

2026 SPaRC Retreat Session Descriptions

Afternoon Concurrent Sessions

Maximizing Your Workday Capacity While Preventing Burnout

In this session, you'll take a fresh look at how your values and strengths can shape the way you work. We'll explore what energizes you, where challenges may be draining your time, and how small shifts – like time blocking or leaning on team strengths – can make a big difference. You'll leave with strategies to help you work with more focus and efficiency, while protecting your well-being in the process.

Joy Brownridge, *Assistant Director, Organizational Effectiveness, System Human Resource Services*

Colleen Crawford, *Employee Engagement and Wellness Coordinator, System Human Resource Services*

Stronger Together: Effective Collaboration for Research Administrators and SPA Award Negotiators

Join an open conversation on how Research Administrators and SPA Award Negotiators can work together more effectively. We'll clarify roles and responsibilities between the two and discuss best practices for collaboration and communication. We'll also talk about strategies for navigating shared workflows to achieve successful outcomes, and we'll use real-world examples to highlight one such team's efforts.

Susanne Klein, *Advanced Senior Award Negotiation, Sponsored Programs Administration*

Kris Williams, *Associate Director for Administration, Materials Research Laboratory*

A is for Audit...Not Anxiety!

This session provides an overview of audit readiness, designed specifically for academic units with limited audit experience. Participants will learn strategies to reduce anxiety, what auditors typically focus on, and practical steps to maintain audit-ready records year-round. The session also offers an overview of common compliance risks and who to contact for assistance.

Cheryl Howerton, *Director, Audit & Compliance, Sponsored Programs Administration (SPA)*

Lisa Young, *Grants and Contracts Coordinator, Prairie Research Institute*

Building Successful Faculty Research Development Programs: Lessons Learned from ACES Research Academy and Engineering GEAR

Research development and faculty support programs can play a critical role in strengthening institutional capacity and faculty success. This session will explore how initiatives such as the ACES Research Academy and Grainger Engineering GEAR (Grainger Engineers Accelerating Research) were conceptualized, development, and sustained to support early-career faculty research growth. Presenters will discuss identifying institutional and faculty needs, securing leadership and unit buy-in, building faculty engagement, collaborating with campus partners, and demonstrating impact over time. The session will also highlight lessons learned, challenges encountered, and strategies for maintaining momentum and long-term program success.

Dr. Elvira de Mejia, *Professor, Food Science and Human Nutrition*

Barbara Godlew, *Director of Research Education and Programming, College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences*

Kara Haley, *Associate Director for Research, Grainger College of Engineering*

Donald Takehara, *Director for Research, Grainger College of Engineering*

Post-Award 101: What I Wish I Knew My First Year

This session is designed for professionals new to post-award research administration or transitioning into departmental roles. It offers a candid, practical overview of core responsibilities, common challenges, and essential skills for success at the unit level, with a focus on supporting Principal Investigators and managing day-to-day award activities, complemented by insights from the SPA Award Management perspective. Through real-world examples and interactive discussion, participants will gain confidence, clarity, and a clear roadmap for navigating their first year as a departmental research administrator.

Carrie Blount, *Associate Director, Federal Awards, Sponsored Programs Administration (SPA)*

Yvonne Shaw, *Director, Budget and Resource Planning, School of Social Work*

Karen Thomas, *Director, Post-Award, Sponsored Programs Administration (SPA)*

Agreement Negotiation: Managing Risk Across Sponsor Types

Ever wonder why some agreements sail through while others seem to stall at every turn? This session highlights the complexities of negotiating sponsored research agreements across multiple types of sponsors and why the path to execution isn't always straightforward. Join us as we discuss the risks and the key players involved in the decision-making process.

Paula Jorge, *Associate Director, Negotiation, Sponsored Programs Administration (SPA)*

Julie Robinson, *Director, Pre-Award, Sponsored Programs Administration (SPA)*

Large Grants, Lasting Impact: Navigating Complex Proposals with Confidence

Large, multi-component proposals require careful planning, coordination, and communication to move from concept to submission successfully. In this session, the Office of Proposal Development (OPD) will share practical strategies and lessons learned from supporting complex, multidisciplinary proposals at Illinois. Participants will explore approaches for interpreting sponsor requirements, coordinating across investigators and units, managing timelines and budgets, and keeping proposal teams aligned throughout the development process. The session will also highlight how OPD partners with principal investigators, departments, centers, institutes, and SPA to support successful submissions and reduce administrative burden on proposal teams. Whether you're new to large-scale proposals or looking to refine your approach, you'll leave with tools, best practices, and resources to help navigate complex submissions with confidence.

Sowmya Anand, *Director, Office of Proposal Development, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation*

Roundtable Discussions

Table #1 Navigating Change in Research Administration

Change is constant in research administration, but that doesn't make it easy. The goal of this interactive session will be to create a candid, supportive space for research administrators to explore the fear of change—why it shows up, how it affects our work, and what we can do about it. Space will be held for participants to share real-world challenges, compare lessons learned, and surface practical strategies that have helped them navigate shifting policies, systems, and expectations. Through open discussion and collaborative problem-solving, attendees will leave with fresh insights, a stronger sense of community, and actionable ideas to bring back to their teams.

Jerald Kimble, *Senior Coordinator, Audit & Compliance, Sponsored Programs Administration (SPA)*

Table #2 Building Strong Teams: A Conversation on Onboarding and Retention in Research Administration This interactive roundtable will bring together research administration professionals to explore onboarding and retention practices across units. The conversation will center on what is working – and what challenges remain – in areas such as onboarding processes, staff engagement and retention, training gaps, workload balance, and the use of mentoring, peer networks, and professional development opportunities. Participants will be encouraged to share experiences and lessons learned from their own environments.	Kierra Fonner, <i>Assistant Director of Budget and Research Planning, Institute for Genomic Biology</i>
Table #3 SciENCv for the Research Administrator As more sponsors begin requiring the use of SciENCv, the question of “where do we fit in?” continues to come up for Research Administrators. We are often asked how documents should be formatted, what functions SciENCv supports, and why a document may be accepted in one system but rejected in another. This discussion will focus on the foundational knowledge that Research Administrators need to effectively support their PIs while helping researchers better navigate and use SciENCv independently.	Rachel Nodine, <i>Grants and Contracts Specialist, Engineering Business Service Center</i>
Table #4 The Principal (Investigator) of Partnership This session is designed to discuss relationship-building efforts to best encourage effective departmental research administrators and the PIs they support. This session will explore the many factors of working with PIs and the skills required to build strong, productive partnerships.	Allison Sutton, <i>Assistant Head for Administration, Mechanical Science and Engineering</i>