Administrative Overload Report

Summary

MAUT's member survey about administrative practices thought to be unnecessary or wasteful elicited over 230 responses reporting over 550 distinct items of concern. The most frequently mentioned problems were: inadequate administrative/clerical support, expense reports, too many/lengthy meetings, rules and administrative practices related to teaching, and inefficient purchasing practices/rules. Underlying many of the members' responses is the sense that central administrative units impose rules, regulations, forms to be filled, etc. on local units without consideration of the additional costs these impose upon the latter.

Next Steps

- Formulation of proposals to address the six most often encountered sources of administrative overload.
- Formation of a permanent Standing Committee on Elimination of Administrative Overload consisting of representatives from the administration, MAUT, MUNACA, and MUNASA.
- Creation and maintenance of a variety of readily accessible and easily navigable entry points where members of the community can register their concerns about unnecessarily burdensome administrative tasks and possible suggestions of solutions.
- Consideration of mechanisms that will compel central administrative units to actively seek the input of representatives of those most affected in the local units before imposing any new administrative burdens on the latter.

Introduction

On November 13th, 2017, a survey questionnaire was distributed to MAUT members by email, requesting them to report back to us on their experience with what they feel are excessive administrative burdens and possible solutions they might have to suggest. We asked specifically about four categories of administrative concerns: filling out forms, rules and regulations, committee meetings and documentation/retention of documents. After 3 days we had received 230 responses to the questionnaire as well as a number of additional emails. These responses contained over 550 distinct items of concern to our members. Sorting these items into a manageable number of broad types of concerns yielded 21 distinct categories which are listed in the following table more or less according to the frequency in which they were mentioned.

Methodology

An email was sent to all MAUT members on November 13th asking them to answer a brief survey consisting of the following eight open-ended questions:

1a.   With respect to filling out forms that are unnecessary, overly complicated, or repetitive, please list specific examples in the field below.

1b.   If you have any suggestions for a possible solution(s) to the examples above, please describe them below.

2a.   Do you believe there are rules and regulations that seem unnecessary, overly complicated, or repetitive?

2b.   If you have any suggestions for a possible solution(s) to the examples above, please describe them below.

3a.   With respect to meetings/committees that are unnecessary, overly complicated, or repetitive, please list specific examples in the field below.

3b.   If you have any suggestions for a possible solution(s) to the examples above, please describe them below.

4a.   Do you believe there is any required documentation of processes/retention of documents that seems unnecessary, overly complicated, or repetitive?

4b.   If you have any suggestions for a possible solution(s) to the examples above, please describe them below.

The survey was kept open for a little over two weeks, until December 1st, 2017. At closure we had received responses to at least some of these questions from 230 members. This amounts to close to a 25% response rate, which is high for a voluntary survey of this nature. In addition, we received a handful of emails directly from members informing us about what they viewed as the most pressing administrative overload issues. We read the entire set of responses several times before attempting to classify the responses into categories that dealt with common perceived problems. After several iterations this exercise yielded 20 distinct categories of perceived administrative overload the most important of which are briefly described below. We have also attempted to incorporate some of the most frequently mentioned possible solutions to the problems mentioned in our descriptions below.

Rank	Category	# of entries
1	Lack of administrative support	53
2	Expense Reports: Travel	33
3	Expense Reports: Other	63
4	Too many/inefficient meetings/committees	42
5	Administration related to teaching	41
6	Inefficient Purchasing	34
7	Document retention	27
8	P-Cards	25
9	OSR	20
10	(Graduate) Student tracking/GPS	18
11	Performance reviews	14
12	Hiring staff	14
13	Payroll for casuals/research assistants	11
14	Ethics Forms	10
15	Thesis Submission/Rules	8
16	Animal Protocol/Ethics	7
17	Slow Reimbursement	6
18	Conflict of Interest Rules	5
19	Paper forms/'wet' signatures/Signing in to Minerva: why re-enter standard info?	26
20	Miscellaneous	48
21	Additional Comments	30

Lack of Administrative Support

Perhaps the most important category of complaints is the first on the list: lack of administrative support. The number of 53 entries for this category actually greatly underestimates its importance for our respondents since many of the other concerns were at least in part a matter of perceived inadequate administrative support as well.

There were three aspects mentioned frequently by those reporting inadequate clerical support. First, many respondents felt that the number of administrative staff members had declined to the breaking point, especially in the context of ever-increasing administrative requirements imposed by the University.

Second, a number of respondents felt that the recent administrative reform in which departmental administrative teams have been merged into multi-departmental 'hubs' has been a failure from the point of view of efficiency and effectiveness. Much tacit knowledge and institutional memory based on the administrative staff's familiarity with the practices and customs of 'their' departments has been lost as a result of the 'hubbing' reform. Thus, according to one respondent "[c]onverting departmental offices to AECs has tripled administrative burden. These people mean well I think but are completely unconnected to the departments they serve. It is unclear who to talk to about specific problems in our AEC." Several colleagues reported that clerical staff was overwhelmed, leading to exceedingly high turnover rates, sick leaves and general disorientation among the administrators in their units.

Third, many felt that clerical staff was often insufficiently trained to perform their functions effectively. This was mentioned particularly frequently in connection with expense reports. We received many examples of expense reports being disapproved and returned to faculty members for reasons that were trivial or irrelevant or simply mistaken.

As a result, many claimed, more and more routine administrative tasks have to be performed by faculty members and this has begun to seriously undermine their ability to devote their energies to the core tasks of doing research and teaching. Moreover, such devolution of routine clerical tasks unto faculty members is quite wasteful of our scarce resources, given the significant salary differential between faculty members and administrative staff.

Expense Reports

The single most frequently mentioned source of excessive administrative burden were expense reports. These were mentioned 96 times in total, of which 33 referred specifically to expense reports for travel expenses. There appear to be a number of problems with the way McGill handles expense reports. Some faculty members find that the reports to fill out have become excessively complicated and detailed. Many complain about having expenses questioned on nonsensical grounds that only reveal a lack of understanding or judgment on the part of the administrator questioning them (e.g., acquisition of Adobe Acrobat Reader, or a notebook to conduct fieldwork, books purchased). As a result expense reports needlessly go back and forth between the faculty member and the administrator, sometimes several times. McGill's decision to continue to insist on original paper receipts even though Tri-Council has decided to abandon them is a particularly frequently mentioned sore point. The need to print out

the reports and obtain 'wet' signatures from department Chairs is another. Yet another is the need to repeatedly enter the same information and/or information that is or should be already available to the administrator. The automatic exchange rate calculator built into the online expense report form is a source of much frustration when the rates deviate from those shown on the receipts submitted. Here is a representative but by no means exhaustive list of irritants w.r.t. expense reports provided by one respondent:

> "I will typically spend 2 - 3 (or more) hours composing a travel expense report. This includes gathering receipts, mining my credit-card reports for backup in case a receipt is considered not adequate, separating out tax amounts, de-aggregating composite expenses (when a bill covers multiple things it is apparently necessary to enter it multiple times, subtracting the difference to get each amount), researching exchange rates (the rate I am charged is never the same as whatever the expense report opts to auto fill in), and finding auxiliary material such as conference agenda (which interactive web features are making increasingly difficult to print out), and computing routes in google maps to justify mileage claims. After all that, having to revise claims for trivial differences in amount, or because I undercharge myself is particularly silly."

Faculty members reporting difficulties with expense reports frequently voiced a feeling that the administration is overly zealous in its efforts to check and monitor their expenses, which seems to suggest an inappropriate degree of mistrust. Here are some representative quotes:

> "Many financial aspects seem to assume I am trying to cheat."

> "Err, trust us! Train financial administrators about what we do in our jobs so I don't have to justify notepads and computers."

> "The procedures surrounding expense reports make a person feel as if he is presumed to be a fraudster."

> "Reconsider assumption that faculty are corrupt criminals who need to be monitored very, very carefully."

Committees/Meetings

There was an equally large number of entries mentioning excessive time spent in committee meetings. These colleagues do not necessarily question the need for committee meetings as an important part of our system of collegial governance. Rather, most remarked on how committee meetings should be scheduled and conducted in a much more efficient manner than is currently the case. A number of colleagues suggested that Chairs and others who call and preside over committee meetings should receive some training in how to conduct meetings efficiently. Several suggested that there is a tendency to resort to face-to-face meetings to discuss matters that in fact can be dealt with quite well through virtual meetings or email exchanges. This is particularly important where committee members have to travel to relatively distant places (off-campus buildings, hospitals, to and from MacDonald campus) to attend the meetings. Again, some colleagues feel that the central administration has a tendency to strike committees to deal with anything and everything without serious regard for the additional burden this imposes on faculty members who are called to sit on them.

Administration related to teaching

Administrative duties connected with courses are among the next most frequently mentioned sources of administrative overload. The most often mentioned issue is the requirement to submit final and supplemental exams several weeks before the end of the semester. This leaves instructors no flexibility whatsoever in varying the course content during those final weeks of the term. This might not be a problem for courses that cover exactly the same material year after year but many courses taught at McGill do not. Another source of frustration are the forms related to exam submission. Several respondents find them clumsy, requiring redundant information and, again, 'wet' signatures. Course revision forms are also mentioned by several instructors as needlessly complicated and bureaucratic. Some criticize the requirement to appoint an associate examiner who cannot be the TA as pointless. Exam scheduling is also viewed as unnecessarily complicated by several respondents. OSD-supervised exams, according to several colleagues, are organized and located to be convenient for the OSD administrators and students but ignore the extra cost to instructors in having to attend to them and pick up the exams. McGill's class scheduling system, and especially its centralized character that allows for little or no flexibility on the part of local units, receives several mentions as being overly bureaucratic and rigid. Similarly, several colleagues feel that the online course constraint forms and the grade submission system are unnecessarily clumsy and rule-bound. The survey elicited a number of other more idiosyncratic complaints relating to rules and forms required for courses. One thing all of them have in common with the other frequently mentioned issues is that faculty members feel strongly that the administrative practices in question are imposed upon them by administrative units that have little or no concern for how they affect the instructors.

Inefficient Purchasing Routines/Rules

More than 30 survey entries mentioned difficulties encountered when purchasing items for research purposes. The McGill Market Place (MMP) system is, according to several respondents, "extremely burdensome and cumbersome." Too many approvals are required and the purchasing order forms are needlessly complicated. As was the case for expense reports, several respondents recounted instances in which orders were sent back and forth between PIs and purchasing administrators because the latter objected too mechanically to trivial omissions or errors that they could easily have fixed themselves, thus wasting a great amount of the researchers' time. Some researchers had the impression that the financial unit administrators handling their purchases would rather bother them, the researchers, with trivial or minor issues than to consult with their fellow financial administrators or use their common sense judgment. And again, researchers felt that such instances seemed to indicate a lack of trust in them by the administrators: "[t]he assumption is that I am ripping off my grant…This makes us feel like we are considered common criminals by McGill's support staff."

Document Retention

Document retention requirements are viewed by many to be unreasonably onerous as well. Three types of documents were mentioned particularly often: exams, invoices and data. Several colleagues felt that they had neither the physical facilities nor the administrative support to store and retain these documents for the time periods required by the University. A number of comments referred to the 7-year retention rule for invoices and data as excessive and unreasonable given the lack of support available. The protocols for recording and tracking IT equipment were also mentioned several times as "a huge added workload" the purpose of which is not clear.

P-Cards

In view of the many issues surrounding expense reports and purchasing problems, it is perhaps not surprising that the rules and regulations governing p-cards come in for a fair amount of criticism as well. Respondents find the reconciliation process necessary to approve p-card purchases particularly complicated and cumbersome. Rules restricting the kinds of purchases that can be made with p-cards, particularly the exclusion of travel expenses, are seen by a number of respondents as unjustified.

OSR

Another 20 or so entries had to do with onerous administrative obligations imposed by the Office of Sponsored Research. The increasingly complicated OSR checklists are especially time-consuming to fill out. Several respondents felt that such checklists were only useful once a grant has actually been awarded. As elsewhere, the need for 'wet' signatures and the clumsiness of pdf forms were also mentioned several times.

(Graduate) Student Tracking Requirements/GPS rules

The overwhelming majority of those reporting issues to do with graduate teaching mentioned the biannual tracking forms of student progress required by GPS as an unnecessarily bureaucratic and ritualistic exercise taking up much valuable time. There is a sense that GPS is trying to deal with a tiny minority of supervisors who might not monitor their graduate students closely enough by imposing unnecessarily cumbersome additional administrative duties on all supervisors. And again the need for 'wet' signatures is questioned by some the respondents.

Performance Reviews

Departmental annual reviews, merit reports, website updates, and c.v. updates require much the same information but in varying formats. This means that a lot of time is wasted entering and re-entering the same information. The problem is even worse for those who have more than one institutional affiliation.

A great deal of wasted time could be avoided by streamlining the various performance reporting exercises so as to require each item to be entered only once.

Hiring Staff and Payroll

The paperwork needed to hire and administer the payroll for research assistants and other casual staff is extremely burdensome, according to close to two dozen entries. Replacing paper hiring letters, contracts and time sheets by online forms and digital signatures would reduce some of the burden, several of them suggested.

Other Concerns

Several other administrative concerns were mentioned multiple times. A number of entries mention that **ethics forms/approvals** and **animal protocols** have become overly complicated and unnecessarily repetitive. With respect to the latter the online forms are found to be particularly clumsy. Several respondents feel that the **conflict of interest rules** with respect to thesis evaluations are overly demanding. Several entries mentioned the extraordinarily **slow reimbursement** process which often leads to considerable embarrassment when external collaborators or guests need to be reimbursed. Excessively long **sabbatical application forms** received a few mentions as well.

As noted several times throughout this brief report, a fairly large number of entries recommended going **as much online as possible with all forms** as something that might help reduce the excessive administrative burden. A related frequently mentioned possible improvement was to **pre-populate all such online forms** with all the unchanging information that should be readily available simply by virtue of our logging into MINERVA. This would significantly reduce the time we spend filling out the same information over and over again on many forms such as course orders to the bookstore, student progress reports, course evaluation forms, TA evaluation forms, TA distribution of duties forms, course availability forms, OSR checklists, conflict of interest forms, expense reports, etc., etc. The introduction of **digital signatures** for all forms would also reduce a considerable amount of wasted time and aggravation collecting 'wet' signatures.

Some Underlying Issues

There is no question that there is a widespread sense among faculty members at McGill that the administrative tasks and obligations imposed upon them have become excessive and a serious impediment to the proper conduct of their principal tasks of conducting research and teaching. Moreover, it is widely felt that many of these are routine tasks that could and should be executed much more efficiently and cheaply by clerical staff than by faculty members. The principal reasons for this steadily increasing administrative burden appears to be a combination of two mutually reinforcing factors: the declining amount of administrative support due to cutbacks of administrative support staff,

on one hand, and the ever-increasing list of forms, regulations and administrative requirements imposed by central administrative units on local teaching and research units, on the other.

As we noted in passing, there is a pervasive feeling among faculty members that administrative duties are imposed upon them without regard for the cost of these duties *to them*. As one of our respondents put it:
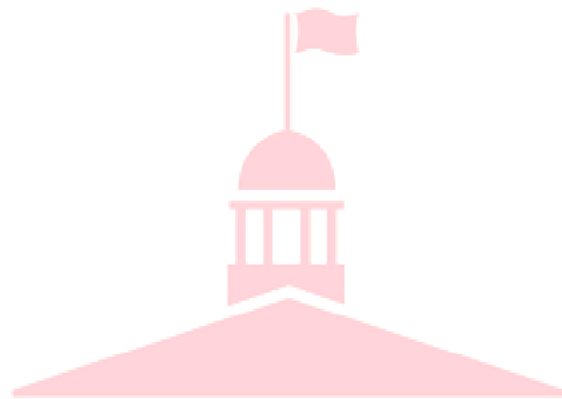
> Although individual instances of these excessive burdens can be addressed one by one, here's the point that I consider critical: what is the source of these excessive administrative burdens? I believe that one important source is that there are too many people around McGill who feel that they have the authority to impose administrative burdens on academic staff. Administrative employees will issue edicts saying that professors have to fill out such-and-such-a form. Anything coming from Human Resources is wildly time-wasting, but we have to comply with it. Some well-meaning group will come up with a solution for some real or imagined problem with which we are all required to come into conformity (sometimes the whole thing is forgotten a few months later).

There may be some built-in perverse incentives that encourage this kind of behavior on the part of central administrative units. When such a unit issues a directive to local units to comply with a new regulation, fill out a new form, etc., and gets the local units to comply, this shows up as a rise of the 'productivity' of the central administrative unit. But the cost to the local units is not recorded anywhere. When the administrative support staff of local units is cut and some of their routine clerical tasks are devolved unto faculty members instead, this appears as a reduction in overall expenditures to the central administration. The increased cost in having professors photocopy final exams, fill out forms and so on, does not show up anywhere. Yet, judging from the responses to our survey and from the many, many complaints about excessive administrative burdens one hears from faculty members around campus (which led us to conduct this very survey) the unmeasured costs are quite considerable. These costs may be hard to measure or demonstrate but they almost certainly consist of lower research output, lower quality of teaching, lower morale and higher turnover among faculty members than would be the case in the absence of this general perception of an ever-growing mountain of administrative burdens. So the question then becomes: how can we build some mechanism into the process of decision making that will take into account these hitherto unmeasured, yet undoubtedly high and important costs? The same respondent gives the following answer:

> The imposition of administrative requirements on academics at McGill should be controlled and overseen by academics. When a new administrative burden is to be placed upon us, there should be some oversight by sensible people who will look at it to try to decide if the goal could be accomplished in some other, or simpler and more streamlined, way. What I am suggesting would indeed require an additional committee--the permanent New Obligation Review committee, or `NO'--but I think the benefits would far outweigh the costs.

This is precisely what MAUT is proposing as a way to combat excessive 'administration creep' at McGill: the formation of a joint standing committee on elimination of administrative overload, consisting of representatives from the administration, MAUT, MUNACA and MUNASA. The idea is for this committee to be a permanent gathering point for people who have complaints about seemingly excessive red tape and to *either* find solutions that reduce the burden *or* provide a convincing explanation for why the

burden cannot be reduced. Even in cases where simplification is not feasible, just to have a reasonable explanation for why this is so will significantly lift morale among faculty members.