed in our study was the lack of codified institutional knowledge. RAs were impeded in efficiently performing their roles (microsystem) by the absence of a shared knowledge base. At institutions focused on expanding research capacity (chronosystem), the presence of an eRA system was described as an important component of consistency for the research infrastructure (exosystem). For emerging research institutions, where there is a limited research budget, leadership (mesosystem) can opt to strengthen their digital infrastructure by engaging less expensive digital options to codify institutional knowledge such as centralized document repositories or shared drives so that information can be stored and easily shared between colleagues, clearly defined grant-tracking policies, and shared calendars for tracking grant deadlines as mechanisms used to support research administration work. Further, leadership can cultivate an environment that emphasizes communication and collaboration.

RAs' workload was further hampered by faculty (microsystem) and leaderships' (mesosystem) lack of knowledge of RAs' role responsibilities. To mitigate these workload challenges (microsystem), HEIs may benefit from cross-functional training (Fared & Darmawan, 2021) for leadership and faculty to understand RAs' role and needs. From a faculty lens, it would be beneficial if institutions ensured they were up to date with general grant policies (mesosystem). Additionally, instituting the practice of holding office hours

for faculty to come and ask questions may enhance communication and strengthen the relationship between faculty and RAs. Leadership can allocate intentional time for feedback and discussion aimed at improving the research enterprise and identifying RAs' most pressing needs within their institutions.

LIMITATIONS

This interview study offers insight into how HEIs may advance their research capacity by addressing the major challenges experienced by RAs across the multiple systems in which they operate. However, the study is also subject to certain limitations that point to directions for future research. Specifically, the interviews focused on HEIs in South Carolina in the U.S. It is likely that RAs in other regions and countries experience many similar challenges (e.g., with staffing and retention, (Alongi, 2024)), with contextual differences such as the status of the RA profession, shaping how these challenges are manifested. While the federal funding changes discussed by participations may be specific to a U.S. population, the abruptness with which the policy changes occurred and the increased workload that resulted for RAs may resonate with an international audience. RAs in other regions and countries may encounter distinct challenges that may be manifested differently within their systems. For example, macrosystem-level influences such as region or country-specific research funding landscapes and policy environments may shape the nature and intensity of these challenges.

We interviewed RAs and leadership across various HEIs, and challenges will also differ based on the extent to which institutions have more developed or emerging research capacity. Future work should seek to understand the institutional context in more depth by focusing on samples based on institutions with different characteristics and comparing between role types and levels of seniority. This will allow for a broader understanding of the challenges faced by RAs in different types of institutional contexts, different roles, and levels of seniority. Further, future research could incorporate a gender analysis to explore whether some of the identified challenges are experienced differently according to gender and whether this has implications for career development, leadership opportunities, or workplace wellbeing.

Another consideration is that we were limited in the space of interviews to directly solicit participants' feedback and recommendations on potential areas of recourse to address their specific challenges. We invite scholars to apply EST framing to study RAs' challenges and feedback on solutions at different HEIs and countries to grant an even greater informed understanding of RA systems to support developing HEI research capacity. Further, we are unable to present a complete account of RAs' lived experiences as the research question focused on research challenges. Future work should seek to understand RAs' perspectives on their research strengths. Researchers could also draw from our list of holistic challenges faced by RAs across systems to use quantitative survey methods to describe the rates and intensity of different challenges across HEIs and regions and countries. For a practical point, HEIs could also implement such surveys and focus groups as a foundation for training or organizational needs analysis to understand the specific

challenges and opportunities (Whelan-Berry et al., 2003) to grow research capacity at their institution.

CONCLUSION

Guided by the EST model, this multisystem approach provided greater context to the complex challenges experienced by RAs. We found that many of the RAs' challenges were connected to research leadership and the hierarchal structure of HEIs. Research leadership (mesosystem) have the potential to mitigate or amplify many of the challenges that RAs experience through their level of support and the decisions they make for the research enterprise including the budget, university policies, infrastructure, and workload distribution. As HEIs seek to expand their research output, it is important that they invest adequately in necessary staffing, systems, policies, and training. Without these research investments the increased workload will fall heavily on RAs and research enterprise professionals, who have to absorb these tasks on top of their existing duties. To strengthen the HEI research capacity and enhance the research administration workforce, we have provided recommendations addressing each ecological system-level challenge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding Statement: This work is supported by the National Science Foundation (Grant # 2420719). Any opinions or findings expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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Statement on Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the drafting, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

Statement on Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in this research and in this publication, nor no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Accepting Editor: Les Labuschagne | Received: 5 May 2026 | Accepted: 18 November 2026
Cite as: Schuster, A., Signorelli, J., Van Fossen, J., Dodson, C., Fischer, M., & Cotten, S. (2026). A Holistic Understanding of Challenges for Research Administrators Working in the Research Enterprise at Higher Education Institutions. *Journal of Research Management and Administration*, *5*(1), 2026112501. https://doi.org/10.18552/2vng2787

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