Gap analysis and assessments: The state of research administrative support across Vermont

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Capstone Workshop

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Infrastructure to Support EPSCoR

Objectives

1. Determine the state of research administration (RA) support across Vermont's institutes of higher education

    1. Are positions filled? Likely to turnover? Background of the current workforce?

2. Determine level of interest in better collaborating or sharing resources across Vermont

3. Begin to brainstorm ideas and solutions on how to create robust RA infrastructure

We define "**research administration**" as encompassing the functions/roles/departments of grants management, sponsored project administration, research development, pre-award support, post-award support, and regulation compliance.

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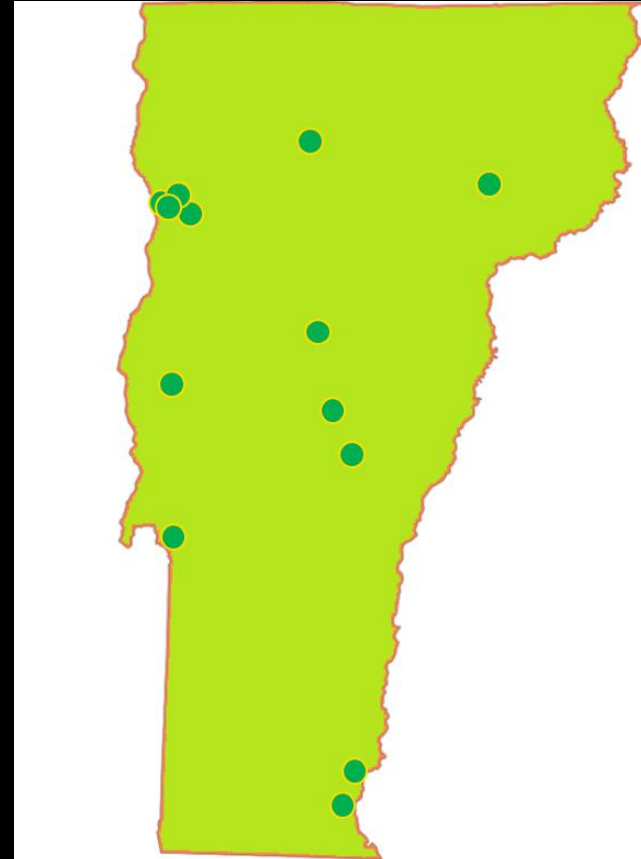Research Administration
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Methods

- Online Qualtrics survey, designed and analyzed in collaboration with Northbound Ventures Consulting

    - Survey open December 2023 – January 2024

- **Key interested parties**: Research Administrators, Institutional Leaders, Faculty Researchers

- Follow up Focus groups, facilitated by Stephanie Lahar & Associates:

    - January 30th: Research Administrators
    - March 18th: Faculty Researchers
    - April 24th/May 6th: Institutional Leaders

- Peer Institution Interviews, conducted by Stephanie Lahar & Associates:

    - SUNY Research Foundation
    - Rochester Institute of Technology
    - Emory University/National Organization of Research Development Professionals (NORDP)
    - University of Montana/Montana EPSCoR
    - University of Wyoming/Wyoming EPSCoR
   - University of Maine/Maine EPSCoR

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UVM IRB approval, Exempt #2
STUDY00002858

Objective 1: Determine the State of Vermont's Research Administration Support

Survey population: 9 responding institutions, 32 respondents

- Champlain College (5)
- Landmark College (2)
- Middlebury College (1)
- Norwich University (3)
- Saint Michael's College (3)
- SIT Graduate Institute (1)
- University of Vermont (13)
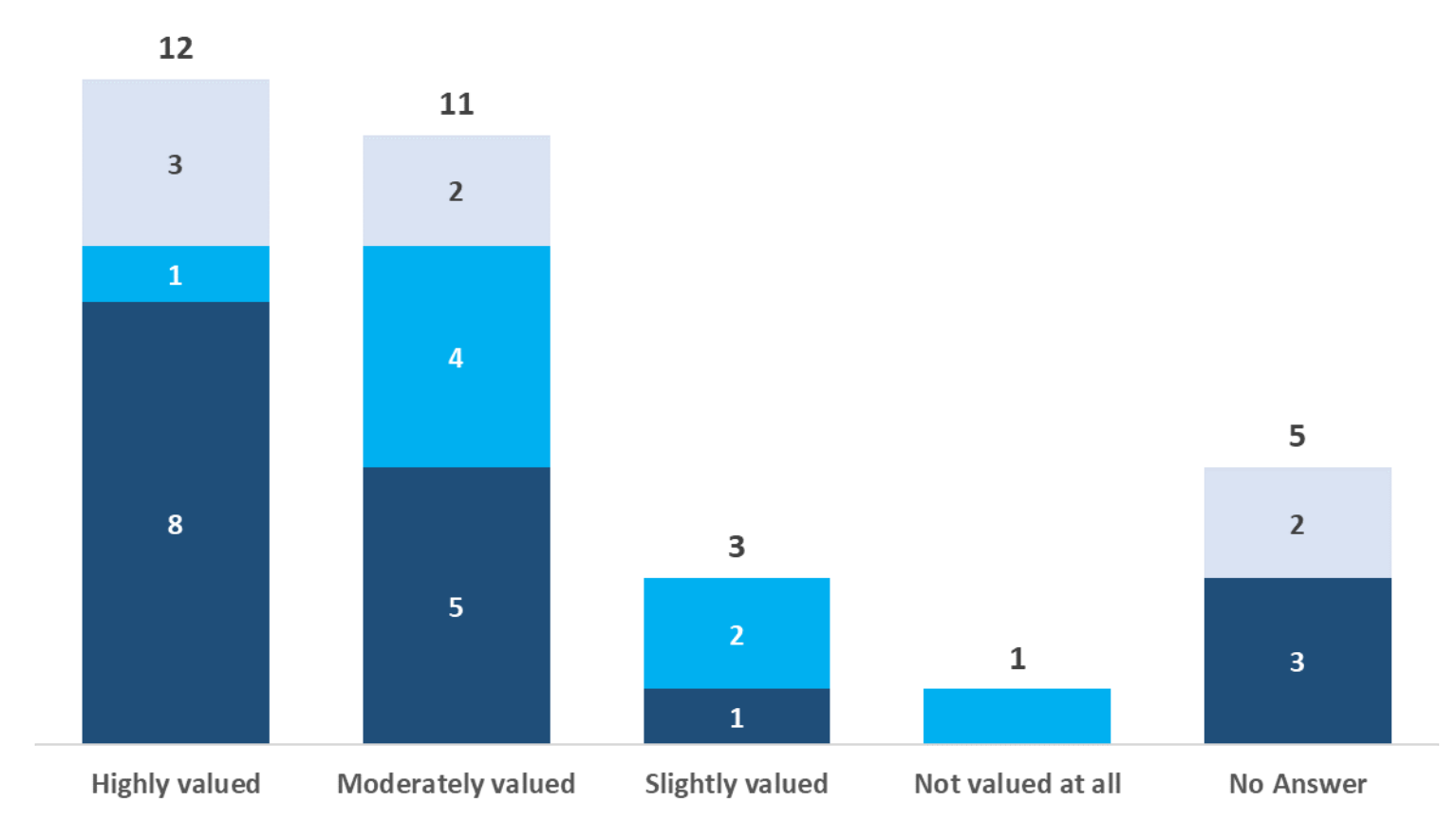- Vermont Law and Graduate School (1)
- Vermont State University (3)

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Please describe your role at your institution.
(all respondents, n=32)
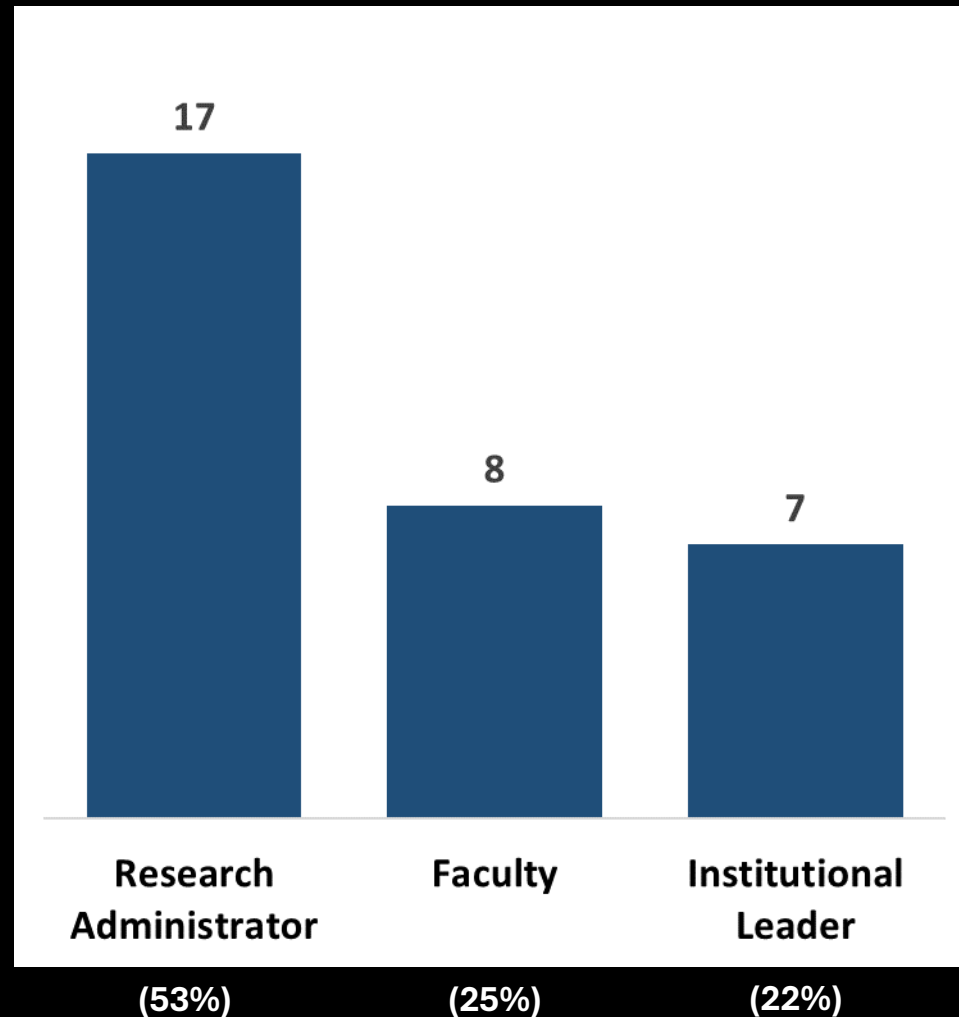
How well valued is the role of research administration at your institution?

All respondents (n=32)

Please rate the level of administrative support you have for each of the following activities.
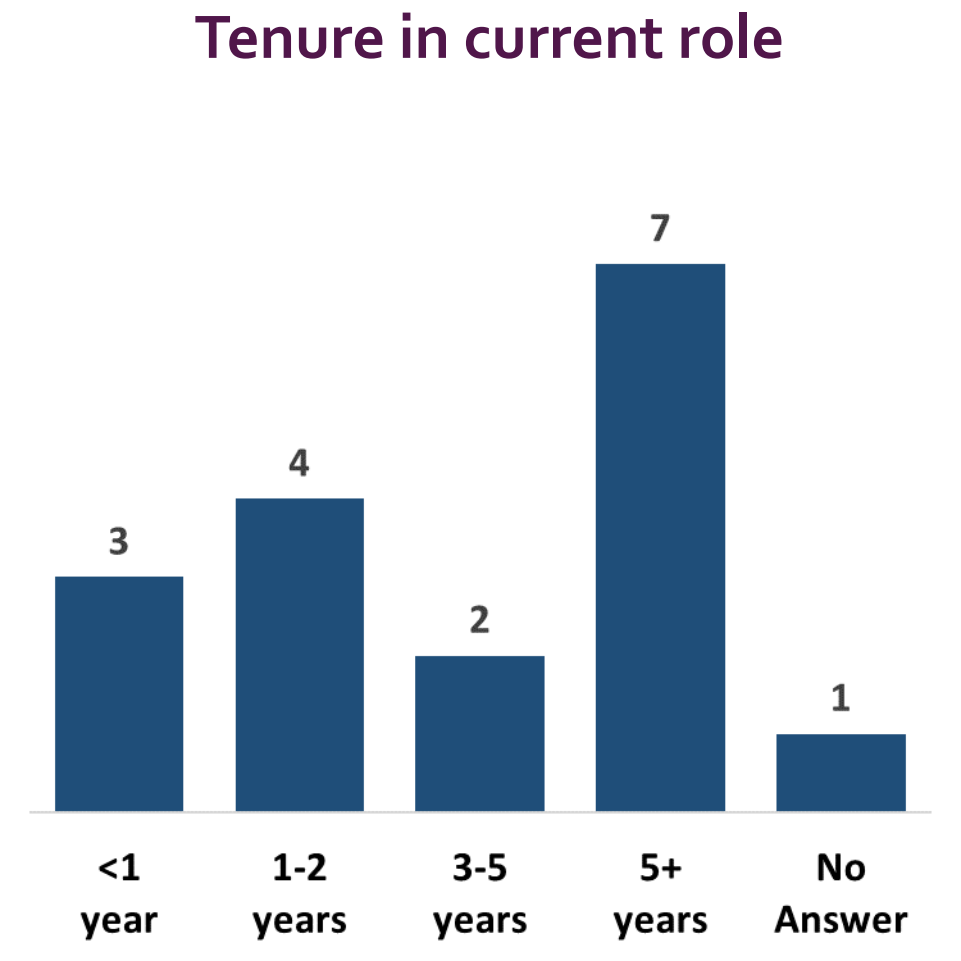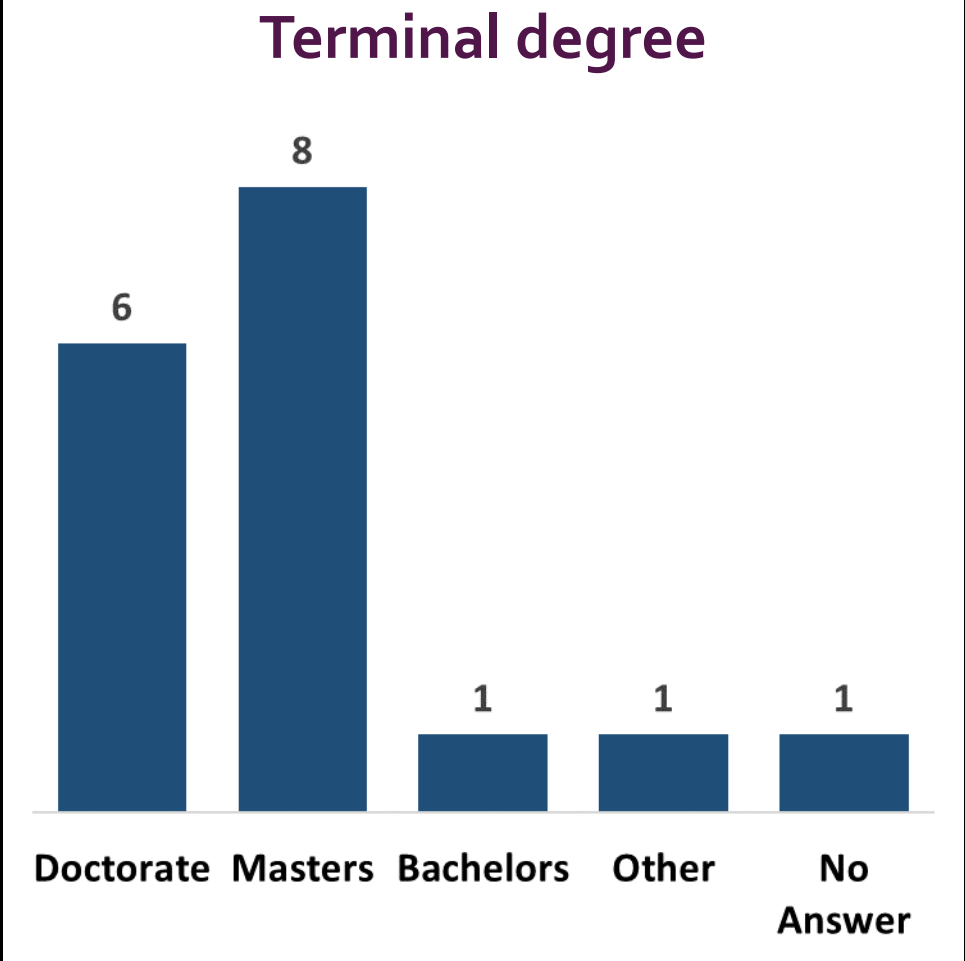
Faculty and institutional leaders (n=15)

	High	Moderate	Low	No Support	No Answer
Researching and identifying funding opportunities	4	7	1	1	2
Building/maintaining funder relationships	3	7	3	0	2
Filling out application forms	5	5	2	1	2
Writing funding applications	4	6	3	0	2
Creating application budgets	6	6	1	0	2
Writing budget narratives	5	5	2	1	2
Copyediting applications	6	1	5	1	2
Grantsmanship review of funding applications	5	3	4	1	2
Strategic planning of funding applications	5	1	6	1	2
Submitting applications	6	4	3	0	2
Tracking and reporting expenses	7	4	1	0	2
Maintaining records per funder requirements	7	2	3	0	2
Funder reporting	5	5	2	0	2
Research protocol compliance management	4	3	3	1	2
Subaward management	5	2	1	1	3
Audit coordination	6	2	2	0	3
Closing out grants	7	3	1	0	2

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Research Administrators (n=17, 7 institutions): Background

Terminal degree

Doctorate	Masters	Bachelors	Other	No Answer
6	8	1	1	1

Tenure in current role

<1 year	1-2 years	3-5 years	5+ years	No Answer
3	4	2	7	1

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What attracted you to your current position?

Research Administrators (n=17)

Bar chart "What attracted you to your current position?":
- Departmental culture: 7
- Convenient / desirable work location: 7
- Hybrid / remote work options: 6
- Positive perception / prestige of role: 6
- Other (please specify): 6
- Institutional culture: 5
- Salary / compensation package: 4
- Professional development: 4
- No answer: 3

1. Work/life balance
2. Less travel
3. Opportunity to build program
4. Opportunity to be involved with research at institution
5. Role fit prior experience
6. Not specified

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Are there any research administration positions that are currently unfilled at your institution?

Institutional leaders and research administrators (n=24)
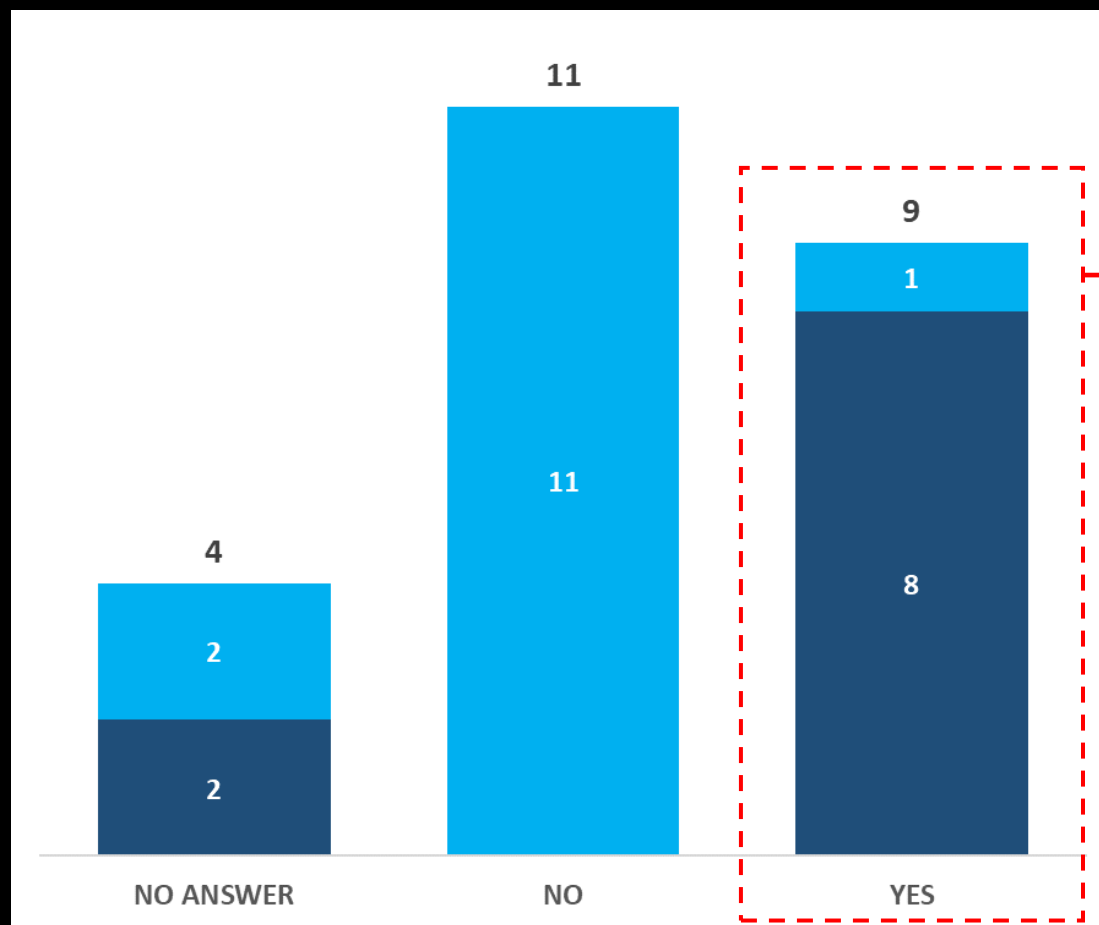
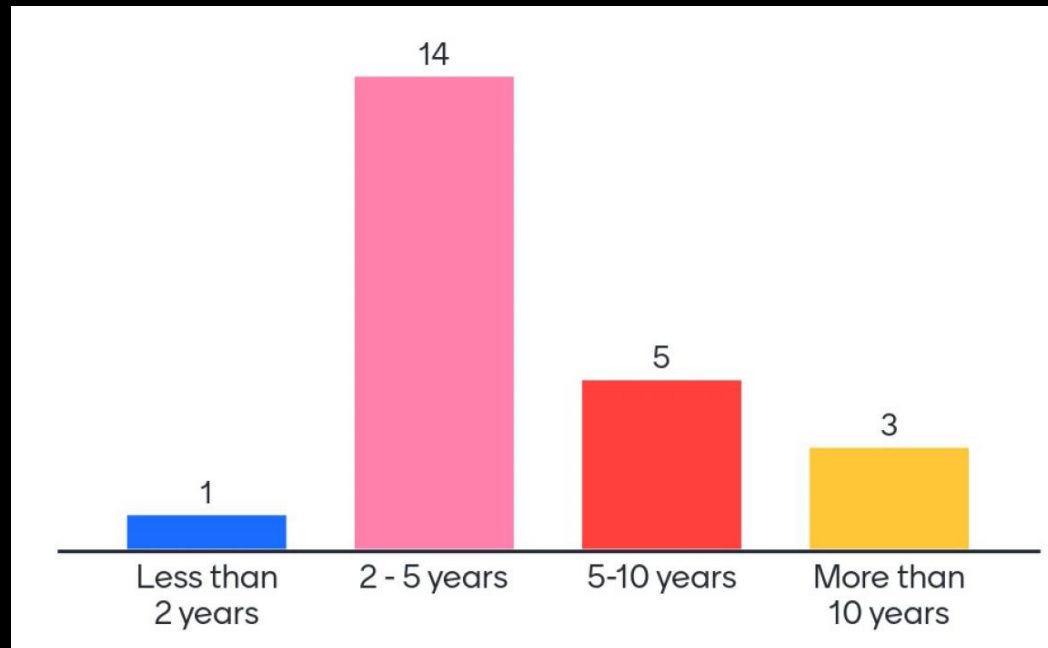Are these positions funded in your current budget?

- UVM: Yes
- Other Institution: No

UVM

OTHER INSTITUTIONS

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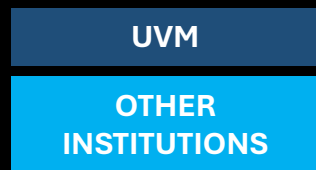
Research Administrator Focus Group

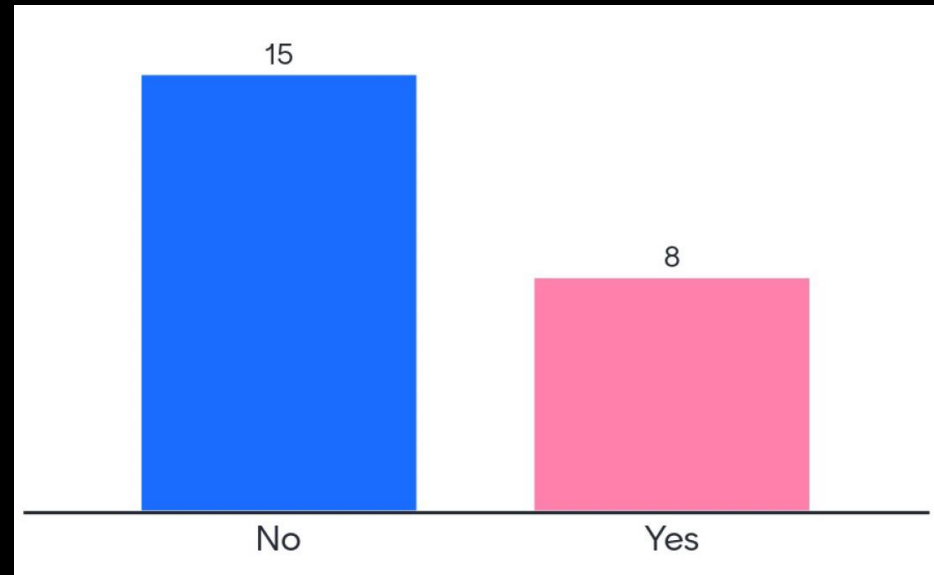26 attendees, spanning 10 institutions

How long do you imagine being in your current job?

Research Administrator Focus Group

26 attendees, spanning 10 institutions

Are advancement pathways available in your current job?

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Research Administrator Focus Group

26 attendees, spanning 10 institutions

What are the largest barriers or constraints to strengthening VT's research support workforce?

Please rate the following factors by how large a barrier they are to recruitment or retention of research administration personnel.

Research Administrators and institutional leaders (n=24)

	Salary / compensation package	Work location	In-state competition	Professional development / career advancement opportunities	Out-of-state competition	Lack of hybrid / remote work options	Negative perception of role	Lack of institutional prioritization	Lack of qualified candidates	Other
Moderate / Large barrier	50%	50%	46%	33%	29%	29%	29%	25%	17%	13%
Small barrier / not a barrier	21%	25%	29%	38%	42%	42%	46%	46%	54%	21%
Not applicable / no answer	29%	25%	25%	29%	29%	29%	25%	29%	29%	67%

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Please describe the educational or experiential backgrounds that candidates for research administration positions should possess.

Do you think a certificate or internship program would provide the necessary knowledge and skills training for research administration candidates?
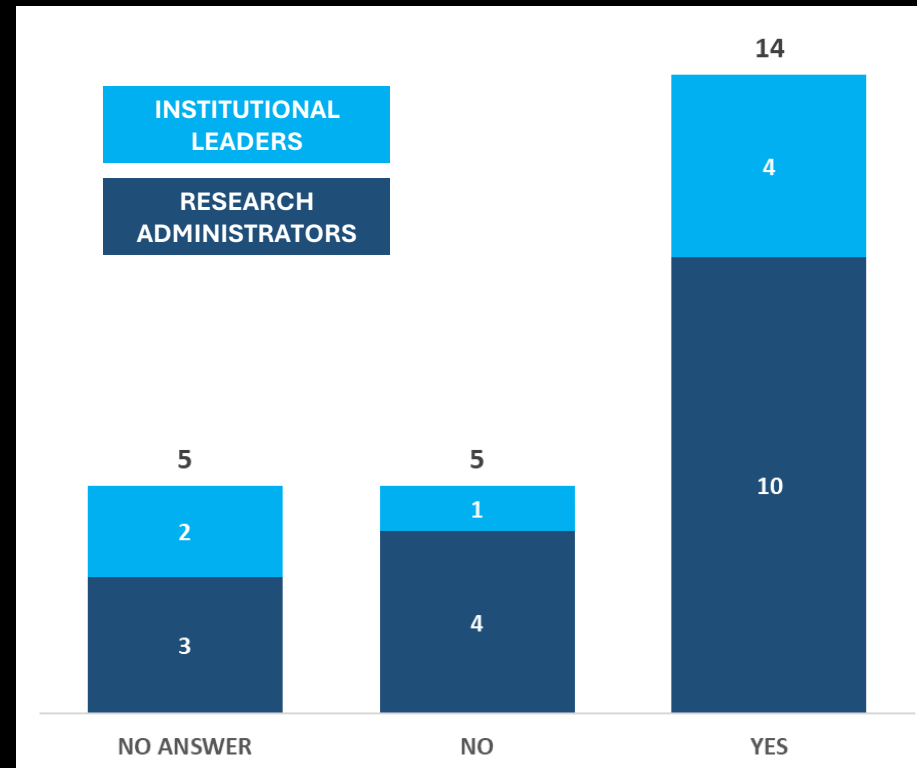
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What's the state of research administration at our Peer Institutions?

Conducted by Stephanie Lahar & Associates:

- SUNY Research Foundation
- Rochester Institute of Technology
- Emory University/National Organization of Research Development Professionals (NORDP)
- University of Montana/Montana EPSCoR
- University of Wyoming/Wyoming EPSCoR
- University of Maine/Maine EPSCoR

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Peer Institutions: Top challenges

Recruiting and retaining employees

- Limited labor pool, fierce competition for experienced administrators, high turnover rates

- Need for centralization and improvements in IT and systems tools cited by most in conjunction with hiring

- Need to build robust learning and development resources and pathways to increase the needed workforce

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Institutional Leaders Focus Group

11 participants from 4 institutions
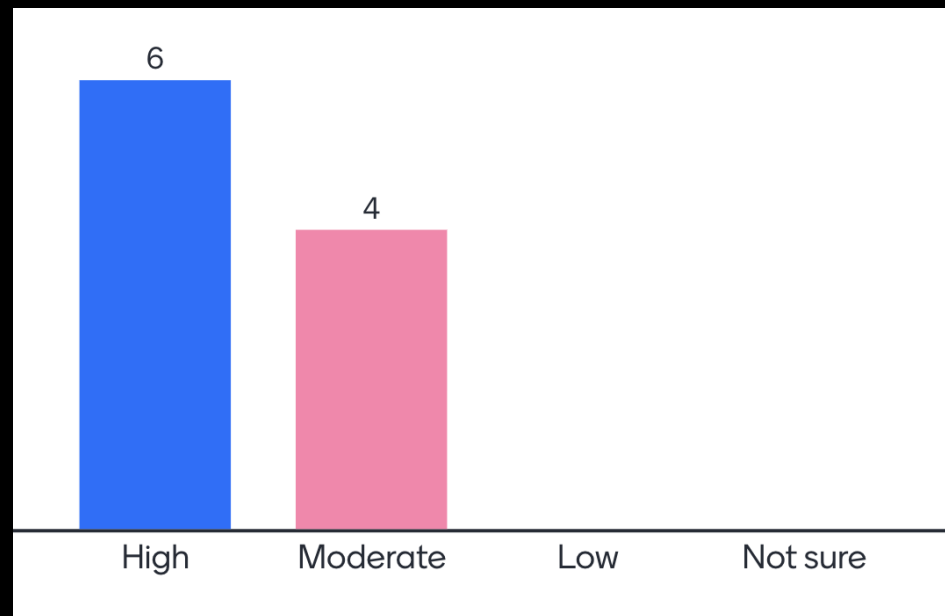

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Researcher Focus Group

13 participants from 4 institutions

Rate your current level of interest in collaborating with researchers at other VT institutions:

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Does your current research administration budget adequately meet your institution's research needs?

Institutional leaders (n=7, 4 institutions)
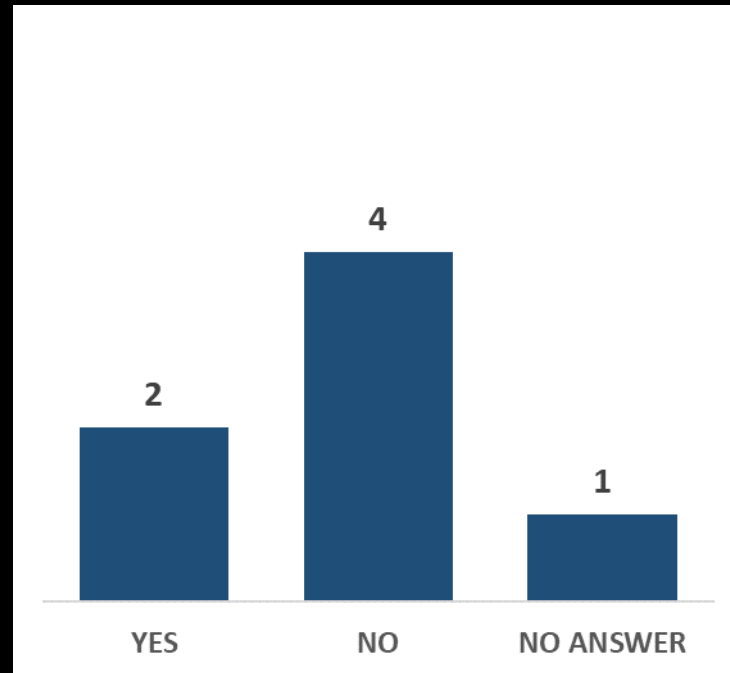
Researcher Focus Group

From your perspective as a researcher, what are the largest barriers or constraints to growing research at VT institutions?

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Comments Across Focus Groups:

- "We know we need alternative revenue to maintain the small college model – tuition isn't enough."
- "I think many faculty are interested in research, but they may not have the skills."
- General need to realize that research can help teaching.
- General interest in more shared facilities and lab space.
- Common approaches and processes would make it easier to collaborate across the state.

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Peer Institutions: Top challenges

Establish meaningful collaborations, and overcome logistical challenges across institutions

- All see their research enterprise growing

- Larger institutions have a stake in expanding research collaborations; in smaller institutions data, research methods, and financial systems requirements are becoming more complex and compliance harder

- Different types of colleges and systems vary greatly in their research missions and their business structures

- "Even with money to buy out a faculty member a [smaller] institutions, there's no backfill to teach that person's classes. Faculty don't even have time to write proposals."

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Objective 3: Begin to Brainstorm Ideas and Solutions for Strengthening Vermont's RA Infrastructure

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What are the key barriers to Vermont's institutions working together to recruit additional administrators, researchers, and dollars to the state?

Research Administrators

- Need for RA Network:
  - "**No common platform** to bring research administrators together…"
  - "…**each institution has their own workload and unable to communicate often with colleagues**. A listserv among the state institutions or annual meetings would help….increase communication…"
  - "We don't know each other well enough or have an established network of research administrators."

- Varying Institutional Priorities:
  - "Most universities in the system are **PUIs with a teaching mission**."
  - "Vermont's institutions of higher education have different cultures of research and varying levels of institutional buy-in and support for research on VT campuses."

- Limited Resources:
  - "Salaries are not high enough to compete with the out-of-state market…"
  - "Small institutions usually **have limited staffing resources**…"

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What are the key barriers to Vermont's institutions working together to recruit additional administrators, researchers, and dollars to the state?

Institutional Leaders

- Limited Resources:
  - "Competition in regards to salaries."

- Need for better communication:
  - "Lack of contact to other institutions (until now, thanks!)."
  - "Lack of coordination [on] identifying shared interests"

- Varying Institutional Priorities:
  - "There is a lot of difference in scale among the institutions and thus a large amount of technical expertise gaps."
  - "We would have to address and overcome concerns that the bigger players would overshadow smaller campuses."

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What are the key barriers to Vermont's institutions working together to recruit additional administrators, researchers, and dollars to the state?

Faculty

- Time Constraints:
  - "**Time**. Most of the faculty I know are focused on teaching overloads."
  - "Time and institutional priorities. College bandwidth issues. We can't hire faculty and everyone is stretched thin."
- Professional Development Opportunities:
  - "Education/Direction as to how to start and manage the process."
  - "Lack of knowledge of research administration, lack of staff support, over-emphasis on teaching undergraduates."
- Varying Institutional Priorities:
  - [At our institution,] "There is a general attitude of 'we are not a research college' that often is used to stop conversations…"
  - "Time and institutional priorities. College bandwidth issues. We can't hire faculty and everyone is stretched thin."
- Networking needs:
  - "…there needs to be frequent opportunities for individuals across institutions to get together and find their professional overlap."

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Research Administrator Focus Group

26 attendees, spanning 10 institutions

What shared resources do we most need in Vermont?

Researcher Focus Group

13 participants from 4 institutions

From a post-award perspective, what shared resources or collaborations could help you increase research at your institution, or across institutions?

Institutional Leaders Focus Group

11 participants from 4 institutions

What shared resources do we most need in Vermont?

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Peer Institutions: Where do people see their research enterprises and support structures headed over the next five years?

- Most of the interviewees expected their research enterprises to grow, and to be faced with continued workforce and infrastructure efficiency challenges.

- Several, but not all of the interviewees thought that a primary strategy to support growth was to **centralize and modernize more functions**.

- Most are investing in building learning and development resources and processes across institutions and systems to train and grow the workforce.

- Some institutions and networks, including those in neighboring states, pointed to **broader collaborations** as one of the most promising pathways to growth.

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Overall Takeaways

- While research administration recruitment and retention is not an immediate concern in Vermont, high turnover is expected within the next 5 years.
  - This is consistent with what is observed at our peer institutions.

- Findings so far indicate interest to increase research activity and collaboration across the state. Seen in all interested parties.

- Top barriers across groups to growing statewide research and RA infrastructure include varying institutional priorities, constraints on faculty time, lack of networking and collaborations, and limited resources.

- Top solutions so far include:
  - Developing shared resource models and processes.
  - Creating an RA support network for retaining and sharing knowledge.
  - Creating better pipelines for recruiting and training RA talent.

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Questions or Comments?

How effective is cross-departmental coordination of research administration at your institution?

All respondents (n=32)

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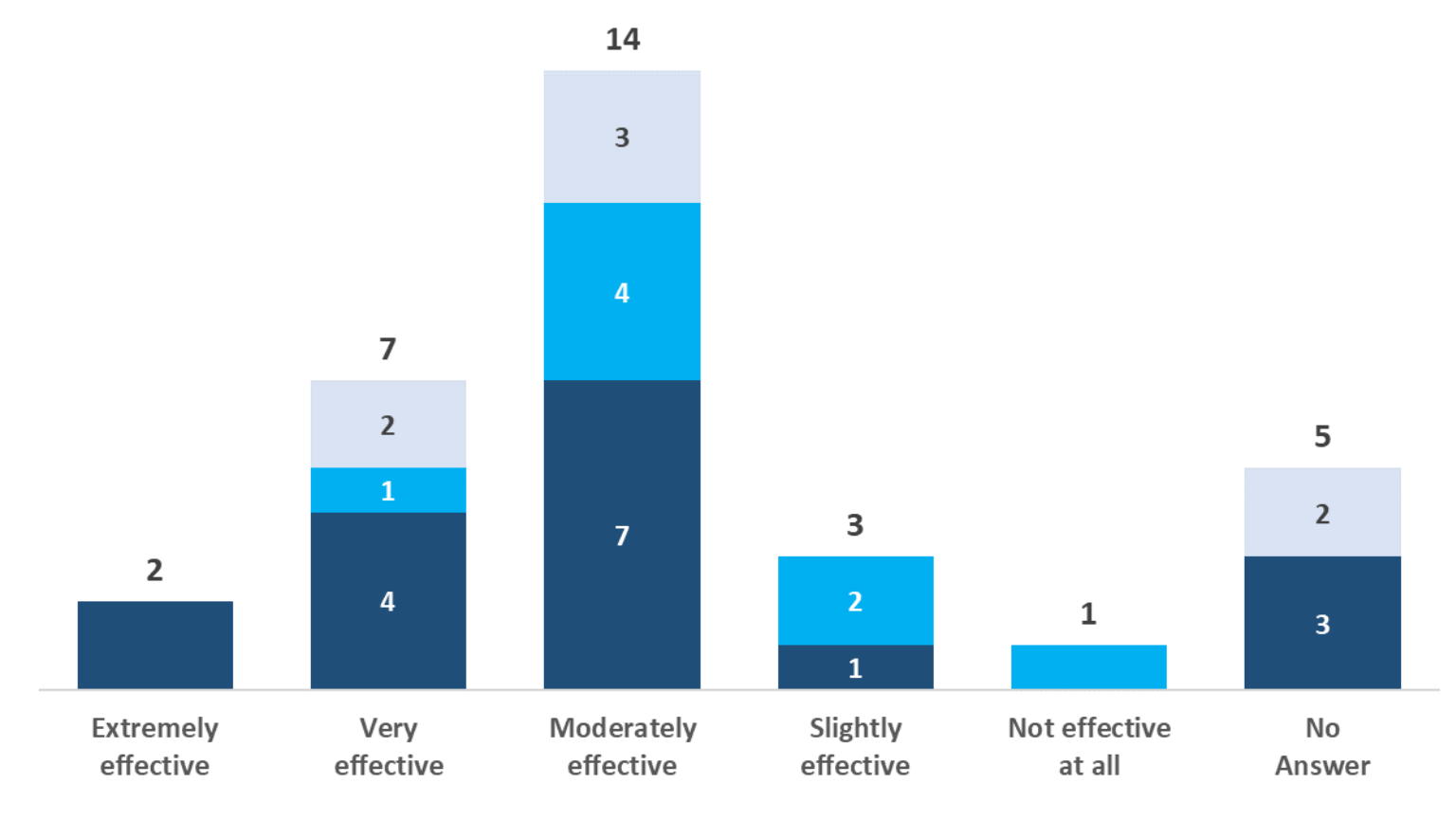
What percentage of your time on average is spent on research administration-related tasks?