First Encounters of the Bureaucratic Kind: Early Freshman Experiences with a Campus Bureaucracy

By: Glen J. Godwin, William T. Markham

Glen Godwin and William T. Markham, "First Encounters of the Bureaucratic Kind: Early Freshman Encounters with a Campus Bureaucracy," *Journal of Higher Education*, 67 (November/December, 1996), 660-691.

Made available courtesy of Ohio State University Press: http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2943816

Abstract:

A study examined the early encounters of traditional-age freshmen with a campus bureaucracy. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with traditional-age freshmen at a state university and with staff in the offices that dealt with them. The results revealed that although students did sometimes experience their encounters with the campus bureaucracy as annoying, frustrating, and confusing, their actions were mediated by their relative powerlessness and their interpretations of their experiences and options; that students' comments about their problems with the bureaucracy related to lines and waiting, impersonality, rules, the fact that specialized offices were scattered across various buildings, and paperwork; that students generally chose to be nonconfrontational when dealing with the bureaucracy; and that staff members experienced difficulties in trying to make the system work and managing their sometimes conflictual relationships with students.

Keywords: Administration | Bureaucracy | Colleges and Universities | Students | First year students | College freshmen

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Glen J. Godwin
William T. Markham

First Encounters of the Bureaucratic Kind

Early Freshman Experiences with a Campus Bureaucracy

As the dominant organizational form in our society [17], bureaucracy provides the framework within which much everyday activity takes place [38], shaping and constraining the behavior of most everyone [10, 25]. Learning to operate in a bureaucracy is therefore a crucial aspect of socialization [45, 25]. Yet adapting to bureaucratic roles is not always easy, especially for "lower participants" [11] in organizations, such as clients and ordinary employees [2, 25]. Lower participants may find themselves alienated [25], disempowered [8, 37], and confused or frustrated by bureaucratic dysfunctions [27] — ranging from red tape and rigidity [29] to communications breakdowns [9]. It is therefore not surprising that overt protests by lower participants stemming partly from dissatisfaction with bureaucratic requirements appear episodically, as in the case of the student revolts of the 1960s and 70s.

Nevertheless, despite occasional protests, the organizational landscape is clearly characterized more frequently by stability and acquiescence to bureaucracy than by sharp dissent. Several explanations for the widespread acceptance of bureaucracy despite its problems have been proposed. Bureaucracy may be less aggravating than sometimes claimed [36], or coercion and managerial chicanery may overcome resistance [10]. Mechanisms for compromising the interests of leaders and lower-participants may defuse conflict [7], or clients and employees may

We gratefully acknowledge the comments of Rebecca G. Adams and William E. Knox on earlier versions of this article.

Glen J. Godwin was a graduate student in sociology at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, when this article was written; he is now working on a master's degree in divinity at the Duke Divinity School. William T. Markham is associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 67, No. 6 (November/December 1996)

accept bureaucracy's disadvantages in return for a steady flow of benefits [18].

But despite its importance, the question of how and why lower participants come to give assent to bureaucratic requirements remains surprisingly neglected in research [25, 42], especially research in higher education. This study broadens our knowledge in this area through an in-depth study of an especially interesting set of lower participants — traditional-age college freshmen at a large state university. Its purpose is to determine how these students' interpretations of and adaptations to the campus bureaucracy allow the bureaucracy to remain stable and continue to function with few challenges and relatively little overt conflict — despite all the problems that bureaucracy is alleged to raise for clients. Answering this question requires an examination of the properties of bureaucracy and the problems it may present for students. It requires as well in-depth investigation of how students as bureaucratic clients develop understandings of the bureaucratic milieu, how they define their situations and options, how they negotiate patterns of interaction with their peers and superordinates, and how they cope with stresses that their experience with and adaptations to the bureaucracy engender.

Although newcomers to the university have been neglected in past studies of bureaucracy, this population is theoretically and practically strategic. Traditional-age freshmen are newcomers to a large and complex campus bureaucracy. Examining their emerging views of the bureaucracy and the patterns of action they develop to cope with it provides an especially clear view of the stresses built into bureaucratic roles — stresses to which more seasoned participants in the campus bureaucracy might already have become inured. By investigating the socializing experiences of newcomers, we gain insight into how patterns of acquiescence and coping become established — as well as how the pressures of bureaucracy occasionally lead to active resistance or exit from the university.

Furthermore, for many traditional-age freshmen, encounters with the campus bureaucracy are among their first *adult* experiences with bureaucracy, and for those without work experience in large organizations these encounters can be their very first. Learning to fit into a bureaucratic society is, of course, one part of the "hidden curriculum" of elementary and secondary schools [15, 19], but freshmen encounter bureaucracy in a new way — as adults. They must now transact business with strangers who provide minimal help and emotional support. They must assume more personal responsibility, and they receive fewer allowances for immaturity and inexperience. Consequently, young

adults' early encounters with bureaucracy can be difficult learning experiences, and their early interpretations of and adaptations to bureaucracy can set the pattern for later ones.

Our investigation has three parts. First, we reviewed existing literature about the problems that clients — especially newcomers — face adapting to bureaucracy. Past work on organizational socialization [45] and student life [33] is almost completely silent on this topic, but other bodies of work provide useful leads. We reviewed studies of dysfunctions of bureaucracy that confuse and frustrate clients, studies of client powerlessness and its effects, literature about how organizational actors go about defining their situations and the implications of their definitions, and studies of how clients negotiate their roles and adapt to bureaucracy.

Second, we conducted preliminary field observation of students as they encountered the campus bureaucracy in various university offices. These observations helped us to see how well issues and patterns described in the general literature about clients in bureaucracy applied to students on campus and identify unique issues that this particular bureaucracy poses for students. The observations also provided hints about how students define their experiences with the campus bureaucracy and direct information about their coping behaviors. We used this information in combination with ideas from the literature review to construct questions for subsequent interviews with Freshmen students and staff and as a validity check on students' reports about their dealings with the bureaucracy.

Finally, we conducted semistructured interviews with samples of traditional-age freshmen and staff in the offices that deal with them. The interviews with freshmen provide extensive information about their interpretations of the campus bureaucracy, the problems it posed for them, and their adaptations to it. The staff interviews provide the staff's insights about student behavior, and they also tell us how staff members' own views and behavior affect their interaction with students.

Bureaucratic Dysfunctions and Powerlessness as Problems for Clients in a Bureaucracy

Bureaucracies combine rules, specialization, hierarchy, impersonality, and records to create an orderly, efficient structure that processes work quickly [16, 35, 47]. Yet despite its vaunted efficiency, existing literature suggests that bureaucracy can also develop irritating and frustrating dysfunctions [9, 27]. Bureaucratic rules can become too numerous, rigid, conflicting, and confusing [9, 25, 27, 32]. Officials may

develop "bureaucratic personalities," placing more emphasis on rules than on client needs [29]. Clients may have to revisit offices repeatedly, endure long waits, and follow complex procedures. Proliferation of specialized departments can lead to poor coordination [23, 27], duplication of requests for information [25], to situations in which no one seems to have the authority or information to act effectively, and a tendency for departments to put their own priorities ahead of client needs [9, 27]. Powerful officials can impose onerous requirements that clients lack the power to contest [8]. Managers — who often lack substantive expertise but want to display their initiative nonetheless — may implement procedures that impede client service [9, 44, 49]. Bureaucratic impersonality can make clients feel poorly served or denigrated because their unique needs go unacknowledged [24], alienating them from officials and exacerbating tensions [25]. Impersonality also encourages officials to distance themselves emotionally from clients and rigidly follow procedures to avoid criticism [25, 29]. Finally, "red tape" can become oppressive, with endless forms to complete [1, 22, 25], errors in records can deprive clients of benefits, and staff may use paperwork requirements to control or punish clients [25, 42].

Bureaucracy can also subordinate individual independence to bureaucratic imperatives [2, 6, 7]. As lower participants, clients typically occupy roles with few resources for gaining power. Authority is delegated to staff [44, 47], who have authority over clients. Clients are often predisposed by past socialization to follow bureaucratic requirements, and they may be awed by officials' titles, presumed expertise, or symbols of authority [3, 44]. They also depend on staff for help in negotiating the system and reaching their goals [3, 25, 42], and bureaucratic procedures and appeals processes frequently make challenging the system difficult [25]. Clients thus often must forego their own preferences to conform to staff demands [8, 47]. Because managers, staff, and clients frequently have different goals, this power imbalance is problematic for clients [25]. Lack of power therefore has considerable potential to produce anxiety and frustration for clients.

Clients' Definitions of the Bureaucratic Situation

Bureaucratic dysfunctions and disempowerment thus pose a set of potential problems for bureaucratic clients, especially newcomers, to solve [46]. Newcomers must make sense of a new situation, decide what possibilities it offers, and negotiate their own roles and solutions to its challenges. We could locate no studies of how this process occurs among college students, but symbolic interaction theory [41, 46] and

scattered studies of clients in other bureaucracies provide some points of departure.

Symbolic interaction theory suggests that, in their initial encounters with bureaucracy, clients base their definitions of their situation on past experience and their own interpretation of their current experiences [5, 43]. They might also actively seek information about how to adapt to the system and reach their ends [25, 31]. The physical setting of offices, waiting areas, ropes, counters, and lines, might provide additional cues [5, 26, 30]. Clients cannot define situations capriciously, because the bureaucracies are highly structured and desired outcomes are more likely to accrue to those who fit into existing forms [46]. Nevertheless, bureaucracy never fully determines behavior, and clients' actions depend to a significant extent on their own definitions.

Defining situations and negotiating a solution to the problems that bureaucracy poses for them is often difficult for clients because their definitions of the situation do not agree with the world view of bureaucratic officials [24]. A client's emergency may be an official's routine problem, and paperwork and procedures that appear clear to bureaucrats may mystify clients [42]. Clients usually prefer personalized attention, but staff may be rewarded for adhering to procedure and fast processing of cases, not for providing personal attention [4, 29]. Understanding both clients' and officials' definitions is thus crucial for explaining how clients cope with bureaucracy.

Clients, Staff, and Negotiated Order

Symbolic interaction theory suggests that, based on their definitions of situation, clients and staff attempt to choose actions that let them interact successfully, reach their goals, play their roles as they understand them, maintain consistent and favorable self-images, and adapt to the situation [5, 21]. Research in other settings suggests that accomplishing this can pose a number of dilemmas for bureaucratic clients, who must decide how much inconvenience they will tolerate and how much autonomy they are willing to sacrifice to obtain services [39]. To the extent that bureaucracy causes them problems, clients must choose among strategies such as resisting bureaucratic controls, complaining about bureaucratic dysfunctions, questioning authority, learning about and embracing the requirements, or superficially acquiescing and "working the system" to reach their goals. Alternatively, they may choose to exit physically [25] or psychologically [2]. Staff also face choices. They may pursue their goals by instructing clients about rules and requirements and finding ways to control them [25]. They may make genuine

efforts to meet individual needs, or — pressured by understaffing, quantitative performance measures, or sanctions for breaking rules — they may become unresponsive, orient themselves toward quotas or minutiae, or withdraw psychologically [4, 25, 29]. How they resolve these dilemmas affects clients' situation.

Because clients are usually at a power disadvantage, the heavier burden of adjustment generally falls on them. They usually face strong pressure to acquaint themselves with bureaucratic procedures and follow them, even when doing so is unpleasant [18, 48]. Nevertheless, past research shows that clients are not without resources for balancing power informally [25, 28, 37]. They can cause inconvenience by filing appeals or grievances (which must be taken seriously in rule-bound environments) or disrupt operations by making a scene [25]. They also can become "prison lawyers," acquiring enough knowledge of the rules to argue their cases effectively. They can cultivate personal relationships with bureaucrats, enlist the support of powerful outsiders [25, 42], or cultivate styles of self-presentations that make them more persuasive [13, 14].

Despite the obstacles created by differing definitions of the situation or goals, existing research suggests that clients and staff often do develop understandings and strategies that let them adapt and accomplish many of their goals [4, 25, 48]. Although clients are at a power disadvantage, the patterns of interaction that emerge are generally negotiated, not imposed unilaterally by staff [14]. For bureaucracy to operate, the two groups need not have identical definitions of situation and goals, but they must develop a working consensus to follow patterns of behavior that lets interaction proceed [48]. For example, clients can appear to acquiesce, "playing along" with irritating requirements and hiding their frustration [14]. The organization can then continue to function despite underlying disagreements [48].

The Research Setting

Our case study of newcomers' adaptations to bureaucracy focuses on traditional-age freshmen at a state university with well over ten thousand students. We examine how these newcomers — some with little previous adult experience with bureaucracy — cope with a highly bureaucratized setting, which potentially presents freshmen with many of the problems described above. Our inquiry focuses on freshmen's experiences with four offices that most encounter almost immediately on arrival.

The *Registrar's Office* registers students for classes at a central site

in the Student Center. It handles preregistration, regular registration, and schedule adjustments. To register, a student must present a schedule card, signed by his or her faculty advisor. Registration is by appointment, so students usually wait less than 30 minutes, but waits can be much longer, especially during the "add/drop" period. Freshmen register last, so they are more likely to encounter closed classes, which become even more common during "add/drops." If a class is closed, students may change sections on their own, but a new signature is required to change courses.

The *Academic Advising Office*, located in the administration building, helps with problems faculty advisors cannot resolve, places students on probation or suspension, processes petitions for exceptions to requirements and requests to declare or change majors, provides general academic counseling, and attempts to schedule "progress-assessment" appointments with first semester freshmen. Advisors ordinarily see students by appointment or on a walk-in basis. However, at the beginning of the semester, when Academic Advising is busiest, all students are seen only on a walk-in basis. They must sign in, indicate their business, and wait to be called. Students are ordinarily called in the order they have signed in, but those with simple needs are sometimes seen first.

The *Financial Aid Office*, located in a third building, administers student aid and handles work-study assignments. About half of students receive financial aid. Students who apply for federal aid must submit an elaborate Financial Aid Form to an office in another state, which determines their eligibility — sometimes only after requests for supplemental information. The Financial Aid Office then makes aid awards. Ordinarily, notices of awards are issued before a semester begins. However, delays do occur, and students may not receive the notices until after arrival on campus. Students must file a new application for each year, providing evidence of adequate academic progress. During most of the semester, Financial Aid staff see students, either by appointment or on a walk-in basis, during specified "counseling hours." But at the beginning of the fall semester, counselors are available for extended hours to see students on a walk-in basis only. Students must sign in and indicate the reason for their visit. Waits can be up to three hours because problems are being resolved and work study assignments made.

The Office of Residence Life handles room assignments and administration of meal plans for students who live on campus. It also handles requests for repairs or alterations to rooms. Students who wish to live in residence halls complete an application before arriving on campus or

during the preceding semester and are assigned rooms in order of application. Residence Life conducts business at two offices, both in the same dormitory. Waits are usually short.

Other Offices. Students pick up financial aid checks and pay bills at the Cashier's Office in the Administration Building. They must present a validated ID and proceed to color-coded stations to pick up aid checks, sign checks, pay tuition and fees, and receive receipts. Long lines form at the beginning of the semester. The ID Center is located in an upstairs office in the Student Center. Existing ID's can be validated and ID's issued to new students only with proof of registration. Students with campus jobs must also present a social security card and other identification and have their completion of a federal I-9 form witnessed at the ID Center. Lines can be very long, but processing usually goes quickly and waits do not usually exceed 30 minutes.

The complex campus bureaucracy presents many potential problems for students. Some afflict bureaucratic clients generally, while others are specific to this particular setting. There are waiting lines, multiple forms to complete, impersonal processing, complicated rules. As clients, students are relatively powerless. Because offices are highly specialized, staff members may not know the details of procedures and requirements in other offices, and no one has overall responsibility for a given student's affairs. When things go wrong, it is the student who must try to coordinate the efforts of the offices and persuade staff to act. Moreover, offices that perform related functions are geographically dispersed, so staff in different offices cannot easily meet to resolve issues. Students with problems that involve several offices must go from office to office and try to communicate the results of discussions in one office to staff in another. This arrangement is conducive to communications problems that require multiple trips to different offices to resolve. Finally, many of the campus bureaucracy's procedures are long-linked technologies, so breakdowns at one step can produce a domino effect of problems later. For example, if Financial Aid sends confirmation of students' aid awards to the Cashier late, students may subsequently find their registrations canceled by the Registrar, their room contracts revoked by Housing, and their meal plans canceled by the Dining Service.

Existing theory and research suggested that traditional-age freshmen would encounter at least some problems with the campus bureaucracy and that how they defined their situation and the problems it presented would be key to understanding how they coped. However, it leaves many questions unanswered. What specific aspects of the campus bureaucracy are most and least troubling to freshmen? How do they define their experiences? What coping mechanisms do they use to deal

with any frustrations caused by bureaucratic dysfunctions and their relative powerlessness? What strategies do they develop to gather information and gain their objectives? How do they relate to the staff, who may have different perceptions, needs, and goals than students? When does a working consensus that lets interaction proceed develop, and under what conditions do relations between freshmen and staff become conflictual or break down?

Data Collection and Analysis

We tailored our approach to data collection and analysis to the level of development of past literature and our research goals. Many past studies suggest that bureaucracy frequently poses problems for clients, whom it usually places at a considerable power disadvantage. The literature also identifies specific problems clients have commonly encountered in specific settings, though it gives little attention to college students as clients. Symbolic interaction theory emphasizes the importance of actors' definitions of a situation and suggested general processes by which clients develop such definitions of and strategies for coping with new or problematic settings, but it gives relatively little attention to clients in a bureaucracy. Scattered studies suggest mechanisms that clients sometimes use to manage their relationships with bureaucracies, but none look at college students as clients.

Our research strategy used a combination of nonparticipant observation and semistructured interviews to both ascertain the extent to which patterns found in previous studies recur among college freshmen and to allow the discovery of new concepts and patterns to build a grounded theory [12]. We attempted to determine whether insights from past formal theory — such as Merton's work on the dysfunctions of bureaucratic rules — and existing substantive theories about the dynamics of bureaucracy in particular settings — such as Susser's [42] insight that excessive paperwork requirements are often used to punish recalcitrant welfare clients — appeared in this setting by mapping our observational and interview data into these categories. However, we were careful to avoid forcing our data into these categories so that new categories and relationships could emerge from the data [12]. This approach, a modification of the constant comparative method [12] allowed us to discover, for example, that many freshmen did not feel especially burdened by what we might have coded as rigid rules because the rules were so institutionalized as to blend into the background of "just how it is," but that, in this setting, a pattern of events freshmen referred to as "the runaround" was a special burden.

Ten days of intensive nonparticipant observation was conducted in the offices described above and in related campus settings in the fall semester, from the beginning of freshman orientation through the end of the "add/drop" period. Observation was most intensive during the first few days, when most students on campus were freshmen. The first author, then a graduate student, attended freshman orientation sessions and circulated among the offices described above, where he waited in line and sat in waiting areas. He attempted to visit offices at peak times but limited his stay in any area to 30 minutes — less if there was little activity. He also ate in the dining hall and spent time in the student center. To avoid influencing events, he minimized interaction with other students, speaking only if addressed. He recorded observations as they were made. (Writing in a notebook is not unusual on campus.) He encountered no evidence of suspicion from students, who usually leave a site immediately after completing their business. On three occasions, he showed a letter explaining the project to staff who questioned his presence.

Field notes were typed daily, and both researchers reviewed them. We noted (a) observations relevant to topics of theoretical importance identified by the literature review and (b) observations that were part of other unanticipated but recurrent patterns of interest (such as students' tendency to try to understand a situation by watching what went on rather than by asking questions). We discussed these unanticipated patterns as they appeared and began to seek further examples of them to understand their place in the larger picture.

The bulk of our data came from semistructured interviews conducted early in the spring semester with a systematic sample of freshmen drawn from the student directory. The directory, which lists all students enrolled after fall registration, was ideal for our purposes because freshmen who were still enrolled at the time of our interviews had just completed their second registration cycle but still had relatively little experience on campus. After eliminating students who had dropped out of school, were older than 20, or had been on campus more than two semesters, 33 eligible subjects remained. We obtained interviews with 20, 19 of whom lived on campus. Sixty-five percent were female, about the same as among all traditional-age freshmen. The semistructured interview schedule contained questions derived from the literature review and our observations. To avoid forcing data into preexisting categories, we included questions that asked about students' early and most memorable experiences in the four offices without specific guidance about what they should cover. Follow-up questions focused on more specific topics that the literature review and observational analysis suggested

might be important. These included rules, paperwork, waiting, relations with staff, "runarounds," complaining, and coping strategies — and experience in other organizations. Interviews averaged 30 to 45 minutes in length.

Interviews were tape-recorded, and transcripts were typed using Ethnograph, a qualitative data analysis program that allows attaching one or more codes to relevant passages in the interview transcripts. With this program, all segments of the notes linked to any code or combination of codes can be recalled and displayed for use in data analysis. We derived the initial codes we used from the literature review and field observations. However, a careful review of pretest and early interview transcripts by both investigators led to some modifications of the original coding scheme to reflect emergent categories and relationships in the data.

Staff interviewees were chosen from individuals who had worked in the four offices for over a year and whom the directors described as having frequent, direct student contact. In one office, the director selected 5 employees for interviews. The other three directors provided us with lists totaling 21 staff members; we selected 5 at random from each office. All staff members selected agreed to participate. The interviews, which averaged about an hour in length, were also based on a semi-structured interview schedule. They focused on relationships with students and colleagues, causes of students' problems, students' adaptation to the bureaucracy, and staff perceptions of their offices' effectiveness and problems. To encourage frankness, we did not tape-record the interviews. Transcripts were compiled from detailed notes and coded and analyzed as described above.

Several drafts of each segment of our analysis were written by the first author and reviewed by the second — who also read a sample of interview transcripts — for clarity, mutual exclusiveness of categories, and fit between the raw data and the categories and relationships suggested. Issues raised by this procedure were resolved by an iterative process in which our discussions of drafts were followed by further review of the raw data and revised drafts of the manuscript. In later drafts we paid special attention to how the categories and relationships we found constituted an overall pattern that could help to answer our original research question.

Points of Friction in the Campus Bureaucracy

Students did sometimes experience their encounters with the campus bureaucracy as annoying, frustrating, and confusing. However, their re-

actions were mediated by both their relative powerlessness and their interpretations of their experiences and options. Their comments about their problems with the bureaucracy centered around five major themes, lines and waiting, impersonality, rules, "the runaround," and paperwork.

Lines and Waiting

When we asked freshmen open-ended questions about what they remembered about the campus offices, lines and waiting were the most frequently mentioned source of frustration. Freshmen reported waits from 5 minutes to 3 hours. The longest occurred in offices where appointments were not accepted and individualized processing, such as making financial aid awards rather than mass production, was required [50].

Even though freshmen often complained about lines and waiting, not all interpreted waiting the same way. For example, a wait of 30 minutes was defined as "just horrible" by one student, but as "no big deal" by another. Three factors helped to predict how negatively freshmen's viewed waiting. When processing was *visible*, as at registration, students could usually see that the staff was moving as fast as possible, making the students more tolerant. Where processing occurred in private offices, as in Financial Aid, the process was opaque, arousing more frustration and anxiety. As one interviewee said, "It may have been that there was someone in every single office and four people in front of me, but that still doesn't account for an hour and a half." The *predictability* of waits was also salient. Lines where people moved at a relatively steady pace allowed students to estimate how long they would have to wait. Two freshmen even reported counting the number of people in front of them. Sign up sheets produced more frustration because position in the queue was hard to determine in a crowded waiting room. Students could try to estimate their wait by checking the sign-up sheet, but they were sometimes misled, because the order in which students were seen depended partly on the nature of their business. Nor was asking staff about probable waiting times effective. Several staff members reported that they lacked the information to answer such questions. Unpredictability led students to become irritated with situations that they saw as chaotic. Less often, *favorable treatment* affected how students defined waits. For example, one freshman enrolled at the last minute because her program was canceled at another college. Although her application was filed late, Financial Aid agreed to process it. She described a 30-minute wait to register as "horrible" but a similar wait in Financial Aid as "kind of annoying" but understandable because of the office's workload.

But despite the inconvenience, our observations showed that students invariably at least outwardly accepted the lines — even when the waits were long. The interview data provided considerable insight into how and why this happened. First, many students saw lines as normal. As one put it, "I just did it and followed the rest of the sheep." Indeed, the observational data showed that students entering a setting often actually looked for lines and sometimes asked others where the line formed. Freshmen also explained that they saw lines as a legitimate, fair way to order an otherwise ambiguous situation. Observation showed that lines were governed by informal equity norms. Students could leave the line briefly to visit the restroom or recover a forgotten item and reclaim their places. On the other hand, they sometimes complained when staff brought someone to the front of the line, violating the equity the line created. But so long as the norms were followed, lines were usually accepted even when they proved frustrating. In one instructive instance, an interviewee cut a class to get to the add/drop period early to avoid being closed out of a class. When the person in line just ahead of her took the last vacancy, she, even though frustrated, did not complain, because she believed the queue was fair.

Some freshmen said that they didn't mind waiting much; however, for others, overt acceptance of long lines masked stronger feelings. One said simply, "I hated it; I just hated it." Lines could also exacerbate anxiety created by uncertainty about other problems in the bureaucracy: "[I would sit there], hoping that [my problem with the office] would eventually work out and never knowing when it would work out." Nevertheless, only three students, two of whom were already frustrated by lost paperwork, reported becoming really angry about waiting. Only two students expressed anger overtly to staff, and they too accepted the wait in the end. Eight of 20 staff interviewees said that students never complain about lines, and 3 reported minimal complaining. Given the large number of students, this also suggests that complaints are infrequent. In short, freshmen accepted waiting, even when they found it frustrating. As one said, "Waiting is just something you have to go through."

Staff Impersonality

Campus offices pursue efficiency and fairness by basing decisions on regulations, not personal considerations. When asked about their own approach to students, 14 of the 20 staff interviewees said that they tried to remain detached, though 6 added that this did not mean callous indifference. Staff explained their impersonal approach by noting that there are too many students to allow staff to cater to individual needs,

that students need to learn to deal with bureaucracy on their own, not be babied by staff, and that for staff to become personally involved would undermine their effectiveness.

Some freshmen praised staff members who went out of their way to help by telling them where to go for assistance, helping them choose courses or majors, and providing personal attention. Nevertheless, the majority perceived staff's approach as impersonal. One freshman said, "They just did what they had to do and didn't have . . . too much contact with students." Others said that students were treated simply as cases to be processed. One remarked, "I felt like I was being herded, actually, . . . like one of the masses, a number maybe." Another viewed this impersonality as a striking contrast to earlier experiences: "When you go through life, you're a person. People care about you. Then [when] you go to college, it's like a totally new world." Two students interpreted impersonal treatment as indicating that the staff member was having a bad day, and a few complained that staff were rude. Still others felt that staff didn't care about them: "They just want to get you in there and get you out so they can go on to the next person, and they could care less about what you have to get done." Interestingly, students had fewer such complaints about student assistants. They felt that shared experiences linked them to student staff, who understood their problems.

Yet despite these negative feelings, freshmen once again defined an irritating situation as "just the way it is," often ruefully repeating some of the staff's own rationales for impersonal treatment. One said, "I guess in situations like that they can't treat everyone personally. . . . It's got to be 'get it done' or the line will back up a lot longer." Freshmen's desire to complete their own tasks expeditiously inclined them to accept the impersonal treatment, which they saw as necessary to reach their goals. One freshmen explained that he accepted impersonal treatment in the Academic Advising office because, "If they did sit down with everyone, . . . you would be there probably three [or] four hours waiting." Ironically, their acceptance of bureaucratic impersonality meant that freshmen rarely asked for help, making it impossible for staff to work personally with those who needed special assistance.

Rules

The literature suggests that excessive, rigid, and contradictory rules are among the most frustrating aspects of bureaucracy, and the campus bureaucracy manifests an extensive, complicated set of rules. Some staff interviewees claimed that the rules were flexible and that they sometimes made exceptions. Staff did sometimes make exceptions, but

the observational data also revealed many instances of strict application of rules. For example, although staff sometimes suggested alternative signers to students having trouble obtaining required signatures on their advising cards, they invariably insisted on an authorized signature, even when the change was minor. In interviews, some staff members explained that they purposefully granted exceptions sparingly, made students work to get exceptions, and warned students that further exceptions would not be given because they did not want students to think the rules were unimportant. Making too many exceptions might cause problems later if word spread and other students expected the same treatment. Several staff members also argued that the students who had the most trouble with the rules were typically too egocentric to understand that the rules were intended to be fair to everyone. Staff believed that the rules were generally fair and efficient, and they tried to communicate the importance they placed on following rules to students.

Despite the prevalence of formalized procedures, when we asked freshmen about rules, we found that they were of two minds. On the one hand, there was considerable equanimity toward rules. This evidently occurred in part because rules were so much a part of the bureaucratic landscape that many students gave them little thought. Indeed, when asked how they felt about rules and procedures, some interviewees needed examples to clarify the question. One explained, "When I went in, I really wasn't conscious of the rules and procedures. . . . I really didn't think about there being rules and procedures. I just went in." Another carried this theme to the extreme, reporting, "There weren't any rules." Indeed, some students used the word "rule" *only* to refer to regulations that caused them trouble.

When asked directly about rules, most freshmen said that they saw them as necessary to keep things organized. One student whose classes were canceled because of the strict application of a rule about payment due dates nevertheless concluded, "[Without the rules], everything would have gotten all screwed up worse." Several also noted that rules helped them to make sense of a new and unfamiliar environment. As one pointed out, "I didn't have a problem with the [existence of] rules because I didn't know what was to be expected." Most also believed that the rules worked to help them reach their goals. One reasoned, I think [the rules] were necessary . . . because [the university is] offering me the chance to earn money to get an education . . . [therefore] I think its necessary that I take care of everything.

On the other hand, some freshmen, usually those who had been inconvenienced, did have complaints about rules. The requirement that

faculty advisors sign registration schedules often proved especially irritating. Advisors could be hard to find, occasionally signed cards without really providing any help — sometimes without even looking at them — and had to be sought out anew for each schedule change. The rule that assigned the lowest registration priority to freshmen was another source of frustration, because it meant that freshmen encountered many closed courses. "They say you're supposed to graduate in four years, and you can't because you want to take a class that's filled up, but then you can't take that class, so you have to keep going back to different classes." There were also complaints about ambiguous or conflicting rules. As one freshman said, "No one seems to have the same story about what to do about anything." Another characterized rules as intimidating. For a brand new person, the [rules and procedures] are not very straightforward. . . . I felt that it was very confusing, and that just scares you even more. . . . It was very nerve-racking." Finally, there were complaints about inflexible rules and bureaucratic personalities. One freshman criticized a clerk who told her that office procedures meant that a check sent in by the student's mother could not be matched to her paperwork. Cancellation of her registration would probably result. She said that the staff member declined to take an interest in the problem, claiming that nothing could be done.

But in even these instances, our interviewees grudgingly followed the rules, and no one asked for an exception. In part this was because freshmen were not aware of the existence of exceptions or of procedures for obtaining one; in part it was because freshmen tended to perceive rules as immutable and to define their own difficulties as idiosyncratic or as minor hassles. Finally, even freshmen with major problems usually concluded that obeying rules was the best way to reach their goals.

"The Runaround"

Specialized offices scattered across various buildings caused problems for students, who frequently had to visit several offices, often in a specific sequence, to complete their business. Worse still, it was not always clear which office handled a problem. For example, several students were surprised that an office named Academic Advising could not sign class registration cards. As a result, some students found themselves rushing from office to office, sometimes revisiting the same office several times, to solve a problem. Office specialization also contributed to chain reaction foul-ups. For example, two students found that when their financial aid applications failed to go through on time,

registrations and meal plans were canceled. Similarly, paperwork lost by one office could not be forwarded to others, resulting in problems down the line.

Five of 20 freshmen reported serious problems with such "runarounds," and 10 others mentioned minor difficulties. Several complained that they had to make repeated visits to faculty advisors for minor schedule changes. Another complained bitterly about problems finding information about what courses could be substituted for a particular requirement. I've gone there . . . for something, and they've chased me all around the world. . . . They sent me everywhere except where I was supposed to be." One victim of a chain reaction foul-up commented, "I was kind of starting to get angry that people were sending me all over campus to figure out something that they had originally screwed up." Others simply found trying to make all the required stops confusing and frustrating: "I've got to get here. I've go to get there. Your mind's one step ahead of your body."

Other students had trouble understanding that secretaries or receptionists did not have the skill or authority to help with many of their problems. After a receptionist asked one student we observed if she could help, but then took his name and told him to have a seat, he commented to another student, "Isn't it stupid how she asks if she can help you and then tells you to sit down? She'll do it every time. Watch."

Staff members said that they tried to avoid giving students the runaround, but some acknowledged that office specialization and the limited authority of individual officials could produce problems anyway. Two even noted that it is easy for the staff to forget that students have difficulty understanding how the bureaucracy is set up. On the other hand, some staff responses contained hints of victim-blaming [40]. Staff were more likely to blame freshmen's problems on failure to read the rules and acquaint themselves with the system and overreliance on help from parents and friends than on the system itself.

Although victims of major "runarounds" sometimes complained bitterly, most freshmen viewed their experiences as — at worst — mildly annoying. Many resolved their problems fairly quickly. But even those who were seriously inconvenienced rarely directed their complaints to staff. Instead, they chose to accede to the bureaucracy, albeit sometimes reluctantly. They saw the problems with the system as, "just the way it is."

Paperwork

Excessive, redundant paperwork is legendary in bureaucracy; however, the majority of our interviewees found paperwork to be — at most — somewhat annoying. One said, "[The paperwork] was a little tire-

some, but I thought it was necessary. . . . It made sense." In fact, students often received more help with paperwork than with other aspects of the campus bureaucracy. Parents usually filled out the most complicated and problematic form, the Financial Aid Form, and staff were available to help with other paperwork. In addition, freshmen generally defined paperwork as a means to their goals: registration and financial aid. One freshman's reaction to the required I-9 (citizenship verification) form was typical. "It didn't bother me. It's required; if I didn't fill it out, I didn't get my paycheck. And if I didn't get my paycheck, I wouldn't be here."

Nevertheless, paperwork did cause problems for some. Lost paperwork and inaccurate records, in particular, caused consternation. One freshman reported recurrent difficulty with her scholarship check.

> They send me a card in the mail saying . . . your scholarship check has come in and you need to come in and sign your check on this day between these times, and I'll go. And your name is supposed to be on a little colored card. My name — never fails — is never on a card. And yet they send me this thing that says . . . come get your check. So I have to get out my ID, and they have to fill out a card for me. So I stand around and wait for that. Then I'll go up and they can't find my file. They don't understand what kind of scholarship I got.

Others complained about redundant requests for information.

> There's way too much repetition of information. They send you nine to ten forms to fill out the very same information. It's like they lost it the first eight times. I'll be happy to tell you anything you want to know, but don't ask for the same information again and again and again. It gets old.

Another occasional complaint was that required paperwork was not clear or that staff were poorly informed and unwilling to help.

> I ask them the question, and they said to me, "Well if you'd read the form, you'd find your answer in the form." And I said, "Well I read the form. . . ." And they read it and said, "Oh." And it wasn't in the form.

Freshmen were especially likely to become angry when they defined paperwork as pointless. One became frustrated when told that, although it would probably not be possible for him to change roommates, he should complete the forms requesting the change anyway. He complained, "It just seemed like a lot of red tape crap that you had to just do for no apparent reason." Another, recalling problems with complex financial aid requirements, complained bitterly, "It must have been 20 pages of paperwork for $100 [more financial aid]." Yet even students who found paperwork frustrating or pointless almost always yielded to the requirements without overt complaint.

Staff members displayed ambivalence about paperwork. Most acknowledged that paperwork, especially the dreaded Financial Aid Form, was a problem for some students, and some agreed that forms could be redundant, lack complete instructions, or implicitly assume too much knowledge. A few complained that paperwork requirements interfered with meeting students' needs. Nevertheless, many staff also insisted that most problems arose because students did not read the instructions, did not ask for assistance, and relied too heavily on parents.

Student Acquiescence to the Campus Bureaucracy

The literature suggested that freshmen might have trouble adapting to the campus bureaucracy, and our interviews showed that many found the bureaucracy annoying at times, while a few experienced considerable frustration. Nevertheless, both the interviews and observational data showed that students rarely displayed *overt* anger about lines, closed courses, paperwork, and runarounds, suggesting that most elected to deal with the campus bureaucracy without verbal complaint, confrontation, or formal appeals. Staff members also reported relatively little complaining and arguing, especially from freshmen, explaining that new students were timid, uncertain, and afraid; however, several noted that freshmen's body language could betray suppressed frustration and anger. Students generally expressed anger overtly only in extreme cases. For example, one victim of an extended runaround later experienced further consternation when he wanted to give a financial aid check directly to a receptionist. She insisted that he give her a personal check instead, as the financial aid award was not yet in the computer system. Although he became angry with her and argued vociferously, he too ultimately gave in and followed the required procedure.

Freshmen's explanations of how they viewed the bureaucratic requirements and their own situation provide considerable insight into their acquiescence. They identified five interrelated reasons for accepting the campus bureaucracy.

One major reason for the lack of overt complaining and confrontation was that freshmen almost always interpreted the campus bureaucracy as the natural order of things. The bureaucracy was so well institutionalized that most had difficulty imagining options — even when an outsider might conclude that alternatives, such as adding more staff to speed up processing, were available. Thus, one student explained, "I just didn't know how they could do anything better than they were"; another commented, "I was upset that it happened, but there was

nothing that any of them could really do." Long lines, frustrating rules and the like were seen as beyond anyone's control, and the few freshmen who suggested improvements often qualified their ideas by saying that they really didn't know whether they would work better. Even those who experienced serious problems sometimes emphasized bureaucracy's strong points, viewing their difficulties as isolated and defining the bureaucracy as generally effective. A few also blamed themselves for their problems, acknowledging that they had not read or followed the procedures.

This definition of the situation led students to accept the bureaucracy — at least grudgingly. As one put it, "That's the way it's supposed to be; that's the way it's going to be." Another said, "That's just part of the rules and regulations. Got to do it; can't cry about it." Consequently, even when bureaucratic requirements and procedures caused them annoyance and frustration, freshmen usually acceded to them. One victim of an extended wait explained his feelings this way, "At that point, I had to stand in line. . . . I didn't really have a choice. I mean, I was hungry. I wanted to go to lunch, but I didn't have a choice, so I just stood there."

Second, freshmen reported that past experiences, such as waiting in a doctor's office, paid jobs, and working in high-school student government, helped them to understand and adjust to the campus bureaucracy. Most also mentioned high school itself as preparation, including — somewhat surprisingly — two who believed that high school had been even more bureaucratic than the university. More typical were those who said that high-school bureaucracy was similar, but on a smaller scale. "[High school] was a taste, so when I came here, it really wasn't anything different. . . . I wasn't really as surprised as I think I would have been if I hadn't had some previous experience." However, some had little experience at all with bureaucracy. Four students, all of whom found adapting to the university bureaucracy difficult, indicated that high school had been much less bureaucratic, offering attentive, supportive assistance.

Third, freshmen interviewees said that they lacked information needed to challenge the system. Knowledge is an important basis for power in organizations [37], and freshmen, as newcomers, had not had enough experience in the campus bureaucracy to understand it very well. As one explained, "I was a freshman; I didn't realize what the hell I was supposed to be doing." Sometimes, ironically, there was even too much information, that is, too much new information to comprehend at once. As one freshman noted, "I didn't know what to expect, so I didn't know how to take it all in." Lacking a clear picture of how things

worked, freshmen found it difficult to question the established order, and the limited information they had predisposed them to do things the organization way. For example, lack of knowledge of the existence of exceptions or, even more often, procedures for obtaining one predisposed freshmen simply to accept the general procedures established for everyone.

Fourth, interviewees' accepted the campus bureaucracy because they believed they had little power. Some believed that it was inappropriate for newcomers at the bottom of the hierarchy to challenge the system. One said simply, "I just don't feel like it's my place [to argue]." They allowed their behavior to be guided by staff, even when they disagreed or did not understand, because they respected authority and expected staff to be in charge. One freshman explained, "[When a receptionist] tells you to sit down, that's what you do." In addition, most freshmen concluded that they were potentially at the mercy of campus bureaucrats. With their superior knowledge of the rules and their ability to enforce them rigorously if they chose, staff could make students' lives more difficult or help them to reach their goals. Thus, 13 of 20 staff interviewees said that they sometimes overlooked minor rule violations — a practice that gave them considerable leverage. Students concluded that it was safer to accept instructions from staff than to risk offending them by complaining. Two freshmen reported that they even "made up" majors on the spot to satisfy a staff member's insistent demand that they list one. Another said that if she complained, "maybe they wouldn't help me as much as they would if I were calm." A few also said they feared that failure to comply might earn them the label of troublemakers, a supposition that also received some support from staff interviews.

This is not to say that the exercise of staff power involved much overt conflict. Staff usually exercised power politely and prudently, and their superior knowledge made it easy for them to persuade students to do things the organization way — in the process socializing them into the bureaucracy [25, 34]. They simply offered polite advice about what students needed to do, presenting their suggestions as in students' best interest. The widespread reliance on lines, rules, and procedures also reduced the need for staff to issue direct orders, and they rarely gave them. Like rules, staff power blended into the background, and even staff themselves seemed almost unconscious of it.

When students violated their expectations, staff often found indirect ways to get them to conform. The observational data showed that students who forged to the front of a line saying that they had only a quick question were simply ignored. It was also obvious that staff members used informal but fairly rigid "scripts" to structure interaction, espe-

cially when many students had to be processed quickly. If a student rambled on or took too much time, staff members displayed enough impatience to bring him or her back into line.

As a result, although freshmen sometimes resented being at the bottom of the totem pole, they usually did not feel that they were being ordered around. Students generally complied with staff requests and suggestions, allowing staff to control their behavior almost without fully realizing it. One freshman explained her compliance with a staff member's request for an appointment this way:

> The lady called me and made an appointment with me, which I think is a bit more pressing than my making an appointment with her . . . [so] it's important for me to get my tail over there and do stuff. I mean . . . she's calling me and doing [things for me].

The final and most immediate reason for freshmen's compliance was that they almost invariably concluded that cooperating with the bureaucracy was the best approach to reaching goals that were important to them. As one freshman explained, "I basically realized that there was no choice. If I wanted to take classes this semester, . . . I had to do what it takes, so I did." For most students, cooperating with the bureaucracy and accepting what they defined as just minor annoyances without complaint led simply and directly to meeting their objectives. So it is not surprising that they elected to cooperate. But even freshmen who had experienced serious problems were apt to adopt this outlook. For them, the bureaucracy "worked" only in the limited sense that, after considerable frustration, they finally did achieve their goals. Nevertheless, the circumstances that persuaded other students that working with the system was the best course also elicited compliance from them, albeit with a more negative view of the bureaucracy and occasional overt protest. As one said, "I don't see another . . . way to solve the problem, so I guess I'll have to deal with it [their way]."

Coping with Campus Bureaucracy

Freshmen usually accepted the campus bureaucracy as "just the way things are," elected to cooperate with it, and rarely challenged it overtly. Yet their compliance was often somewhat grudging, and at times they were irritated and frustrated by their powerlessness and the campus bureaucracy's requirements and dysfunctions. Hence, they had to develop strategies for coping with the problems the bureaucracy caused them. By ameliorating the problems the students face, these coping strategies help the bureaucracy to maintain itself and function despite its drawbacks.

Finding Out How the Bureaucracy Works

As newcomers, freshmen need information about which offices to consult for various services, what materials or information to bring, and the order in which events must occur. Several staff people noted that freshmen are bombarded with so much confusing information that they have trouble determining what is important or understanding any of what they have been told. Students also often cited lack of good information as a key reason for many of their problems with the campus bureaucracy. They mentioned confusing instruction sheets, inadequate orientation sessions, and staff who assumed that freshmen understood everything in advance. As one said, "They acted like I was supposed to know all this stuff, and I don't know where the hell I was supposed to find out about it."

Our interviewees adopted various strategies to sort things out and decide what they should do. Some adopted a "watch and learn" strategy. From what they saw, they inferred how they should interact with staff, what paperwork was needed, and what procedures were in use. For example, students were observed leaving the ID Center after they saw that others had brought receipts from the Cashier's Office, commenting that they were going to get their receipts. In some offices, ropes that guided lines and signs on the walls also provided information. Several freshmen said that they purposefully observed what occurred in the campus offices to gain information, but for many "watch and learn" was not a systematically planned strategy. Instead, their need for information made them ready to note and absorb whatever data crossed their paths. Several staff members and students pointed out that students preferred to learn by watching rather than by asking questions because they did not know what to ask and wanted to avoid appearing naive or bothering staff.

Freshmen sometimes did ask directly for information or advice from staff as well as from friends or parents, who sometimes accompanied them. Students accompanied by friends and parents were a common sight during our observations, but most freshmen reported that they did not rely heavily on them for advice. Most of the freshmen's friends were also freshmen, and interviewees told us that neither they nor parents had much useful information. Staff tended to emphasize the help students received from friends or parents more than the freshmen, usually citing instances of bad advice.

Strategies for Getting What You Want

The campus bureaucracy and students' relative powerlessness could make reaching their objectives frustrating. It was therefore to their ad-

vantage to find ways to "get around" the bureaucracy to get what they wanted more directly than they could by going thorough official channels. If successful, use of unsanctioned or unofficial methods to reach their goals has the potential to defuse tensions that might otherwise build up in interacting with the campus bureaucracy.

One obvious strategy for achieving one's ends is to violate the rules, but most freshmen interviewees said they never did so. The requirement that the faculty advisor sign the registration card is a good example. The requirement could be aggravating, and the opportunity for rule violation was obvious. Many freshmen said they knew that others had forged a signature, and the chance of being caught was low. Yet only four students said that they had considered forgery, and only two had done so. Staff also noted that a few students failed to follow the requirement to inform Financial Aid when they dropped below a full course load, but they said this violation was rare, and none of our interviewees mentioned it.

Freshmen gave several reasons for hewing to the rules. A few said that they were afraid of being caught. Others believed that following rules was fairly easy, so breaking them was not worth it. Some said that they did not yet know the system well enough to guess what they could get by with but might break more rules later. Many seemed to take rules so much for granted that breaking them was almost unthinkable. Thus one labeled the advisor's signature rule as "written in stone."

Fibbing is another potentially effective way to shortcut the bureaucratic process and reach one's goals. Staff interviewees reported occasional instances of students who lied about what other staff members had told them. Some of these "lies" may actually have been the result of student misunderstandings of what other staff had told them, and none of our student interviewees reported lying.

Another possible strategy is to enlist the help of parents. Both observational data and freshmen interviews indicated that parents accompanied students fairly often, especially to Financial Aid, where they could provide needed information. Nevertheless, only two instances of parents intervening directly were noted in the observations, and only the two student interviewees who experienced the worst problems said they had asked their parents to help. Nevertheless, the mere presence of parents may have helped to ensure more responsive treatment. One freshman explained,

> "I think the way they treated me was different when my mom was there and when my mom wasn't there. It's like, 'Well, here's your daughter; we're going to treat her good; everything is going to be fine.' Then whoa! Mom's gone, and it's like, 'Now we're going to treat you like we really want to treat you.'"

Usually however, the bureaucracy worked well enough that students preferred to handle things themselves. And indeed, some parents insisted that they do so.

Staff members had a different view of parental intervention; 19 of 20 reported that students sometimes brought parents along, and 17 said that parents were very active in assisting students, helping them with paperwork, interceding when dorm repairs were not completed promptly or when mistakes in processing paperwork occurred, and even helping students to select courses. Several commented about parents who insisted on doing all the talking, often to the student's embarrassment. But staff also reported instances in which students asked parents to accompany them because they believed this would help to get what they wanted. Freshmen may have underreported parents' assistance because it threatened their self-esteem, and staff's strong negative reaction to parents' involvement may have led them selectively to remember times when parents intervened. Staff have good reason to dislike parental intervention. Dealing with parents takes time, creates conflict between trying to satisfy the parent and avoiding unfair exceptions, and may affect job performance ratings or job security. Perhaps partly for these reasons, most staff believe that students should handle their own affairs.

Filing complaints and appeals is another strategy for getting one's way in bureaucracy [25]. The campus bureaucracy offers several ways for students to appeal decisions, through the offices themselves, to faculty committees, or through the administration. Although our interviewees did not know the details of these procedures, most were aware that complaints were an option. Some had actively considered mounting a formal complaint, but no one had actually done so, and staff reported that formal complaints were rare. When we asked students who had encountered problems why they did not complain, some said that they had just never been pushed far enough. Others claimed that complaining was not in their nature: "I guess I'm not that kind of person, to really go and complain about things." Others were afraid that appeals would succeed only in offending powerful staff members.

Despite the irritation and frustration — and occasional genuine anger — that dealing with the bureaucracy could engender, both the observational and interview data indicate that students generally chose to be nonconfrontational. This could require using "fronts" [13] to conceal true feelings. Through speech, gestures, and manner, they presented a calm, rational outward demeanor, even when inwardly angry. They often tried to appear "mature" and cooperative and conform to the norms of the bureaucracy. Our freshmen interviewees believed that such fronts were the best way to maintain superficially pleasant relations with staff, make a favorable impression, and reach their goals. By

acting this way, students contributed to the development of a "working consensus" [13], supporting staff's view that the bureaucracy worked relatively smoothly.

Most direct encounters with staff did not last long, so it was not too hard for students to maintain their "performances." Nevertheless, some did lapse, at least momentarily. For example, one student was observed to become overtly hostile when a staff member asked her if her papers had been checked. Rather than respond to the anger, the staff member ignored it, and the student soon resumed her calm "performance." Staff members believed that it was important to maintain calm outward appearances and to avoid dealing with obviously angry students, therefore they usually did not react to such lapses or to student body language that signaled frustration or anger.

Dealing with Frustration

Whatever their strategies, students did not always get what they wanted immediately and they sometimes had to put up with considerable inconvenience before they reached their objectives. Hence, they needed to find ways to deal with the resulting frustration. By reducing or managing frustration, these safety valve strategies made it easier for students to maintain smooth relations with the campus bureaucracy.

A few freshmen tried to reduce their frustration with the campus bureaucracy by simple avoidance. One explained, "I haven't dropped or added a class just because I didn't want to have to go through the crap. It just seemed like too much of an ordeal." For most, however, avoidance was not feasible. They had to find other ways to reduce or manage frustration.

One approach was to create psychological distance. Students sometimes responded to staff impersonality by viewing staff just as impersonally as the staff viewed them. If staff members were affectively distant, our interviewees would transform them into just another part of the bureaucratic apparatus, expressing only partly concealed resentment by referring to them as "Miss Whatever" or "the poor little lady." Or as another put it, "A receptionist is a receptionist is a receptionist." By creating interpersonal distance, students could avoid damage to their self-esteem by deciding that staff opinions of them did not matter and justify expressing resentment toward staff.

Another set of strategies for reducing frustration centered around waiting in line. Both observation and interview data indicate that students in lines spent much time talking to one another, allowing them to build social networks and pass the time. Indeed, 5 of our 20 interviewees actually recruited friends to go with them to a campus office. As one said, "It would have been a lot worse if I hadn't had someone to wait

with me." Others were accompanied by parents for the same reason. Some freshmen reported using waiting time to conduct "symbolic rehearsals" [41] of upcoming interaction with staff. Others passed the time and reduced their anxiety by tracking their progress: "I just watched the line in front of me and noticed how much time each person was taking and tried to evaluate how much longer until I would be seen."

Because freshmen were unwilling to vent their frustration to staff, they turned elsewhere to express their feelings. The ends of lines, for example, provided "back regions" where students could "come out of character" [13] and voice their complaints to other students. When staff members were near, these complaints were suppressed or muted in the interest of avoiding friction with staff. Friends, roommates, and parents could also provide a sympathetic ear for students needing to blow off steam.

Staff Coping Behaviors

Staff members too experienced difficulties trying to make the system work and managing their sometimes conflictual relationships with students. Staff dealt with conflict primarily by attempting to maintain a businesslike attitude when dealing with students. By emphasizing following the rules, making clear that they expected to be treated respectfully, and maintaining emotional distance between themselves and students, staff could insulate themselves from the emotional demands of their work while reassuring themselves that they were providing fast, equitable service [25, 30]. All staff members said that they tried to avoid conducting business with visibly angry or agitated students. They tried to calm them, encouraged them to leave the office, and referred the most problematic cases to supervisors. Similarly, decisions about student petitions were made in private. Students were informed by mail, protecting staff from the immediate anger of students whose petitions were denied. Strategies like these reduced the emotional strain on staff, helping to stabilize the system.

Staff also developed shared interpretations of why students had difficulties — some of them self-serving ones that protected their self-images and commitment to the system. Although some did concede that runarounds and confusing jargon caused some problems for students, staff attributed most problems to students who looked for short cuts, put things off, accepted poor advice from parents and friends, and — most of all — failed to read and follow rules. Staff reported that students who were too dependent on parents, those from small towns, and freshmen had the most difficulty. They characterized freshmen as lost, "green," and too accustomed to having their parents take care of things.

Staff also sometimes engaged in "victim-blaming" [25, 40]. For ex-

ample, we heard uncooperative students described as having "attitude problems," parents characterized as "domineering," and students who advised others as merely "thinking that they know what's going on." Although probably true in some instances, staff's ready reliance on such characterizations reassures them that the system is sound and that most problems come from uncooperative individuals.

Like students who were irritated by the bureaucracy, staff who were frustrated by aggressive students or difficult decisions turned to peers for counsel and support. Backstage conversations allowed them to vent frustrations, make light of student peccadillos, reassure one another of the soundness of the procedures, and obtain advice about how to handle problematic cases. Several noted that conversations with colleagues let them "talk out" their frustration with students who had angered them rather than directing the anger back toward students.

Implications

Bureaucracy is the dominant organizational form in our society, and learning to adapt to it is an important aspect of socialization. College freshmen's first experiences with bureaucracy are theoretically and practically strategic because, as putative adults, freshmen must learn to deal with bureaucracy and its problems without the protection and support of parents and sympathetic teachers. They must define a new situation, adapt to bureaucratic constraints, and learn to operate successfully in a bureaucratic context. Because their encounters are early ones, freshmen's experiences reveal the dynamics of adapting to bureaucracy especially well. They may also set the pattern for later encounters, helping us to understand how bureaucracy perpetuates itself despite built-in strains.

Bureaucracy uses specialization, rules, hierarchical authority, records, and impersonal decision making to achieve efficiency, accuracy, and speed by tightly structuring behavior, minimizing wasted effort, and encouraging rationality [47]. Yet bureaucracy carries a price, especially for lower participants. Bureaucratic dysfunctions, such as runarounds, waiting in line, and communication breakdowns, are not just obstacles to efficiency. They are also sources of irritation and frustration for clients. Moreover, because bureaucracy works by tightly controlling behavior, lower participants sometimes find working within its confines annoying and unpleasant [2, 46].

Bureaucracy thus presents a paradox for clients seeking services. Like most social structures [7, 8], bureaucracies have a positive side, meeting needs in an orderly way, and a conflictual side, controlling client behavior in ways that impose costs. As newcomers to bureau-

cracy, freshmen confront this paradox immediately. The bureaucracy often operates predictably, equitably, and relatively efficiently to meet their needs [20]. When it does, it elicits trust and compliance [3]. But to get bureaucracy to meet their needs, students must pay a price, subordinating personal preferences to the bureaucracy's demands, standing in lines, accepting impersonal treatment, filling out required paperwork, following rules, and accepting staff guidance. Control does not come merely from having to take orders [8], but also from a complex apparatus of rules, physical barriers, records, indirect cues about proper behavior, and rewards for conformity and punishments for deviance [10, 25]. Adapting to these constraints can be unpleasant, so motivating clients to conform can be problematic [24].

Yet freshmen do in fact usually conform, even when inconvenienced or frustrated. The forces that produce their compliance form a complex, interactive system, which is especially persuasive for newcomers. Socialization teaches them to define bureaucracy as the normal and best way to accomplish complex tasks. For many, successful encounters with bureaucracy reinforce this view [20]. Freshmen often lack the previous experience or knowledge needed to visualize arrangements that might work better, and they do not see challenging the system as appropriate behavior for neophytes in a subordinate role. They see staff members as having authority, and they fear that challenging the system might cause staff to retaliate by withholding the information or help they need [3]. Although they may acknowledge minor flaws in the bureaucracy, staff are generally committed to the system that employs them and puts them in control of interaction. They communicate this commitment and their expectations to students, and they withhold cooperation from those who do not conform.

Faced with these conditions, it is very likely that most clients, especially organizational newcomers like college freshmen, will define bureaucracy as part of the natural order of things and as relatively efficient, viewing any problems they encounter as minor irritants or isolated incidents. The minority who encounter more serious difficulties often have more reservations and complaints about the bureaucracy, providing greater potential for conflict [24]. But these clients interpret and act on their experiences within the context of a larger group who define the bureaucracy as normal and efficient. Almost all respond by concluding that it is to their advantage to conform overtly to bureaucracy's demands, maintaining a compliant, cooperative front in their brief interactions with staff. They see conformity as a more promising path to their goals than protest. Staff members encourage and reward this behavior, and staff's willingness to make exceptions and overlook

minor rule violations helps to defuse some of the most serious conflicts. Freshmen who experience problems reduce their own anxiety and frustration by gathering information about how the bureaucracy works, by developing strategies to manipulate the system to get what they want, by blowing off steam in backstage settings, by seeking emotional support from family and friends, and by developing strategies for reducing frustration.

The result is a bureaucratic system that continues to elicit acceptance and cooperation from lower participants whom it sometimes does not serve well. Complaints are repressed or expressed only in muted terms. Freshmen fit their actions to bureaucratic constraints, and behavior flows through well-worn bureaucratic channels, even when they and staff define things differently [48]. So long as both groups follow bureaucratic procedures, the organization can continue to function.

As today's freshmen evolve into tomorrow's seniors, they often become more accustomed to the system, more adept at working within in, and a bit more willing to bend rules or complain. Nevertheless the definitions of situation and patterns of behavior laid down early persist at the university and are probably carried to new organizations — just as experiences from high school and early job experiences help to shape the definitions and behavior of freshmen.

The reactions of students who differ in age, gender, class, or regional background might depart in detail from our findings, but the pattern of conformity and acceptance reported here is apparent on many other campuses, as well as in other client- serving bureaucracies [25], and it outlived the student revolts of the 1960s and 1970s. Examination of its roots helps us to understand how bureaucracy endures despite tensions inherent in it, both on the university campus and beyond.

References

1. Argyris, C. "Selections from the Impact of Budgets on People." In *Organizations: Structure and Behavior,* edited by J. A. Litterer, pp. 251–263. New York: Wiley, 1952.
2. Argyris, C. *Personality and Organization.* New York: Harper, 1957.
3. Bidwell, C. E. "Students and Schools: Some Observations on Client Trust in Client-Serving Organizations." In *Organizations and Clients: Essays in the Sociology of Service*, edited by W. R. Rosengren and M. Lefton, pp. 37–69. Columbus, OH: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.
4. Blau, P. M. *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 1955.
5. Blumer, H. "Society as Symbolic Interaction." In *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology,* edited by J. Manis and B. Meltzer, pp. 145–153. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972.

6. Braverman, H. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975.
7. Dahrendorf, R. "Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis." *American Journal of Sociology*, 64 (September 1958), 115–127.
8. Dahrendorf, R. *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959.
9. Downs, A. *Inside Bureaucracy*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1966.
10. Edwards, R. *Contested Terrain*. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
11. Etzioni, A. *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*. New York: Free Press, 1975.
12. Glaser, B. G., and A. L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine, 1967
13. Goffman, E. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959.
14. Goffman, E. "The Interaction Order." *American Sociological Review*, 48 (February 1983), 1–17.
15. Gracey, H. "Learning the Student Role: Kindergarten as Academic Boot Camp." In *Readings in Introductory Sociology*, edited by D. Wrong and H. Gracey, pp. 347–361. New York: Macmillan, 1972.
16. Gulick, L. H. "Notes on the Theory of Organization." In *Classics of Public Administration*, edited by J. Shafritz and A. Hyde, pp. 80–89. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1992.
17. Hall, R. H. *Organizations: Structures, Processes, and Outcomes*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991.
18. Homans, G. C. *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.
19. Jackson, P. W. *Life in Classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968.
20. Katz, D., B. A. Gutek, R. L. Kahn, and E. Barton. *Bureaucratic Encounters: A Pilot Study in the Evaluation of Government Services*. Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, 1975.
21. Lauer, R. H. *Social Psychology*. Boston: Houghton Miflin, 1977.
22. Lawler, E. E. III, and J. G. Rhodes. *Information and Control in Organizations*. Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear, 1976.
23. Lawrence, P. R., and J. W. Lorsch. *Organization and Environment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967
24. Lefton, M. "Client Characteristics and Structural Outcomes: Toward Specification of Linkages." In *Organizations and Clients: Essays in the Sociology of Service*, edited by W. R. Rosengren and M. Lefton, pp. 17–36. Columbus, OH: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.
25. Lipsky, M. *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980.
26. Mann, L. "Queue Culture: The Waiting Line as a Social System." *American Journal of Sociology*, 75 (November 1969), 340–354.
27. March, J. G., and H. A. Simon. *Organizations*. New York: John Wiley, 1958.

28. Mechanic, D. "Sources of Power of Lower Participants in Complex Organizations." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 7 (December 1962), 349–364
29. Merton, R. K. "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality." In *Social Theory and Social Structure*, by R. K. Merton, pp. 249–261. New York: Free Press, 1968.
30. Milgram, S., H. J. Liberty, R. Toledo, and J. Wackenhut. "Response to Intrusion into Waiting Lines." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51 (1986), 683–689.
31. Miller, D. C., and W. H. Form. *Industrial Sociology: Work in Organizational Life*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.
32. Mintzberg, H. *The Structuring of Organizations: A Synthesis of the Research*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979.
33. Pascarella, E. T., and P. T. Terenzini. *How College Affects Students: Insights from Twenty Years of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992.
34. Parelius, R. J., and A. P. Parelius. *The Sociology of Education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987.
35. Perrow, C. *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1986.
36. Perrow, C. "A Framework for the Analysis of Organizations." *American Sociological Review*, 32 (April, 1967), 194–208.
37. Pfeffer, J. *Power in Organizations*. London: Pitman Publishing, 1981.
38. Presthus, R. *The Organizational Society*. New York: St. Martin's, 1978.
39. Rosengren, W. R. "The Social Economics of Membership." In *Organizations and Clients: Essays in the Sociology of Service*, edited by W. R. Rosengren and M. Lefton, pp. 205–222. Columbus, OH: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.
40. Ryan, W. *Blaming the Victim*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.
41. Stryker, S. *Symbolic Interactionism*. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1980.
42. Susser, I. *Norman Street*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
43. Thomas, W. I. "The Definition of the Situation," In *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology*, edited by J. Manis and B. Meltzer, pp. 331–336. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972.
44. Thompson, V. A. *Modern Organizations*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961.
45. Van Maanen J. "Organizational Socialization." In *Handbook of Work Organization and Society*, edited by R. Dubin, pp. 67–130. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976.
46. Vaughan, T. R., and G. Sjoberg. "The Individual and the Bureaucracy: An Alternative Median Interpretation." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 20 (January 1984) 57–69.
47. Weber, M. 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
48. Weik, K. *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.
49. Wilensky, H. *Organizational Intelligence*. New York: Basic Books, 1967.
50. Woodward, J. *Industrial Organization: Theory and Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.