Changes in higher education are requiring academic units to take on new tasks that were once handled by central administrators. These “administrative mandates,” which Stephen Majeski, political science department chair at the University of Washington, describes as “temporary or new permanent tasks that departments, programs, or centers must accomplish that are not accompanied by additional resources,” are forcing academic leaders to devise new or additional strategies without compromising the primary functions of their units.

The prevalence of administrative mandates is a function of four factors, Majeski says:

- budget cuts
- decentralization
- increasing accountability
- competition for resources

As budgets become tighter, administrators look for ways to improve efficiency. One way is to decentralize some administrative tasks. Technology has enabled academic units to take on tasks like payroll and travel, grants and contract administration, class scheduling, and web support, Majeski says.

“Payroll used to be done at the administrative level. Now basically everything is web-driven, but there has to be information inputted and processed, and that now takes place at the department level, at least at our institution,” Majeski says. The goal is to reduce central administration costs, “which is politically advantageous,” Majeski says. “No administrator wants a bloated central administration. That’s a bad use of resources.”

Another area of expanding administrative task is in producing reports for various stakeholders. As tuition rises, legislators, students, parents, donors, taxpayers, and others are demanding more accountability from academic units. “That’s completely legitimate,” Majeski says. “We live in a political environment. There are a lot of stakeholders in higher education, and they have a right to have some sense of what’s going on in [departments]. And there needs to be some mechanism to respond and to demonstrate accountability.”
Accountability is increasing the number of reports academic units must produce, including annual reports, diversity studies, faculty hiring reports, curriculum revision plans and procedures, and course and curriculum assessment, among others. For the most part, faculty see accountability requirements as an additional burden rather than a threat. If they complain about it, it’s usually about having to take more time to fill out paperwork. “However, they would feel threatened if the process affects in some fundamental way how they did their job or took a little bit away from academic freedom,” Majeski says.

Another area that is increasingly becoming another departmental task is development. “Donors want to give to things that excite them, and it’s not a development person who is going to get them excited about that. It’s actual people who are doing the interesting research,” Majeski says.

This means that departments need to have more direct contact with donors and potential donors through things like newsletters and events. “It takes time for faculty, the chair, and staff to be engaged in these things. There’s a big payoff, hopefully, but these are new tasks for many of us, and we don’t have additional financial or administrative support typically to do this,” Majeski says.

With reduced budgets, departments are finding that they are competing with each other for faculty lines, teaching-assistant allocations, graduate fellowships, computer equipment, and lab and office space. With this competition comes an increase in the amount of work advocating for your unit. “Departments have to invest more effort in making a good case and arguing for those resources. A one-page justification for a new faculty position becomes five pages because you know that’s a very valuable resource and your colleagues have good arguments and reasons as well,” Majeski says.

With all of the additional responsibilities, academic leaders need to prioritize to help their units make the most of limited resources. “You may be asked to write all kinds of reports. And you can write two kinds: You can write a report that answers all the appropriate questions, marshals all the data, and does a perfunctory job without going overboard because it’s not something that’s valuable to you or your department. If it’s something that you and your colleagues think is really valuable, that’s what you invest your effort in; that’s where you write that long, persuasive report. It’s not that you’re doing a shabby job on the others. It’s just that you’ve got to decide because you can’t write the best, most persuasive report for everything that comes down the pike,” Majeski says.

“Department chairs usually cannot comply with administrative mandates without help from faculty and staff, but their time needs to be protected,” Majeski says. “Most chairs have an innate belief that they’re in this position to absorb a lot of the administrative overhead, to protect their colleagues so they can teach and do research and do the other things expected of them. But if you overprotect them, you end up not dealing with the issues at hand and sort of driving yourself crazy.”
This means that although delegation is important, there needs to be an organized approach that gives faculty and staff adequate training. And while some administrative mandates might seem excessive or pointless, refusing to do them will not help your case with the administration. Instead, you need to band together with colleagues in other departments if a requirement is more than the departments can handle, and work on solutions through the governance process.

Although administrative mandates require departments to perform more administrative tasks, more autonomy often comes with the added responsibilities. “Lots of administrators talk about decentralization as empowering departments. They say, ‘You have a lot of work to do, and we’re going to give you the authority and ability to make more decisions.’ That’s a line that most administrators give. A lot of them deliver that but not always. My argument is that the more work we have to do, if we have the ability to decide for ourselves how to accomplish things, we’re probably going to be in a better position to use those resources more effectively.”

Contact Stephen Majeski at majesi@u.washington.edu.