

Bureaucratization in Academic Research Policy: What Causes It?

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Barry Bozeman

Center for Organization Research and Design
Arizona State University
USA
bbozeman@asu.edu

Jiwon Jung

Center for Organization Research and Design
Arizona State University
USA
jiwon.jung@asu.edu

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Barry Bozeman¹ and Jiwon Jung²

¹*Arizona State University, USA; bbozeman@asu.edu*

²*Arizona State University, USA; jiwon.jung@asu.edu*

ABSTRACT

Senior academic researchers and research administrators whose careers have spanned decades have witnessed a monotonic trend in the growth of bureaucratic rules and structures pertaining to research policy. The increase in administrative requirements takes many forms, some directly related to research and others tangentially related. While the onslaught of rules has increased administrative burdens, not all of these requirements are red tape; many are useful and even vital. But when taken together, the amount of administrative procedure and documentation associated with research conduct and administration becomes crushing.

Others have well documented the bureaucratization of university research policy and administration. Our primary purpose is to explain *why* rules and regulations and the bureaucratic structures supporting them continue to grow, extracting an ever-greater toll on time and resources available for actual research. Absent an explanation of the growth of administrative burden, it is not possible to provide valid assessment of the effectiveness of rules and regulations pertaining to research policy. We examine the problem from the lens of a well-developed theory of organizational red tape specifically, applying it specifically to the problem of

research administration red tape. The theory suggests that the increase in research policy bureaucratization can be explained chiefly by three different factors: crisis response, pressures for bureaucratic over-control, and the use of research policy for side-payments, both social side-payments (to achieve social goals not directly related to research) and political side-payments (conferring favor with political supporters by proving rules or policy symbols favored by them). To help elaborate the theory as well as to provide context, we provide case illustrations of ranging from the vitally important (research misconduct) to mundane bureaucratic requirements (standardization of required biosketches).

1

Introduction

In the U.S. and throughout most of the world, university research becomes increasingly bureaucratized (e.g. Schneider *et al.*, 2014; National Science Board, 2014). Along with increasing dependence on research funding and increased expectations for more and more research-funds-per-academic-researcher, the demands of political bureaucracy continue to grow, reducing the proportions of time devoted to science and increasing the amount of time demanded for administration, especially administrative assurances. The increasing bureaucratization and compliance burden is not simply a matter speculation. In the United States, several authoritative studies (e.g. American Council of Education, ACE, 2015) have recently examined university administrative burden, including specifically burdens associated with research policy and administration (e.g. Decker *et al.*, 2007; National Science Board, 2014).

Since no one seems to be rushing to the defense of more and more rules, since no one is in the business of self-consciously creating red tape, since nearly everyone acknowledges that it is important to devote as many resources as possible to research and innovation and to not siphon off funds unnecessarily from that enterprise we are left to contemplate this question:

What explains the continual growth in rules and regulations surrounding publicly funded research?

This question is the chief focus of the current paper and, remarkably, there is almost no scholarly attention devoted to answering this question. There have been many efforts to document the growth of rules and administrative burden in research policy, blue ribbon panels have been convened and made recommendations about reducing rules and their costs, but the causes of this onslaught have generated little speculation, much less systematic explanation. Our concern here is to explain the reasons of bureaucratization. In doing so, we rely on theory and research about red tape and bureaucratic pathology.

The organization of the paper is as follows:

- In the next section we provide a brief, necessary preamble to organizational analysis- a review and conceptual demarcation of bureaucratization, red tape and formalization.
- After clarifying closely related concepts, we review some of the studies documenting the bureaucratization of research policy and administration in the U.S. and the responses to the bureaucratization, both institutional responses and responses and attitudes of individual investigators.
- A next section introduces theory of rules and red tape, the theory-base we use as a lens to asking the study's key question concerning the growth of rules in research policy and administration.
- After providing a theory base, we turn to the core question of the paper: *What explains the continual growth in rules and regulations surrounding publicly funded research?* Here we provide a conceptual model.
- Finally, we examine key elements of our conceptual model in terms of a variety of government rules and procedures promulgated, ones that almost always have good intentions but, when taken together, vastly increase administrative burden while only rarely

demonstrating the social value purchased by the administrative burden.

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Author Biographies

Barry Bozeman is Arizona Centennial Professor of Technology Policy and Public Management and Director of the Center for Organization Research and Design, Arizona State University. Bozeman is corresponding author. Email: bbozeman@asu.edu. Website: <https://cord.asu.edu/>

Jiwon Jung is a doctoral student and senior research associate, Center for Organization Research and Design, Arizona State University. Her research interests lie in the fields of public personnel management, science and technology policy, and public management. Email: jiwon.jung@asu.edu.