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Chronicle Careers<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2009/03/2009030601c.htm>**HEADS UP****We Can't Do That Here****How do you fight professors and administrators who use rules and regulations to resist change?**By GARY A. OLSON

Last month, the veteran astronaut Andrew Thomas and several of his colleagues at the Johnson Space Center in Houston posted a homemade video on YouTube. It depicted a fictitious engineer's futile attempts to persuade NASA officials to consider an innovative spacecraft design. At every turn, her ideas were dismissed with statements like "that's not how we operate." Thomas made the video to show how the culture of NASA had become increasingly hostile to new ideas, preferring instead the comfort zone of "the way things are done around here."

In academe — as, apparently, at NASA — people often respond to any proposed change in policy or procedure by saying "University rules prohibit that," or "State law does not allow that," or "Federal regulations specify that we can't do that." Occasionally, no such rule or regulation even exists; it is a figment of lore, faulty memory, or wishful thinking. At other times, the rule may exist but is interpreted so narrowly as to subvert its original intent. Either way, the result is the same: Innovation is trumped by bureaucracy.

A senior sociologist I know ran into such obstacles recently while negotiating an appointment at a lower-ranked institution than his own in order to move closer to his ailing parents. He asked his new department chair for an annual stipend of \$5,000 to help defray his research costs, but his request was met with puzzlement.

"The chair claimed that the institution had never given anyone a research stipend and was certain that university rules prohibited it," the sociologist told me. "This university only recently began to raise its research profile, so I think they were just unfamiliar with stipends." Rather than investigate whether there was a way to grant the request, the department head simply took shelter in a comfortable stock reply: "We can't do that here."

A dean of a pharmacy school told me a similar story. He once attempted to install a display case in the hallway outside his office where he planned to exhibit awards and trophies won by his faculty. His plan came to a halt when a campus facilities officer notified him that the case could not be installed because it jutted 10 inches out from the wall and, thus, did not comply with safety regulations.

"I was quite familiar with the regulations," he told me. "And I knew that we were in compliance because the case did not impede access." He challenged the compliance officer to produce the rule. She was unable to do so, and he eventually had his display case installed. But it was a lot of time and effort expended, just to get a display case hung.

An education dean told me of a dispute in one of her departments that serves as yet another example. The department's constitution said that "all tenured and tenure-track faculty shall have the opportunity to evaluate the department chair." Some faculty members read that statement as barring all adjuncts and instructors from weighing in. Others disagreed, arguing that the statement specified no such prohibition.

Asked to make a ruling, the dean pointed out that the statement was simply intended to give faculty members "the right" to evaluate the chair — not to exclude other constituents from the same opportunity. One group in the department had insisted on reading the rule in the most narrow fashion.

Clearly, some perpetually suspicious professors and administrators help foster a culture comfortable with the status quo. Others, in contrast, approach innovation with a can-do attitude: "Let's see if we can make this happen, given our rules and procedures."

Perhaps what I am contrasting are two personality types — one that thinks rules exist in order to police people, and one that sees rules as setting appropriate boundaries. The impulse to ensure that university officials are complying with all relevant rules is a good one; however, rules should not be invoked to cripple a unit or prevent it from forward thinking. And, of course, some people are purely obstructive. They say no for the sheer pleasure of flexing their administrative muscle.

A mix of facts and strategies might help counter those who ritualistically block change.

First, understanding the differences between a rule, a policy, a procedure, and a guideline might be especially helpful. A guideline is simply a suggested practice established to assist people in performing some function, as in "Guidelines for Preparing a Teaching Portfolio." A procedure is a standard practice that a department adopts in order to ensure consistency and efficiency, as in the steps for filing a complaint. A policy is a formally adopted procedure, or set of procedures, that binds people to certain actions, as in a university's alcohol policy. And a rule is an even stronger restriction or prescribed action set by the institution's trustees or some other legal entity, and thus has legal status. Violation of a university rule or policy usually exposes you to serious consequences.

Knowing whether your proposed change would be governed by a university rule or a policy, or if it is merely a matter of procedure, is important. When someone claims the change is "prohibited," you might begin by consulting your institution's formal lists of rules, policies, and procedures to confirm that that is true.

If the rule or policy does exist, the next step is to ask, "Does the rule, in fact, prohibit my proposal, or is someone interpreting the language in an overly narrow way?" Just as there is a huge difference between a guideline and a rule, there is an equally vast gap between "no university employee shall ..." and "university employees are advised to exercise caution when...."

If you cannot locate the rule, ask someone to show it to you so you can see the precise wording. If people are simply invoking a prohibition as an excuse for saying "we can't do that around here," they will be unable to present the formal, recorded restriction to you.

And, of course, it is always good practice to consult widely on the campus when you propose a change. Having "buy in" from the affected parties helps strengthen your hand against those who tend to block innovation.

It's part of the job for university administrators to comply with all appropriate rules and regulations. But it's also part of the job to seek out new ideas and innovative ways of doing things. If we are to lead our institutions, we need to fight the urge to respond to change with knee-jerk resistance — after all, it's not rocket science.

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