

The New Version of Administrative Creep

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It's become a new annual tradition: Whenever a faculty member retires, the rest of us circle the wagons to begin the delicate process of justifying why our department still needs the position.

In meeting after meeting, we discuss the precise timing of the retirement, the budgetary implications, the effects of a phased departure, and the odds that we can make an effective case to the administration for a replacement hire. The argument goes something like this:

- **Professor No. 1:** "We don't really know whether the administration will agree to a search. The budget looks pretty bad. Enrollments were down in the university last year."
- **Professor No. 2:** "Well, but with two full professors going to half-time, it should free up more than a starting faculty member's salary."
- **Professor No. 3:** "Let's write a notice of vacancy and see what the administration says."

At one such meeting, a faculty member arrived with what amounted to a spreadsheet. It showed the five-year projection of cost savings based on three retirements, the need for at least one replacement faculty member, and the savings to administration over this period. It also proposed options (like replacing the retiree with a fixed-term appointment), and outlined the impact of each decision on our program's budgetary picture.

Notably absent in all of these faculty meetings? Any discussion of pedagogy or scholarly expertise. We're faculty, not administrators. And yet when we meet to discuss a retiring professor, we don't talk about the direction we want to take our department, the content areas we want a new faculty member to cover, or the academic needs of our

students (and how a new hire might help us meet those needs).

In short, these meetings — which happen regularly across academe — are not about faculty priorities. They're about administrative ones.

It has become clear that we are experiencing a new kind of "administrative creep." Growth in the administrative ranks throughout academe is a well-known trend (our own university spends only 36 percent of its annual budget on instruction), but less understood is the way in which a pervasive administrative lens increasingly seems to color almost everything we do as faculty members. We are seeing a faculty-identity correction — as we spend more and more of our time serving the administrative needs of our institutions, to the detriment of our own scholarship and pedagogy.

Moreover, creeping administrative work sends the message that our academic institutions serve a narrow purpose — conveying degrees as quickly as possible — rather than the deeper, more important goal of educating citizens. In effect, administrative creep shapes the lived experience of most faculty members, many of whom are now defensive, cautious, scared, and compliant.

Death by 1,000 emails. Strong teaching and research are the headlines that bring in students. They decide to attend an institution because of the great education they expect to receive in the field that most interests them. We doubt that many students (or their tuition-paying parents) are particularly interested in their professors' ability to generate spreadsheets for replacement hires.

When it starts to happen, administrative creep typically isn't felt as an overly onerous task. Requests for faculty involvement in administrative tasks are framed as opportunities to volunteer. The faculty member is presented with an ultimatum that runs along the lines of "if you don't volunteer for X committee/task force/working group, it will be done by administrators without you." The subtext is that not being present will result in negative effects for faculty — as if what is in the best interest of administration is not in the best interest of faculty.

Unfortunately, our presence on those groups often legitimizes their administratively-focused decisions. Additionally, the more that we are brought into administrative decision-making, the more an administrative identity begins to shape who we are and what we do. We start to think like administrators — focused not on what we do best (teaching and research), but rather what administration requires.

Another example of administrative creep is the focus on filling classes — i.e., selling credits. Too often, we spend time discussing a strategy to "offer the classes that will fill," rather than a strategy to "offer the classes our students need to succeed." Administrators want faculty members to be nimble, to adjust our course offerings to meet students' demands. That means adding sections in high-demand courses, and cancelling sections of under-enrolled classes.

In that model, administrators view professors as parts in a machine, easily shifted. While that is a problem in and of itself, the more pernicious problem is the degree to which faculty members start discussing which courses to offer based on fill rates, and planning our hiring around the fill-rate paradigm.

Administrative creep, then, is not a matter of mean-spirited administrators conspiring to undermine the faculty. Instead what most of us face is death by 1,000 bureaucratic emails — incremental, even micro, administrative requests that serve to reshape our identity, bit by bit, and increasingly define who we are and what we do. So how should we resist?

The anti-Nike model: Just Don't Do It. One of the most important and effective responses to administrative creep is for faculty to just say no.

A significant percentage of the administrative tasks we are asked to perform are simply unnecessary. Here's how the game works: Administrators are hired. They require certain tasks of faculty (writing reports and assessments, for example) and are then responsible for evaluating the results. Those administrators have created a loop that justifies

their positions but does nothing to strengthen teaching and learning for our students.

Why not eliminate the very administrative positions that our universities have created to serve this circular logic?

A step in that direction is to say no to administrative requests that support the loop. That doesn't mean that we should decline *all* such requests — just that we limit our involvement to the ones that reflect faculty interests in improving our curricula, teaching students, building our scholarship, and creating knowledge.

Administrative thinking is like water: It seeps into everything we do. We as faculty have to start recognizing that saying yes to an administrative request is more than simply meeting the specific needs of a specific administrator. Saying yes is also strengthening the hold of administrative thinking, and allowing it to creep ever deeper into our faculty identities. Essential faculty work — teaching, learning, and scholarship — becomes framed by mandates that administrators regard as "student-centered." But all that means is that course decisions are no longer governed by the expertise of faculty.

Resisting administrative creep means recognizing that decisions on the most important courses for students to take, in what sequence, and with what content should rest with the faculty. Resisting means reasserting faculty ownership of the curriculum. It means declining to let administrative jargon and priorities control our discussions. And it means that — rather than designing administrative spreadsheets — we should advocate for new hires who can respond to the needs of our students, departments, and fields, as defined by the faculty.

We need to resist the temptation to argue for higher education in — and only in — administrative terms. The future of our universities may depend on it.

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