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Registrar History Part I

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Oregon State University – Retired

Perhaps the most interesting project that I worked on at the Office of the Registrar (OtR) at Oregon State University Office (OSU) was during my last year in the office. I was fortunate during my fifteen years at OSU to work on assignments that were interesting, important, and challenging. Each project had its demands, frustrations, and rewards; all were valuable learning experiences and opportunities to work closely with colleagues across the university.

Approaching my last year, the University Registrar, Rebecca Mathern, asked me to work on a particularly captivating project that we quickly dubbed the *Registrar History*.

Until we actually began, I couldn't envision how exceptional the project would be or that I would end up fully immersed in documenting the history, in its broadest sense, of policies, procedures, regulations, initiatives, and collaborative efforts that impacted the work of the OtR. Personally, it was a challenging, educational, and gratifying way to end my work at OSU. For the University, the work has served as a great first step to a continually updated record of information and valuable institutional history.

This article – Part 1 of 2 – is a description of the project's beginning: how we defined the scope, selected topics, and dealt with the expansion of the project. Stay tuned for Part 2 which will complete the explanation of the project, including our research methods, organizing our presentation, and reconciling the information overlap. Also included will be a discussion of our estimation of the value of the project and the circumstances that allowed us to make this undertaking a success.

Documenting Daily History

The *Registrar History* was an outgrowth of Rebecca's interest and determination to fully document registrar procedures. While informal written directions have always been maintained, the goal of the most recent effort was to create formal and comprehensive documentation for all office processes.

The focus of the documentation was to ensure that written instructions were available and deadlines recorded for all term-based operations. Examples included term setup and priority registration schedules; scheduling processes and deadlines; classroom assignments; NCAA certification; Veterans certification; and degree verification. Additionally, documentation was completed for activities for the annual commencement ceremony. Related tasks included the task calendar, the coordination required with colleges and other departments, and the complementary grading and degree verification.

The entire office participated in the *Registrar History* project. Everyone was asked to pay particular attention to the points where tasks overlapped or where coordination and collaboration were required. The OtR Information Technology section assisted in all areas by detailing the deadlines and job requirements for all computer program submissions and web-based updates that have become integral to every facet of office operations.

Who cares about the Registrar's History?

The purpose of the *Registrar History* project was to capture the registrar's office institutional memory; to provide continuity; and to establish a reliable and relatively authoritative account of issues and topics over time. Not to mention it's a widely recognized best practice.

This endeavor seemed to me, at first, a compact and relatively straightforward endeavor and it certainly proved to illustrate how naïve I was after fifteen years in the office. It began innocently enough, when on an otherwise mildly eventful day, Rebecca suggested that a compendium of issues, policies, and regulations relevant to the OtR, and their evolution, would be useful. She was looking directly at me when she made her observation. I suppose I could have been more cautious, when I agreed with her. And in all honesty, in answering student questions, or discussing a policy or regulation with faculty or other administrators, I had often felt that if I knew the original purpose for that policy or regulation, or at least some history of how it had evolved and why, that would have been extremely helpful in those conversations.

In general, the information we had concerning the rationale for the current version of a policy or regulation extended as far back as the memory and experience of the longest-serving member of the staff. Beyond that, everything else was conjecture—sometimes reasonable and helpful, and sometimes only conjecture. The office staff agreed that a more thorough history would be valuable, while also acknowledging

that the demands of day-to-day operations and deadlines pressure made it very difficult, and at times impossible, to devote time and energy to documenting those issues.

We began with the topics we thought would be useful to trace historically, specifically the academic regulations, such as academic residency, grading systems, repeated courses, degree requirements, etc., and certain General Catalog issues.

OtR managers and staff agreed that our history document would benefit not just our office, but also others in the university. The explanation of the evolution of the policies and procedures would be useful as a means of more consistently answering questions from students, faculty, and colleagues of why things were done in the current way. And more broadly, the history would provide some context, framework, and depth to the ongoing discussions between our office and other departments of policies and procedures.

In short, the project originated with the general idea that a more comprehensive and certain account than we currently had of policies and regulations would have great benefits for all.

The Beginning of History: Identifying Topics

The process of deciding what to include was in part haphazard and in part based on shared experiences in the office.

On more days than not, questions arose about why we did things the way we did, and why policies were in force in their current fashion. Generally, the OtR was held to account for the implicit accusations in the line of questioning – first, that the way things were being done was wrong, confusing, and/or not well thought out, and, second, it was our fault.

Most of the time the questions were reasonable; for example:

Why can't I register sooner?

Why can't I register for more than 19 credits?

Why are there pluses and minuses in the grading system?

Why do I have an F in this class if I never attended?

I thought I dropped this course; why am I being charged tuition?

Why doesn't my repeated course improve my GPA?

Why am I on academic warning (or probation, or suspended), and what does that mean?

Why can't you tell my child's grades? I pay the tuition.
Why are exam policies so restrictive?
Why do I have teach courses according the day/times defined in scheduling protocols?
Why is grade submission so detailed and immediate?
How should I deal with a disruptive student?
Why are parking fees so high, especially since I have to park so far away (we had to refer that one)?

... You get the picture...

Some topics were identified because they prompted the most frequent, consistent, and adamant questions, or calls for clarification.

Sometimes, questions were recurring, predictable even, and some stemmed from gray areas in the regulations. Those topics were often the basis of continuing, often extended, discussions in managers meetings, or in meetings with colleagues.

Sometimes a topic was included because it simply had to be; for instance, which instructor "owns" the ten minutes between classes, the instructor of the class that just ended or the instructor of the next class? That was not an inconsequential discussion to the instructors involved.

We experienced questions regarding academic regulations that were sometimes plaintive and sometimes angry. Though some of the confusion and frustration was intentional, certainly some of it was a result of genuine belief that a regulation or policy was outdated and/or unneeded, obtuse, arbitrary, or not useful. Faculty were unsure and vexed by other issues, including scheduling protocols, examination policies, audit policies, grade submission, and others. Their views were not dissimilar from the students.

Though we were able to answer the questions, and provide the information or steps that were required to comply with a policy, procedure, or regulation, I know, at least for myself, that discussions would have been more complete and confident with more background of the issue. It was often difficult, to know how a policy had emerged or changed over time.

At OSU, the Faculty Senate is, almost universally, the source of academic regulations, catalog policies, and other regulations and procedures. The Faculty Senate or its committees are the primary initiators of changes and adaptations to those policies and procedures over the years. Changing technology and instructional methods, student inquiries, and many other influences and forces have also

prompted changes. The evolution has always been intended to improve the learning and teaching environment, with an emphasis recently on improving equity and access.

We found that answering two particulars about each issue provided a good basis for discussion of almost all topics:

- What was the rationale for the current version of a policy or regulation?
- What were the points of contention and/or confusion in the policy or regulation?

Unfortunately, the background for policies and regulations was, in many instances, speculative or not available immediately.

That was where the research into Faculty Senate minutes and reports, Committee annual reports, other OSU website sources, discussion with colleagues, and our own internal discussion helped provide useful background.

Broadening the Historical Scope

The process of identifying topics to include was relatively straightforward, and never-ending.

After the identification of initial topics, the project almost immediately mushroomed. We decided on a bolder answer to the questions of what should be included in the history and how far back should it go: everything, and forever.

We expanded the list of topics from policies and academic regulations to:

- ✓ University programs, e.g. orientation, degree partnerships, exchanges, etc.;
- ✓ Initiatives, e.g. zone scheduling, scheduling protocols, course forecasting and course access, advisor support, student success, etc.;
- ✓ University partners with whom we collaborated on a regular basis, e.g. Vice Provost for Student Success and Undergraduate Dean, advisors, Honors College, OSU Cascades, Athletics, ECampus, Student Conduct, International Education and INTO, etc.;
- ✓ Other projects, e.g. software implementation for degree progress, Catalog maintenance, student evaluation, room scheduling, hybrid and innovative courses; registration PINs and holds, pre-req enforcement, etc.

Fortunately for me, I had a year before I would retire, so – again naively – I thought I would have no trouble in meeting the goals and timeline.

The History Digest...ahem, Folder

I began collecting in my topics folder what we would include in the *Registrar History* document. That precious folder, a lone but never lonely manila folder, accompanied me to every meeting and presentation I attended. I would studiously make notes at the suggestion of others or insert information I felt to be pertinent.

As I added folders topics, information- and folders to hold them- I gave little thought at that point to organization or details of the explanations. I simply wanted to capture all the topics and issues that ought to be in the history.

It was a haphazard data collection effort, but it was effective in one important way: it was comprehensive. I had after a short while folders bulging with notes about issues that needed additional research and explanation.

Segue to Researching and Re-Writing History

As with any research project, a clear demarcation between start, middle, and end never existed. There was no point when I could say the compilation of topics was complete, or research was sufficient.

There was, though, a very real time constraint, namely, I was going to retire. The project had begun about a year before my retirement. Six months later, I had accumulated a reasonably exhaustive list of topics, begun some initial research, and could call the identification of topics for inclusion in the *History* reasonably complete. At this point, my terror waned while the daunting cloud of the scope of this project loomed ahead.

As Part 2 will describe, beginning the process for organizing and drafting procedures helped solidify the end result, and plugged in gaps where information was missing. I had six months to finish, and I asked myself, confidently: how long could it take to organize, draft, and revise several fat folders of information, anyway? Naiveté at its zenith.

Tom Watts worked in the Office of the Registrar at Oregon State University from 2001 to 2016. He began as Special Programs Manager, and worked also as Assistant and Associate Registrar, before his retirement in 2016. He lives in Seattle, where he cheers for his wife's bagpiping endeavors, roots for the Mariners, and takes instructions cheerfully from his granddaughters.



The Role of the Academic Analyst in Shared Governance

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This abstract is a summary of a Ph.D. dissertation as titled above. The next publication will include a summary of the findings of the research and will include an opportunity to ask questions that can be answered by the researcher. This abstract is the warm-up for the research findings article in the following months.

Abstract

This research explores the roles of academic professionals in higher education, specific to how they engage in decision-making processes. Academic professionals provide important functions in higher education work but there is little in the literature about these actors and their contributions to leadership and governance. A literature review triangulated role theory, organization theory, and the shared-governance field of study to bring together actors within higher education and compare their involvement based on the shared-governance model in operation at different institutions. The researcher introduced the hypothesis that when registrars are not involved in curriculum management, there may be negative effects on student success. In the study, a survey was administered to registrars and faculty members representing nearly 200 institutions to ask about the role of the registrar in specific policies and curriculum practices. Results were measured using Fisher's Exact Test and were interpreted through multiple qualitative approaches, including inductive analysis. Outcomes were not significant in the quantitative test results, but respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the role of the registrar in shared governance affected student success. Themes were recorded to articulate the most common reasons respondents offered for how the registrar was

involved in academic policy, curriculum management, and supporting student success. Results of the inductive analysis provided several themes that pointed to unique roles for the registrar, such as leading from behind and acting as a compliance authority, even when partners do not appreciate being held to compliance standards. Implications for practice focused on the qualitative outcomes of the survey. Suggestions for future research included further review of quantitative data outcomes and exploring ideas from inductive analysis around leading from behind and acting as a compliance authority.

Rebecca Mathern, Ph. D.

Associate Provost and University Registrar at Oregon State University
Rebecca Mathern has been involved in higher education for over twenty years and currently serves as the Associate Provost and University Registrar at Oregon State University in Corvallis, OR where she resides with her family. Rebecca has a background at both two year and four year institutions and enjoys contributing to the Registrar community through service to AACRAO and PACRAO.

