University administration

OK, be honest. How many of you out there wouldn’t love to have the ability to cast a spell over the administrators at your university so that they will leave you alone and let you get your work done? I’m not talking about the nice people downstairs who process your orders or help you with your FEDEX packages. No, I am talking about the tie wearers who sit in that big fancy building across the street and tell you constantly about all of the things you aren’t allowed to do any more or the new rules they have decided to impose on us all. Those are the ones I would like to turn into toads and then perhaps apply a little genetic modification so that they grow extra big warts. Granted, most of the ones we academics deal with on a day-to-day basis are probably not the prime culprits, but someone in a big office out there must be responsible (maybe even the government?) for all of these silly rules and forms to fill in.

For example, I was recently awarded a grant; the application took a year from start to finish and required detailed justification of all of the resources needed, including the staff and job descriptions. I asked for, and was awarded, a rather high-level technical person to run projects in the lab and to do sophisticated biochemical and biophysical experiments. In order to comply with the university policy, I went to the personnel office to get all of the relevant forms to advertise this new post. I filled in the job description, roughly summarizing what I had written in the grant, only to be told that this post didn’t sound very ‘high level’ and that the salary would be downgraded by about 30%. Hang on, didn’t I just produce a peer-reviewed grant proposal that convinced a funding body that I needed a high-level person? How can non-scientist administrators at the university claim to know more about my real requirements than those who awarded the grant? “Ahhhh,” you say, “You must be new at this, you need to learn how to play the game.” So, I write a new justification in which the technical post is now elevated to God- or Goddess-like status and will run multiple departmental facilities, invent new equipment, write computer programmes and sing and dance to keep the lab safe, happy and motivated. But what, exactly, was the point of this? Why re-justify the position that I had already made a case for? I totally fail to understand what the university hopes to gain by trying to downgrade all of its technical staff to the point that they receive poverty-level wages. Sure, they might save a little money in the short-term, but in this case they will lose money because the funding body pays 46% overheads! So what is the point? Perhaps the tie is adjusted a bit too tightly today.

I learn from my friends at other universities that I am not alone in this. All universities apparently have administrators who claim to know what
is best for us all. They have ‘secret’ job description files that they won’t show us, and they compare these…ahem…well thought-out criteria - such as this verbatim quotation from one such leaked document: “Often has to deal with problems or situations requiring thought or choosing solutions” - with our proposals to see how much we can pay our staff. I’m sorry, but any group who has to sit around a table and vote on whether my technician will have to deal with “situations requiring thought”, but doesn’t understand the description of the post that I’ve written in my grant proposal really needs a sleeping spell cast on them for at least 100 years. And when they talk about “choosing solutions” does that mean choosing between, say, 1 M NaCl and 8 M urea? Or perhaps I am being idealistic and naïve. Perhaps we really need these job criteria to keep everything fair at work. What if, for example, two people did almost the same job and got paid different wages? Or even worse, what if one person frequently was in situations requiring “thought or choosing solutions” and got less pay than someone who could leave their brain at home on a shelf all day? Hmmmmm. As an independently funded research scientist, I get paid a lot less than most administrators.

Another example that is likely to spark a lot of controversy is university safety policy. Someone out there is deciding that we need to fill in a lot of forms - perhaps more forms than pages in our notebooks describing experiments that we are doing. What are they for? To protect us? Hardly. We could think about jumping into the stack of risk-assessment forms and hiding if dangerous microbes escape in the lab, but that’s about all those forms would do for us in a real crisis. To protect the university from legal actions? Probably. I have worked in a few places in a few countries, and always it’s the same story with safety. Cover your backside by leaving a big paper trail. I am not saying that we don’t have to have a coherent policy and be safe in the lab. Just the opposite. I think that we actually make labs more unsafe by making the safety regulations so labour intensive that they become a joke and a chore to be avoided. If, instead, the policy had something to do with the real needs of the scientists, it could be very beneficial and would probably be welcomed by many researchers.

For example, I am supposed to fill in descriptions of the risks of every hazardous chemical that is used in my lab. OK, that sounds fair enough until you think about it: the hazards are written on the bottle of each chemical! Why does it need to be re-recorded in each lab in each university? Why don’t we all just read the label? Why doesn’t the university read the label for us and write down the hazards of everything it orders by downloading the forms that accompany each chemical ordered? It would be much simpler than my trying to assess the risk of fixing my cells in ethanol before going for a drink (to fix my brain) on a Friday night.

I am also supposed to assess the risk of genetically modified organisms created in my lab. This sounds very noble, but what does it really mean? Who can tell the effects of expressing activated oncogenes in bacteria and then dumping them down the sink? Oh, of course we add bleach to them first, but what about the little spot that spilled on the floor that I walked in and tracked all over the campus? Oh, I forgot, nothing is ever supposed to spill in the lab, because we are all perfectly safe. Whew! I feel better knowing that. Let’s be honest. We don’t think that any of the organisms we modify in the lab are harmful, or we wouldn’t be bathing in them daily when we do our five-litre preps. We count on natural selection and competition with the ‘wild type’ to quickly destroy any such organisms that might stick to our shoes inadvertently. Luckily for us, this seems to work. Otherwise, I guarantee that none of us scientist types would be around any more, and the world would be teeming with even more mutants than are already employed at my university.

Of course I realise that this entire rant is a big fantasy - we will always have to deal with administrators and rules and forms, and it really doesn’t matter that we find them ridiculous! In some cases, although I find this very hard to admit, some of this stuff probably does do some good. But, as always, the important question is ‘Is there anything that can be done about any of it?’ Firstly, we can at least try to take our rants out of the coffee room and say what we think to a lot more people. One of the problems with scientists is that we are so busy - we run meetings, review papers, give talks, supervise students, give lectures, and some of the lucky ones even do experiments! By making our schedules so full, and demanding so much of each other, we prevent ourselves from having the time to get involved in government or university policy. We keep our heads down and just try to avoid those committees. A few of the superhuman ones among us who don’t need to sleep manage to get involved in science policy and do the rest of us a huge service. However, I don’t think that we will change this pattern unless some rewards are given to scientists who make administrative and policy contributions. Those rewards could be from research funding bodies, who could fund projects to improve relations between scientists, government and administration. Rewards could also come from the government (!) to universities to promote an active role of scientists in making policy. Scientists also need some power to deal with administrators. These ‘rules’ that take away the money from our grants and make us write ridiculous job descriptions should not come into effect - they are harmful to us and to universities. Until some big rewards are offered, however, I am firmly resolved to hide in my office and avoid all “situations that require thought or choosing solutions.”

The Wicked Witch of the West