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Why Rules Matter

By Gary A. Olson

How do you fight professors and administrators who think rules and regulations apply to everyone but them?

Last month's column was about people who attempt to block change by citing rules or interpreting them in the most narrow way possible. But academe also has its fair share of people at the other end of the spectrum: those who ignore rules and deadlines; view them as petty, bureaucratic nonsense; and think they only apply to someone else.

Over the years, I have known several faculty members who refused to submit an annual report summarizing their achievements for the year to their department head. They couldn't be bothered with such trivia, even though failing to do so adversely affected their annual evaluations. Other colleagues would consistently disregard deadlines and submit their grades, sabbatical reports, or other important documents well beyond the published "drop dead" date. Still others, when serving on a committee, would make decisions in direct opposition to the committee's specified criteria — voting to admit to a graduate program someone who clearly did not meet the minimum requirements, for example, or voting against a colleague for tenure even though that colleague had far exceeded the department's stated standards.

Administrators are just as prone to such looseness. I know a social-sciences dean who, in attempting to be compassionate, found himself in hot water with his provost. By university policy, tenure and promotion applications were due by 5 p.m. on a certain Friday. A political scientist called the dean a half-hour before the deadline and frantically begged to hand in his application first thing Monday morning — after all, no one was likely to review the applications that weekend.

The dean generously, but unthinkingly, granted the request, and the assistant professor submitted his application on Monday morning. A week later, a historian in the same college attempted to

submit her own tenure application, now a week late. She was told that she was ineligible because she had failed to meet the published deadline. Outraged, she sued the university.

"My provost was furious," the dean told me. "He said I was so intent on playing Mr. Nice Guy that I forgot my duty — to ensure that all faculty and staff in the college were treated with the same degree of fairness." Fearing that the historian would easily win her suit, the university settled the case out of court.

It is not that compassion and flexibility are bad; it is that in violating rules and deadlines, other people might be injured or disadvantaged. A veteran provost I know is fond of saying that a good administrator must be a rule monger, otherwise you invite chaos and injustice. She tells stories of faculty senates or administrative officers creating a rule, and then promptly violating it when that proved convenient. "I would constantly have to remind them that they themselves created the rule, and usually for a good purpose, but they couldn't simply disregard it," she told me. "It is as if some people believe that 'academic freedom' somehow means that they are free from the constraints of rules and deadlines or that rules are for others, not them."

As a kind of master example of why rules matter, consider the set of rules often called a departmental "governance document," or bylaws. As an administrator, I have had to ask people to develop governance documents that clearly articulated in writing the important procedures, rules, and deadlines governing their departments. Doing so has substantial advantages for faculty members, staff employees, and administrators.

The administrative benefits of a well-conceived governance document include:

- Consistency. All department members have a reasonable expectation that like situations will be treated in a similar fashion, and fewer decisions are likely to be made ad hoc or on the fly.
- Accountability. When procedures, rules, and deadlines are clearly expressed in a publicly accessible document, it becomes much easier to judge proposed actions and behaviors than when no such document exists.
- Legal protection. When you make decisions or take actions consistent with your department's formally adopted set of rules and procedures, courts are less likely to decide you have acted in a capricious or discriminatory fashion.

But the rules and policies spelled out in a sound governance document aren't just important administratively. They also benefit faculty members in several ways:

- **Transparency.** The operation of the department is open and comprehensible to all constituents, rather than mysterious and inexplicable.
- **Fairness.** The same consistency that serves as an administrative benefit leads to a greater level of equitable treatment of all department members.
- **Equity.** Rules protect people from the abuses of old-style cronyism. Decisions aren't made capriciously, in smoke-filled rooms, and to the benefit of one person or group over another.
- **Trust.** When decisions are made in the sunshine, when procedures and rules are clearly articulated, and when you are treated in the same fashion as your colleagues, you are much more likely to assume your chair and others are acting in good faith rather than deceptively.

Naturally, when people are able to participate in creating and revising their department's rules, especially the creation of a comprehensive governance document, they are much more likely to buy into those rules and understand why they were adopted and why they are important.

So the key to dealing with people who ignore rules and deadlines is to demonstrate that, while petty bureaucracies do exist, and while some academics do perpetually use rules in obstructive rather than productive ways, rules and deadlines can provide important safeguards against abuse. We need them not primarily as a way to police people but as a way to protect them from unfair treatment.

Rules are like any number of instruments: In the wrong hands, they can become weapons; in the right hands, they are the essential tools we need to get things done.

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