

Professional Research Assistants/Research Associates Committee Report

March 22nd, 2023

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I. Executive Summary

University of Colorado Boulder Staff Council formally convened a committee whose mission is *to research the desire as well as advantages and disadvantages of incorporating CU Boulder-employed Professional Research Assistants and Research Associates into the group of employees represented by Staff Council.*

The PRA/RA committee has three overarching objectives:

1. Ascertain the desire of PRA/RA's for representation
2. Determine the priorities and values of this group and discover if their values and priority alignment with existing staff
3. Formulate a recommendation for Staff Council

The Staff Council was informed of the lack of representation of this group by community member Kimberly Kruchen during the Staff Council Executive Committee meeting, held on December 14, 2022.

II. Committee Recommendation

The PRA/RA committee used a consensus-driven decision making process to arrive at their recommendations. The committee recommendations for consideration by UCB Staff Council are summarized below.

The committee unanimously recommends Staff Council adopt changes to their bylaws to expand their representation to all eligible PRA/RA employees. This recommendation is conditional on the following objectives being met, and are as follows:

Within a period of no less than 6 months from the adoption of this recommendation:

1. Establishment of a special committee within Staff Council whose duties will be to determine the process in which this recommendation is enacted.
2. The approval of a revised, expanded budget proposal to be submitted to the Office of Budget & Fiscal Planning within the normal cycle of campus operations.
3. The addition of no less than 2 PRA/RA representatives to Staff Council, as well the creation of a “PRA/RA Representative” seat on the Executive Committee.
4. A clear communication roll out plan acknowledging the adoption of this recommendation, publication of the full committee report, and a detailed description of how this will benefit all employees impacted by this change, and guidance for how PRA/RA’s can be involved in the implementation process and Staff Council as a whole.

Within a period of no more than 2 years from the adoption of this recommendation:

1. A progress report will be compiled and distributed to all constituents, evaluating the impact of the initiative.

III. Committee Members

Committee members included representatives from across the UCB campus, representing a variety of perspectives and skills that would develop a well-reasoned and evidence-based recommendation.

- Colisse Franklin, Research & Innovation Office
- Vanessa Luna, UCB Staff Council
- Karrie Pitzer, UCB Staff Council, Tri-Chair representative
- Alisha Stewart, UCB Staff Council
- Betty Rasmussen, UCB Staff Council
- Kimberly Kruchen, Strategic Resources and Support

IV. Committee Activities

The committee met five times to discuss and consider strategies for information gathering, creating questions that would prompt robust conversation and feedback from professionals

currently serving in the PRA/RA role, and reviewing those findings to craft a committee recommendation.

Table 1

PRA/RA Meetings and Agenda		
Meeting	Date	Agenda
1	January 23rd, 2023	Introductions, develop objectives, background information, create action items, determine meeting cadence
2	February 6th, 2023	Boulder Faculty Assembly response, assess possible recommendations, and determine focus areas for discussion.
3	February 20th, 2023	Discussed focus group protocols
4	March 9th, 2023	Review focus group findings, tentatively agree on recommendation, appoint recommendation writers
5	March 20th, 2023	Review draft recommendation and vote on adoption

Committee members Colisse Franklin and Kimberly Kruchen met outside of the official committee to write specific questions to ask of PRA/RA community members.

Table 2

PRA/RA Focus Group Questions	
Question	Language
1	What do you enjoy the most about working at CU Boulder?
2	What are some of the more challenging aspects of working at CU Boulder?
3	Thinking about your engagement on campus and with campus activities, how would you rate your level of engagement? (High, medium, low)
4	<i>Follow up:</i> Please tell us a little more about the barriers that exist when it relates to your engagement
5	What would you rate as your level of knowledge about the benefits related to your role? (High, medium, low)
6	<i>Follow up:</i> What types of benefits are you familiar with?
7	From your perspective, what is the most significant priority related to your success on campus?

8	There are groups on campus that are formed to organize support around student and employee needs and to help ensure representation for student and employee groups. These groups often help to represent, inform, and educate staff and act as a liaison to the CU Boulder administration. These groups include the student government, BFA, and Staff Council. We recognize that research faculty is not represented by any of these groups. What would you all see as some benefits to being included in shared governance? What would be the challenges?
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On February 20, 2023, the committee distributed a communication calling for participation in focus groups to discuss the committee questions. This communication was sent to units on campus asking for a sample selection of PRAs and RAs to sign up for focus group sessions.

1. 1305 Sr Research Associate
2. 1306 Research Associate
3. 1309 Sr Professional Research Assistant
4. 1310 Professional Research Assistant

The response to this call for participation was overwhelming, having to expend sessions to accommodate additional researchers. Committee members capped participation at 63 due to the limited number of focus groups able to be held in the time frame necessary for the committee to make a recommendation.

Interested participants not included in the 63 were told to submit their feedback by email.

Table 3

Research Faculty Age Data ¹		
Age Group Name	Age Group Range	Percentage of Population (%)
Silent Generation	1945 and before	1.34
Baby Boomers	1946 - 1964	15.66
Generation X	1965 - 1980	26.16
Millennials	1981 - 1996	48.84
Generation Z	1997 - ~2012	8

The focus groups were held in an entirely virtual format, utilizing Zoom to bring participants together. Of the 63 researchers selected, 58 participated in the focus groups.

¹ Compiled February, 2023 by CU Boulder Human Resources representative Kenny Nelson and shared with the committee

Table 4

PRA/RA Focus Group Dates & Attendance		
Meeting	Date	Number of Attendees (excluding facilitators)
1	Wednesday, February 22	14
2	Thursday, February 23	12
3	Tuesday, February 28	15
4	Wednesday, March 1	3
5	Friday, March 3	14

V. Focus Group Findings

The following are a summary of the focus group findings, based on the questions that were asked and compiled by Colisse Franklin & Kimberly Kruchen and presented to the committee for review and discussion on March 9th, 2023.

The findings were presented in the meeting, and the full findings report was distributed via email to all committee members later that afternoon.

Main Points

1. Overall, the research faculty had very positive things to say about working for CU Boulder. They are passionate about the work they do, being part of an academic institution, making an impact, contributing to the overall success of the campus, freedom to be innovative and to explore new ideas and research, working directly with students, the people they work with directly (teams), the flexibility with schedules (hybrid or remote options), and are very appreciative of the CU benefits (health, retirement, EcoPass, tuition, library access, parental leave, access to rec center). Specifically, flexibility in schedule came up in every session, especially when it came to childcare/families. They understand that this is not the case with other institutions/federal labs.
2. They were genuinely appreciative that they were being asked to provide input and very engaged in conversation. Many stated that they had not been asked before, and the sessions helped them to feel heard and valued. They requested more listening sessions and the opportunity to provide feedback. Participants were also interested in a summary of the feedback.
3. Regarding engagement, they voiced feeling like they are second class citizens, and that they did not have a voice on campus. Some stated that they are engaged in their unit, but others still feel like the “odd people out.” They noted that units place more emphasis on tenure-track teaching faculty and graduate students. They often do not feel included

as part of the campus, regardless of their role in bringing in external campus funding, their impact on research and student success and overall role of the university's success.

Feedback from the participants included:

1. Overall positive experience being an employee of CU Boulder, commenting on the great benefits package and flexibility offered.
2. They presented as a very engaged group, eager to share their experiences and have a meaningful impact on the university as a whole.
3. Very appreciative to be asked for their perspectives, multiple groups stating independent of each other they felt like "second class citizens" and did not have a voice on campus.
4. A strong desire for meaningful representation within campus leadership, with the ability to advocate for their own needs and desires.
5. Priorities for this group primarily included:
 - a. Improved need for recognition
 - b. Addressing an overall misunderstanding of the different employee types or classifications on campus and what benefits are available to each group.
 - c. Child and elder care
 - d. A need for better transportation and parking options on campus for event attendance
 - e. An improved Tuition Assistance Benefit program, which would include a more streamlined and transparent process as well removing the cost barriers. An example would include allowing employees to audit courses with the intention of expanding practical skills that can be applied to their current career.
 - f. Cost of living
 - g. Mental health support
 - h. Addressing the enormity of the university and its bureaucracy, which can lead to decreased productivity, loss of faith in the organization and burnout.
 - i. Career advancement and promotion tracks
 - j. Formalizing opportunities for sabbaticals (4-6 weeks), paid or unpaid, to allow individuals time to rest and reset.
 - k. Lack of bridge funding

VI. Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

The committee would like to acknowledge that we did not discuss or focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) concerns during our meetings and focus groups. Specifically, we did not ask specific questions or receive feedback related to DEI, nor did we track the demographics of those who participated in the focus groups.

Despite the above-mentioned oversight, the committee acknowledges the importance of DEI and recognizes it as a priority for Staff Council. We support the inclusion of DEI-related discussions in the planning and rollout process of this recommendation. This acknowledgement

indicates a willingness to improve and prioritize DEI concerns in the future, hopefully leading to a more inclusive and diverse environment.

Appendices

Glossary

Baby Boomers

a person born during a period of time in which there is a marked rise in a population's birth rate, especially a person born in the U.S. following the end of World War II (usually considered to be in the years from 1946 to 1964)

Boulder Faculty Assembly

the representative body of the faculty in the shared governance of the CU-Boulder campus. A guiding principle of that shared governance, recognized by the Board of Regents of the University of Colorado, is that the faculty and the administration shall collaborate in major decisions affecting the welfare of the University. In practice, the BFA has primary responsibility for setting academic policy and is expected to advise the administration on other policies. <https://www.colorado.edu/bfa/>

Bridge Funding

continuing funding to allow productive CU faculty on soft funding at any stage of their career to continue their research as they seek to secure and/or wait to receive funding)

DEI

abbreviation for "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion"

Generation X

the generation of people born in the 1960s and 1970s

Millennials

of, relating to, or belonging to the generation of people born in the 1980s or 1990s : of or relating to millennials

Office of Budget & Fiscal Planning

part of the [Budget and Finance](#) team within the Finance and Business Strategy (FBS) division. Partners with academic and administrative leaders, coordinates campus-wide budget and fiscal planning and identifies and facilitates the allocation of resources necessary for the Boulder campus to excel as a major educational and research university. <https://www.colorado.edu/bfp/>

PRA

abbreviation of Professional Research Assistant. Also includes the Senior Professional Research Assistant title.

RA

abbreviation of Research Associate. Also includes the Senior Research Associate title.

Silent Generation

also known as the 'Traditionalist Generation', is the Western demographic cohort following the Greatest Generation and preceding the Baby Boomers. The generation is generally defined as people born from 1928 to 1945

Soft funding

sponsored projects, grants, service contracts, internal service centers, and research funded by gifts

Staff Council

a team of elected members from across the University of Colorado Boulder campus whose purpose is to recommend to the University administration proposals designed to improve the status of staff employees at the University. They do this by serving as a liaison between staff and Boulder campus, University system, and State administration.

<https://www.colorado.edu/staffcouncil>

Strategic Resources and Support

oversees the University of Colorado Boulder's administrative, business, operational and finance teams, working to enhance and support the university's academic and research missions. <https://www.colorado.edu/srs/>

UCB

abbreviation for "University of Colorado Boulder"

PRA/RA Demographic Information²

Table 5

Breakdown of PRA/RA's by Job Titles	
Job Title	Count of Employee ID
Professional Research Assistant	1135
Research Associate	565
Senior Professional Research Assistant	167
Senior Research Associate	155
Total	2022

Table 6

Breakdown of PRA/Senior PRA		
Unit	PRA Total	Sr PRA Total
College/Center/Other	354	47
Institute	781	120

² Data compiled by Colisse Franklin 3/16/2023 from HCM

Total	1,135	167
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Table 7

Breakdown of RA/Senior RA		
Unit	PRA Total	Sr PRA Total
College/Center/Other	175	83
Institute	390	72
Total	565	155

Boulder Faculty Assembly Statement

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PRA/RA Focus Group Protocol

Purpose

This document will outline the protocol to be used for a set of focus groups designed to collect information from professional research associates and research associates. It includes the logistics of the focus group process and the questions being asked. The goal of the data being collected is to understand the opportunities and challenges related to representation and shared governance for these campus groups.

Marketing

Please join us for a quick discussion about your employee experience at CU Boulder. We want to gather feedback from research associates and professional research assistants to ensure support, inclusion, and to understand ways we can improve the status of staff employees. Consider joining us on (dates/times) and sign up here.

Protocol Logistics

The focus group will use the principles that inform the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). NGT is a structured process that focuses on gathering insights from those closest associated with the area. It limits the researchers' influence. It also gives space to ideas and values, equally. It can be used to explore a concept and generate a hypothesis.

- Who: A sample of PRA/RA staff from the institutes and departments. Colisse is sending invite and sign-up document to institute leads to
- What: The focus group will last for approximately 30-40 minutes. The document outlines the introduction and questions that will be discussed.

- When: The project will take place during February and March 2023.
 - Wednesday, February 22, 2023, from 3:00pm – 4:00pm.
 - Thursday, February 23, 2023, from 4:00pm – 5:00pm.
 - Tuesday, February 28, 2023, from 12:30– 1:30pm.
- Modality: Conducting most groups virtually.

Focus Group Full Report

PRA/RA/Sr RA & Sr PRA Focus Group Notes, compiled March 9, 2023

Kimberly Kruchen and Colisse Franklin met with five focus groups, consisting of Research Associates (RAs) and Professional Research Assistants (PRAs), between February 22 and March 3, 2023. A total of 63 researchers signed up for the focus groups from a variety of units across campus, with 58 participating. The participants were primarily from the institutes, but a few researchers were from colleges and schools.

We asked each group the following questions:

- What do you enjoy the most about working at CU Boulder?
- What are some of the more challenging aspects of working at CU Boulder?
- Thinking about your engagement on campus and with campus activities, how would you rate your level of engagement? (High, medium, low).
 - Please tell us a little more about the barriers that exist when it relates to your engagement.
- What would you rate as your level of knowledge about the benefits related to your role? (High, medium, low) (examples of benefits? Health insurance, parental leave, tuition assistance, etc.)
- What types of benefits are you familiar with?
- From your perspective, what is the most significant priority related to your success on campus?
 - There are groups on campus that are formed to organize support around student and employee needs and to help ensure representation for student and employee groups. These groups often help to represent, inform, and educate staff and act as a liaison to the CU Boulder administration. These groups include the student government, BFA, and Staff Council. We recognize that research faculty is not represented by any of these groups. What would you all see as some benefits to being included in shared governance? What would be the challenges?

Summary of Main Points:

- Overall, the research faculty had very positive things to say about working for CU Boulder. They are passionate about the work they do, being part of an academic institution, making an impact, contributing to the overall success of the campus, freedom

to be innovative and to explore new ideas and research, working directly with students, the people they work with directly (teams), the flexibility with schedules (hybrid or remote options), and are very appreciative of the CU benefits (health, retirement, EcoPass, tuition, library access, parental leave, access to rec center). Specifically, flexibility in schedule came up in every session, especially when it came to childcare/families. They understand that this is not the case with other institutions/federal labs.

- They were genuinely appreciative that they were being asked to provide input and very engaged in conversation. Many stated that they had not been asked before, and the sessions helped them to feel heard and valued. They requested more listening sessions and the opportunity to provide feedback. Participants were also interested in a summary of the feedback.
- Regarding engagement, they voiced feeling like they are second class citizens, and that they did not have a voice on campus. Some stated that they are engaged in their unit, but others still feel like the “odd people out.” They noted that units place more emphasis on TTT faculty and graduate students. They often do not feel included as part of the campus, regardless of their role in bringing in external campus funding, their impact on research and student success and overall role of the university's success.

Issues/Barriers Discussed:

Lack of recognition in general, including the lack of recognition about their years of service. Lack of fully understanding and awareness about **benefits** that CU offers, including parental leave, tuition benefits, retirement benefits, and others. In general, they would like to be able to easily navigate/access benefits available. They would like to see better orthodontist and eye care coverage. Regarding retirement benefits, one researcher said they had been on campus for 25 years and their understanding is still low. For example, it took years to understand that they could contribute more to their retirement.

Overall **misunderstanding of different employee types** on campus and what benefits are available to each group (i.e. parental leave for TTT faculty vs research faculty). They would like to see better accommodation for new parents, including schedules and physical support such as lactation spaces.

Lack of campus **child care** and backup child care benefits. Generally, there is a lack of childcare options, but Boulder and surrounding areas have long waitlists. (See slide of research faculty by age groups – 48.84% millennials). Childcare may be a big issue for this group. Staff consist of 43.95% Millennials and 7.87% Gen Z. Research Faculty consist of 48.84% Millennials and 8% Gen Z.

Lack of affordable parking on the main campus makes it challenging to engage in on campus events. This includes the **separation between NOAA, east and main campus**. They would like to see more campus events and webinars offered on East Campus.

Frustration with **tuition benefits** – including the lack of ease when trying to use, cost and value of courses (not easy to navigate and cost prohibitive). They would like to take courses to enhance their professional career and position at CU, without paying for tuition (non-degree

seeking, non-credit courses). They are often discouraged from taking courses without a grade by faculty. One comment made is that the tuition benefit did not feel like a benefit at all. A specific desire is for data management courses to be offered as part of the tuition benefit.

High cost of **housing** in Boulder results in many of them living outside of Boulder. Home buying options are unknown, but the 'Landed' program was referenced by one researcher.

<https://connections.cu.edu/stories/homebuying-support-program-offered-cu-employees>

<https://www.landed.com/?irclickid=w4bX0tTYvxyNRiyXCRw8XCiUkAUfOXC30IHTo0&irgwc=1>

Researchers are facing mental health challenges and need more support from campus.

They struggle with the enormity of **bureaucracy** and the challenges of a big organization. The institution is so big that even simple things feel impossible. This is leading them to have to find workarounds that they should not have to find; including looking for short cuts, challenges with purchasing needs such as computer hardware and is making it challenging to get work done in this environment. Additionally, the level of bureaucracy seems to be increasing. Related to this idea, they would love more support in administering grants and contracts at the unit level and stated that OCG support was great!

Interest in **sabbatical options** for Research Faculty, even if only for 4-6 weeks and unpaid. The key desire is that they would like to keep their benefits. Formalizing this as a benefit to all researchers on campus would be impactful and potentially a retention tool.

Overall **engagement with campus is low** for most of the researchers. Part of that is due to the cost of parking passes, public transit/convenient bus availability, family commitments, remote work, and communication about events.

Lack of flexibility with soft funded positions to **volunteer/provide service** for campus opportunities. A stipend could potentially be provided for those on soft money.

Lack of support for **shared facilities can lead to loss of basic functions and overall access to the equipment in the facility**. These facilities can be a meaningful retention and recruitment tool.

There is a lack of transparency about what ICR is used for on campus. A desire from researchers to understand where the ICR funds go and what services RAs and PRAs gain from those funds.

They would like to see **better/more targeted communication** to research faculty. Topics may include changes in benefits, impact of policy adjustments, etc.

Lack of **career track/professional advancement** within the RA and PRA job codes. Lack of a clear salary framework or understanding of how salaries are set and the differences between units is a contributing factor around this challenge. Researchers do not think salaries are competitive. For some units, a career track structure doesn't exist. Some institutes have a good career track structure. Potential solutions discussed include having more titles available within the job codes, and professional development opportunities.

Lack of **bridge funding** between sponsored projects is a significant challenge. Funding opportunities are getting more competitive and there is a concern that lack of funding will require them to reduce FTE or lose position. There is a belief that the university does not recognize those challenges.

Voiced the adverse impact of **admin days** being offered (holiday days, snow days, etc.), on both small and large grants and contracts.

Voiced the adverse impact on grants and contracts because of the way CU accrues and charges **leave**.

Shared Governance

- Many Research Faculty would like to be part of a group that had a collective voice to help guide change and have direct contact with campus leadership. Some of the smaller units or institutes have governance groups that represent research faculty. For example, CIRES, School of Education.
- Some stated they would make time to be involved. They would love more avenues to engage. The benefits of this type of involvement would be to develop relationships across campus, learn about different norms across campus and what to expect and not to expect.
- For some, loyalty is to their specific project, not necessarily to the larger campus. Specifically, “a challenge is that for those of us on soft money we do not have the overhead funding to participate on these types of groups. Depending on the size of the grant, it can be difficult to make that time for smaller funded projects.”
- Lack of awareness about shared governance groups. Those familiar with governance groups were confused about titles and why they were not represented by BFA.

Recommendations

Our recommendation would be to include RAs and PRAs in the CU Boulder Staff Council. The majority of their concerns align with those of other staff members. The other challenges raised can be discussed and worked on in RIO, within the individual units, and with improved communication.

This group needs representation, and the mission of the Staff Council aligns with many of the needs discussed by this group. Specifically, providing the research faculty with information, representation, and education about opportunities to improve their employment experience.

A key to the successful representation of this group will be clear communication and concrete examples of the benefits and opportunities that the Staff Council can offer this group. We also recommend discussing and being open to the value this group can offer in return.

We suggest 2-4 Research Faculty seats be added to the Staff Council (or number proportionate to depending on total number of staff/research faculty). Long term, if there seems to be an interest in a separate Research Faculty Council, campus could investigate that pathway.

**Suggest BFA provides context and language that outlines why Research Faculty are not represented by BFA.*