

Message from the Chair

This issue of *Collective Speaking* focuses on a presentation, made at the Joint Grievance Committee meeting in mid-March by USFA Senior Grievance Officer Colleen Bell, to senior university administrators. The presentation outlined challenges faculty members encounter with administrative processes at the U of S, and how these challenges add to and impede the work of faculty.

Data for this presentation came from you in one of three ways, a survey conducted by the USFA Ad Hoc Committee on University Administrative Practices, stories submitted through a Google document, and complaints made to the USFA. Thank you for sharing your experiences.

[Pdf of Presentation Slides](#)

It is not yet clear what resulted from the presentation. We do know that senior administrators are aware of the concerns we have raised, but thus far, there have been no resolutions. In fact, there seems to be confusion amongst deans concerning the travel policy. However, we wanted to share the presentation slides with you and encourage you to continue to raise these challenges with your deans and other senior university administrators.

We will keep you posted.

Geraldine Balzer

USFA Presentation Regarding Administrative Processes at USask

Over the last few years, and especially since the Covid-19 pandemic started, our University community has had to adapt to many changes: not only in learning to pivot between online and face-to-face teaching in response to the latest numbers of infections, but also in dealing with changes to administrative processes essential to our teaching and research related activities. We have learned how to operate new and constantly changing software systems introduced to support these processes, to deal with impersonal “help” provided by

constantly changing staff applying constantly changing rules. In response to many complaints received by faculty, the USFA carried out two data-collection initiatives: 1) a survey (quantitative and qualitative) of the state of the administrative practices on campus in the summer of 2020, and 2) created a shared Google doc, available to USFA members between January 10 and March 20, 2022, where they could share their personal stories about difficult experiences with administrative processes that impact on their research, teach-

ing, and wellbeing.

Both data-collection initiatives were very successful. The study received 450 responses (nearly 50% of USFA members) and the shared Google doc attracted 38 stories by faculty, many of whom are prominent researchers, holding research chairs or leading research institutes. Additionally, 14 complaints were sent directly to the USFA between January 10 and March 20, 2022.

Six areas of focus emerged from the study and the shared stories:

Connection Point, Research Ethics Process, Concur, Direct Travel and Travel Policy, UnivRS and IT. In summary, the conclusions stemming from the data analysis are that faculty have become “co-producers” of administrative processes in unprecedented ways over the past 8-10 years.

- Most (86%) of survey respondents perceive that administrative processes interfere with other responsibilities.
- Faculty are poorly equipped to be co-producers of many administrative processes and consequently experience co-producing as fraught, stressful, and time-consuming.
- Hidden productivity costs associated with increased co-production hinder faculty in supporting the university’s mission in research and teaching excellence.
- Co-production is happening in areas that are not beneficial for research and teaching (e.g., expense reimbursement) while in other areas, co-production would be beneficial, but does not happen (e.g., software approval/downloads, booking flights).

Administrative staff reductions

Faculty feel their time and expertise is wasted doing the work of an office coordinator. The choice of senior administrators to lay off administrative staff has left faculty to organize and coordinate thesis committee meetings, do basic paperwork, accounting and financial reporting, fundraising, human re-

sources, archiving of data and database management, computer and technology management, publishing, website management, marketing and communications, as well as reception, occupational health and safety, and logistics and procurement. It is not an effective use of our time. For the past decade ever increasing number of rules, and growing central admin and executive positions, have deteriorated the ability to do research at UofS because processes get ever more complicated, lengthy, and onerous on faculty.

We are expected to attend training for the various online systems, but then the systems change and the instructions are not accurate anymore. When asking for assistance on Connection Point, we are referred to a set of instructions, which are also often out of date, irrelevant or insufficient, about how to do things ourselves.

A majority (66%) of survey respondents perceive that administrative support is insufficient for competitive research programs. Some state that support for research is quickly dwindling to the point where they are seriously considering downgrading their research programs (e.g. animal support, budget management, equipment issues, HR etc.) Faculty share that they have decided not to seek further tri-council funding because it seemed a better use of their time to focus on actual research and writing than on the bureaucratic processes involved in administering a grant (e.g. filling

in incomprehensible forms and dealing with interface issues of software support systems like UnivRS or Concur).

Information Technology

Most survey respondents (58%), especially in Science (71%), perceive that IT’s control over computers and other IT policies negatively affect their productivity and workload. Many responses indicate that a particular “sore point” is the removal of administration rights on computers purchased with grants. It is annoying and time-consuming to have to ask IT Services to install printer software or free statistics software. Submitting a ticket to get IT support for such tasks means wait time, inconsistent support, delays work, and interrupts creative processes. The lack of a dedicated person one can refer to is also problematic. One faculty member says *“it took up almost two days of my time between setting up three different sessions with IT to get their new laptop set up properly to be able to synch with the University cloud and printing service. I would have been better off continuing to work from my own personal laptop than to switch to university-managed computers.”*

Many faculty members find IT security controls excessive, inefficient and time-consuming. There are many complaints in this area. The multi-factor authentication is tedious and time consuming; it requires having two devices at hand all the time. If one forgets their cell phone at home, they may not be able to log into Paws and need to travel back home to pick

their phone.

"One size fits all" approaches do not align with realities of diverse research needs and processes in a comprehensive university. This applies to both software and hardware.

The restriction on installing new software oneself and the requirement to seek ICT security approval for installing any software that is not on the University's pre-approved list makes it impossible to carry out planned research. Long approval and service wait times impede teaching, student support and research. The approval process takes several weeks and is often inconclusive. This makes it hard to meet deadlines for papers, project proposals, reports or to collaborate with colleagues from different institutions. It also impacts graduate students training. For example: *"I have been asked multiple years in a row if I got permission for the same software that I went through the ridiculous hoops the year before. Everything takes forever - for example NVivo is free but it took me days to get it installed after it stopped working early. My graduate students working remotely were no longer eligible for the free nVivo because they were "not on campus computers" even though they couldn't be on campus computers because the campus was shut down. So I had to buy them licenses for programs I wouldn't usually have. And again - all of this took weeks because of the sheer number of emails we had to ex-*

change." Another faculty member *"purchased two computers for graduate students (during COVID) to enable them to perform their research from their UofS offices. Computers arrived to the IT office but IT people were too busy to install them for 4-6 weeks (inadequate staffing)."*

The same software that needs to be reinstalled after its license expires has to go through the same painful process. Software approved and installed on classroom computers for a particular class offered in one year or term needs to get reapproved and re-installed again the next year or term, causing faculty to give up and not use the software at all to avoid the process. Students' education suffers as a result.

The blanket ICT policy that blocks administrative privileges even on research computers has very high costs on all university stakeholders. It leads to delays requiring hours of paid time of lab managers and ICT staff as well as faculty (in meetings and email correspondence) to install required software, wasting university funds and diverting faculty grant funds away from actual research. It leads to delays in graduate student graduation while they wait for software needed for their work to be installed. This adds to the financial burden of students (extra tuition fees and living expenses) and also for the faculty supervisor and department or college (grants for student fellowships during the unproductive time). Research not done in time means missed publication deadlines and no student co-

authored publications, and a lesser chance of faculty success in grant competitions. The whole process, apart from wasteful, is demoralizing for all parties involved. No university that takes its research mission seriously should have policies in place that routinely incur costs like these. Many faculty note that this is not a complaint about IT staff, who were as helpful and responsive as they could be while hampered by counterproductive policy.

The restrictions on software make it impossible to use hardware required for research projects. For example, *"The controls that IT places on office and especially laboratory/research computers causes no end of difficulty. Within my lab we have multiple pieces of research equipment with networking capabilities, and which are operated by computers. None of the systems can be used to full capacity because IT will only allow them on the network if they are set up with their management systems. Most of these machines have been setup and calibrated by the manufacturer and there is no guarantee that installing this extra software will not interfere or cause functional issues. Additionally, the software for this equipment is not on the pre-approved IT list. IT also causes issues with our shared lab machines because their tight controls prevent the download of packages, extensions and upgrades."*

An informal inquiry regarding the ICT security of some other U-15 universities (Ottawa, Dalhousie, Manitoba, Alberta and UBC) reveals that, at

all of these universities, faculty are free to choose and purchase all the computers, and purchase and install software, they need for their research. There is no approval process, ICT just provides help and technical support, instead of deciding which software or hardware should be used. Faculty have administrative rights on their computers, both personal and lab-computers.

The constraints on purchasing hardware are equally counter-productive to research and teaching. The choice of computers to purchase with grant funding through IT Requisitions has been limited to three Lenovo configurations (one desktop and two laptops). Purchasing Mac computers is officially discouraged, yet many specialized research software packages run better on Mac. Many faculty members and students are used to and prefer using a Mac; learning to work on a different platform takes time that could have been productively used for other things. Support for Mac computers is virtually non-existent. The Self-Service portal for Mac users is not helpful; faculty, staff and students are not able to install software from the Portal anyway since they need administrator rights on the computer. It is nearly impossible to install software using the Self-Service portal even on older Macs when the user has administrator rights. Getting service from ICT on the phone can take several hours and end in “bring your computer to

ICT” so they can reformat the disk and install everything again and remove the administrator rights of the owner. The process can take a week, which means a week of lost time, unable to do anything without computer. Connecting Macbook Air to printers on campus to print course material/activity sheets for a face-to-face class, for example, becomes an ordeal, which often forces faculty to eliminate the activity altogether.

ICT policies and their implementation also create problems with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. For example, a faculty member on maternity leave was shut out of the A3 License or Microsoft License. *“When I went on maternity leave, imagine my surprise to learn that I didn’t even have access to Word as I was trying to shepherd my graduate students through their theses with an infant in my arms.”* This problem was ultimately fixed for faculty on Maternity leave but the problem remains for faculty on long term disability (LTD). Some sort of IT code i.e. a “date feed from one system to another” affects those faculty members, whereby those who are on LTD are cut off from access to the Microsoft License and cannot upgrade software or programs that other faculty have access to. There doesn’t appear to be any “policy” that authorizes this. *“When I asked who authorized this they just shrugged their shoulders. They claim that LTD equates to “terminated” for IT purposes. When asked, no one could explain what other IT services were cut off for those on LTD.”*

Connection Point, Concur and UnivRS

Connection Point (CP) is difficult to use and faculty state they try to avoid it. Only a third of survey respondents (33%) said they rarely have to follow-up with additional queries or corrections to CP. Not every experience is bad. However, faculty describe CP as slow and confusing. What used to be done quickly and efficiently now can take weeks and even months. Reflecting on an experience with writing an offer letter in a hiring process, one faculty member said: *“There is more time and resources spent telling me what I have done wrong then it would take for someone in CP to just fix it and send me back the right version for signatures. Where did all the admin folks go who used to do this stuff?”*

The rules and practices used by CP are inefficient, stall research and add to the work of faculty. Complaints about CP approval processes and reimbursement or payment are commonplace. In the data collected, faculty relayed stories about having to personally cover expenses specifically in support of research projects and waiting weeks for reimbursement, often having to pay interest charges on credit cards, because of rules for p-card use. We heard about invoices submitted weeks in advance of payment deadlines but paid late, resulting in additional costs due to late payment fees prolonged delays (more than 4 months), even with continual prodding by the faculty member, to get research underway due to procurement processes.

Almost half (48%) of survey respondents indicated they have problems managing grants or new submissions with UnivRS. Respondents commented that it is not user friendly. Not only is UnivRS difficult to navigate and not all information is relevant, it is also slow and crashes frequently. Many faculty report having problems with Concur, describing it as time consuming and difficult to use. On faculty members saying: *"Concur is another very poorly designed software. The level of user-unfriendliness is just unbelievable!"* Three quarters of survey respondents said it would be simpler if Concur expenses were handled by an administrative assistant.

Two important concerns raised in the presentation to senior administrators regarding a recently instituted (in the last two years) requirement that flights must be booked through Concur or Direct Travel for airfare to be reimbursed. 1) Booking through Concur may conflict with tri-council and [U of S policies that state travel expenses should be the most economical that can be arranged](#), and 2) travel support is not flexible enough to meet research needs, especially for field research. Faculty provided stories about how there are limited flights available through the Concur booking system, and how the ability to make last minute changes at odd hours is not possible through Concur. The option to use Direct Travel also has problems. Faculty members cannot take advantage of personal credit card amenities that

help stretch funding such as the ability to check bags at no cost. Additionally, some practices fail to adhere to principles of equity diversity and inclusion. We heard of one faculty member who, for medical reasons, had to seek permission to book appropriate flights unavailable through Concur. Permission was given, but the faculty member had to book through Direct Travel and pay any difference in cost.

Ethics

Another area of administrative processes faculty must deal with is related to ethics. Faculty report unjustified and unacceptable approval delays that compromise grant terms and program completion. We heard about stalled progress on theses and dissertations and lost funding as students wait to hear from the Research Ethics Board (REB). Faculty also told us about community partners having to give back grant money and choosing to go through ethics processes at other universities because the U of S process is too slow and cumbersome. Delays are costing faculty and students in other ways. Graduate students run out of funding. Work required for evaluation cannot be performed until approval processes are completed. Funding dollars are being used to pay research support personnel to "tread water" rather than work on research projects, if hiring support personnel is possible in advance of ethical approval. These circumstances are placing many researchers at the U of S at a disadvantage to other institutions, and *"this discrepancy in turn-*

around time for ethics between USask and other institutions has become more obvious in speaking with colleagues at similar-sized institutions across Canada and the USA."

Perhaps of greater concern is that faculty relayed stories of how research contract policies and the REB are impeding Tri-Council grant hosting. We heard about faculty members choosing to be co-PI rather than PI. In one example, it was because U of S will not allow collaborators from other institutions to access data from a national data platform if the contract for the data platform is through the U of S, something U of S faculty can do when contracts are through other institutions. Access to the data platform for collaborators required another access contract, which doubled the overall data access costs. *"The USask procedures are out of step with all known institutions who allow multi-site teams to have one data contract signed, and the PI takes responsibility for distributing the data as per ethics and the national data platform's policies."*

Consequences

Difficult administrative processes have consequences and the following were noted in the presentation to the employer:

- Inefficient design of administrative co-production results in reduced faculty focus on excellence in research and teaching
- Reduced student support and classroom teaching innovation
- Faculty relinquishing their role as PIs in collaborative projects to

avoid inefficient admin processes at the UofS

- Decreased faculty morale and motivation
- Faculty find ways to subvert the policies to do their work, or they avoid doing the work altogether (e.g., de-installing lock-up software installed by ICT, not engaging in research that requires lengthy ethics approval processes)
- Problematic impacts on equity/diversity/inclusion
- Reduced research productivity impacts university ranking among U15
- Efficiency metrics used to justify policies are incomplete and miss the most important metrics around achievement of the uni-

versity's research and teaching mission.

Recommendations:

- Ensure administrative process goals are fully aligned with research and teaching goals.
- Provide administrative support for areas of co-production that harm productivity in research and teaching (e.g., expense reimbursement claims).
- Allow co-production in administrative areas that are beneficial to teaching and research excellence (e.g., give faculty administrative access over their computers).
- Instead of administrative leaders and external consultants working to develop administrative processes, FSD should consult with the faculty, staff, and student us-

ers of these systems to design better processes.

- Cost-benefit evaluations must evaluate the full range of the hidden productivity costs of administrative processes, including the cost of added faculty workload, reduced research productivity, reduced teaching innovation, lower faculty morale and increased burnout, extended student time to completion, and reputational costs for the institution.

We cannot predict whether university administration will take up our recommendations. However, the ability of the University of Saskatchewan to rise higher in rankings is severely limited by administrative processes that impede faculty's ability to research and teach.