

dear residents

January 7, 2024

Dear Residents,

As many of you know, I have a large administrative role, overseeing a myriad of activities from recruiting to graduation. In between these two bookends of your time here, there will be forms to fill out, letters of recommendations to compose, and the gathering, analysis and reporting of your academic progress both internally and externally. Given that such work is now the largest slice of what I do, I am surprised on two fronts: that I have no formal training to do this well, and that I haven't really thought of understanding this work in a scholarly fashion. In other words, why haven't I systematically studied these administrative processes? It turns out that most academics accept the bureaucracy of the institutions that they are part of.

Just a few weeks ago, we received a list of residents and fellows who hadn't completed the Parkland conflict of interest form. Apparently, this was assigned in July 2023, and it clearly escaped the notice of many of you. As I thought this through, I wondered why I don't seem to get a timely list of what is assigned to you and when it would be due by. I'm often brought in to help solve these issues when they reach the proverbial eleventh hour. By the time they arrive at my doorstep, they are wrapped in urgent messages with the threat of taking away your Epic access or having your pay docked. It's hard for a program director, who is primarily YOUR advocate, to cross over to the space where these threats are emanating from. What's more logical is for me to examine the process, take co-ownership at its genesis rather than at its finale.

I wondered if anyone had written about such situations. Someone has – David Graeber (author of *Debt: The First 5000 years* and *The Dawn of Everything*) did just that – it's a marvelous book entitled "The Utopia of Rules" in which he discusses the origins and evolution of bureaucracy.

Your first name and initial	Last name	Sex <input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> F
Street address and unit no. (if applicable)	Social security number or taxpayer ID (EIN)	
City, or town, state, and ZIP Code	Daytime phone number	

The Utopia of Rules

On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy

David Graeber

Author of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*

"A brilliant, deeply original political thinker." —Rebecca Solnit

Your signature X	Date
Email address	
Comments	

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One quote that resonated with me:

“Just as the invention of new forms of industrial automation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had the paradoxical effect of turning more and more of the world’s population into full-time industrial workers, so has all the software designed to save us from administrative responsibilities in recent decades ultimately turned us all into part or full-time administrators.”

We have a lot of freedom in the work we do – we can image and Vanc/Zosyn anyone we like – we don’t (yet) need anyone’s permission to do so. The medical profession enjoys considerable but not unlimited freedom (there are several drugs that need prior authorization or special processes – they are either expensive or dangerous). Paradoxically this freedom entails an increasing bureaucracy that catalogues, measures, analyses and ultimately manages this freedom. Perhaps Dr. Y is prescribing too many opioids, or Dr. Z’s length of stay is too long. Regarding conflicts of interest, you are not prohibited from having them, you just need to report them, and someone up there will decide if they need to be managed in some way.

Another Graeber quote:

“But the culture of evaluation is if anything more pervasive in the hypercredentialed world of the professional classes, where audit culture reigns, and nothing is real that cannot be quantified, tabulated, or entered into some interface or quarterly report.”

Process improvement, project management, implementation science, industrial and organizational psychology – most institutions will embrace one or more of these capabilities to help manage and optimize the rules and processes that are part of our daily work. As 2024 starts, I will attempt to understand and help manage all the bureaucratic tasks that come your way. The first step will entail comprehensively cataloging all that is expected of you and by when, the next would be to negotiate away that which is duplicative or of no value. I expect that over the course of your training here there may be upwards of 100 discrete administrative tasks. Except for a few quick ones, I cannot assume that you will get these done “on your own time.” Some are created by the program: evaluations, timesheets, surveys; others by your employers/hospitals: various compliance modules, immunization, TB testing, mask fitting, etc.

I want to apologize to all who were caught off guard by any last-minute administrative requirements accompanied by threats. I know that you are conscientious and eager to cooperate. I also realize that your clinical responsibilities and education are your primary priorities. Together we will find a way to manage what has become a recurring problem in our program – the urgent administrative task that threatens to take away your Epic access and dock your pay. It should never come to that. It's not your failure – it's mine.

Dino Kazi