

UNRAVELING ADMINISTRATIVE BLOAT:
DRIVERS AND IMPLICATIONS IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

Administrative bloat in higher education has raised concerns about its impact on institutional finances, academic quality, and resource allocation. This thesis examines the primary drivers of administrative growth in select U.S. universities over the past two decades and analyzes its implications within the higher education landscape. Employing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative analysis of institutional data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is complemented by qualitative insights gained from interviews with administrators, faculty, and students.

The study identifies multifaceted drivers contributing to administrative bloat, shedding light on organizational behavior and resource allocation patterns. While compliance demands and expanding student services have been acknowledged as contributing factors, this research aims to comprehensively explore additional drivers that have not been adequately addressed in existing literature. Through interviews, diverse perspectives from stakeholders within universities are integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Findings are expected to contribute to filling gaps in the literature, offering insights into the implications of administrative bloat on institutional finances, academic quality, and resource distribution within higher education. The thesis aims to provide actionable recommendations for optimizing administrative efficiency without compromising educational quality. Ultimately, this study seeks to inform policymakers, university administrators, and stakeholders about strategies to address administrative bloat and enhance the effectiveness of higher education institutions.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alejandro J. Ramos, an MPA candidate at Cornell University's Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, holds the Brooks Public Policy Fellowship. With a strong foundation in political science and Spanish from Sacred Heart University, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude, Alejandro has demonstrated academic excellence and a deep commitment to public policy and education.

As the founder and executive director of the Ramos Research Institute, Alejandro leads a team dedicated to impactful research in public policy, particularly focusing on civic education policy and voting behaviors. His work emphasizes strategic planning and collaboration with various stakeholders to enhance policy formulation and implementation.

Alejandro's research experience is complemented by his involvement in teaching and leadership roles. He has served as a teaching assistant at both Sacred Heart University and Cornell University, guiding students in Constitutional Law, Public Administration, and other public policy-related courses. His leadership skills are further highlighted through his roles as Editor-in-Chief of the Cornell Policy Review and previous executive president of the student government at Sacred Heart University, where he led significant organizational transformations.

His academic pursuits are enriched by his active participation in conferences, publications, and community engagement initiatives, demonstrating a well-rounded approach to his field of study. This thesis reflects his dedication to understanding and solving complex issues in higher education administration.

Upon completing his MPA, Alejandro aims to continue influencing public policy through thoughtful research and effective policy advocacy, with a particular focus on improving educational systems and outcomes.

To my family and loved ones—thank you for your unwavering support and boundless encouragement. Your belief in me has carried me through every challenge and triumph.

To Drs. Laura and Derek Cabrera—thank you for seeing potential in me, for challenging me, and for making my time at Cornell more than just an academic journey. You helped me grow into a more thoughtful student, a more grounded person, and above all, a systems thinker.

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PREFACE

The rise of the administrative bureaucracy in higher education: growth or bloat? I would have never thought that I would select this topic for my MPA thesis. As I write this, I have been a full-time student at three distinct institutions: a small public college in New Jersey, a midsize private Catholic university in Connecticut, and a large research Ivy League institution in New York. Additionally, I have attended several other universities as a visiting student. At each institution, I became intimately involved with its mission and hierarchical structure.

I am both an observer and a curious individual. At my first institution in New Jersey, students often remarked that there seemed to be more "adults in suits" on campus than students. This observation did not refer to the faculty but to the staff members and administrators whose roles we, as freshmen, never quite understood.

After transferring from my first institution, I found myself in Connecticut at an institution that truly captured my heart. As an active member of the community—some might argue, too involved—I learned everything I needed to know about being successful by understanding the people and the institution's structure. Within a year, I was elected to the highest position a student holds on campus, and I made it a point to attend every meeting I could as the voice of the student body. My peers and I often questioned the roles of the various (associate/assistant/executive/senior) (director/vice president/coordinator/dean/provost) positions. For instance, while we understood the tasks of a university president, provost, and president's cabinet, the specific duties of each of the 14 vice presidents, and those below them, remained unclear. As a comparative learner, I found that most other institutions were not much different, if not worse.

After graduating with my bachelor's degree, I moved on to pursue my MPA in New York, concentrating in government, politics, and policy with a focus on education policy. Here, I often felt just as confused about finding the right person to address specific issues. Despite the tight-knit community of my school, one of the smallest at the university, I still found myself "lost" a year into my program. Identifying the staff member or administrator responsible for each specific program became an ongoing challenge.

Participating in several hiring processes, similar to those I experienced in Connecticut, sparked further questions. Some hires were for roles vacated due to retirements or departures, while others were for newly created positions or lateral moves within the school. This made sense to me, as my policy school was relatively new and required a robust administrative structure to support its undergraduate and graduate programs, including two well-established master's programs and a PhD program. However, my curiosity led me to investigate whether other universities with more established policy schools of the same caliber followed similar practices.

I set notifications on several schools' career pages for administrative roles within their policy schools and observed that many individuals transitioned to new positions within the same program or school, often to lateral or slightly elevated roles. This trend puzzled me. While it was logical for my relatively new school to build its administrative capacity, why were older, well-established schools doing the same? These were purely administrative roles, with no dual responsibilities as faculty members.

My interest in education policy and this topic was further fueled by my belief that education is the key to solving many societal issues. This conviction led me to pursue my MPA, where I have focused on understanding how administrative bloat impacts higher education. An article from the Wall Street Journal on the rising cost of higher education at Auburn University, which became one

of the most expensive public universities in the country within 14 years, piqued my interest (Fuller et al. 2023). For this thesis, I use Auburn as a case study along with three other institutions.

As much as I would have loved to focus my case studies and research on institutions I have attended, I believed that it would be a breach of my own moral and ethical code since I had an inside look at their functions as a student leader. Instead, I selected Auburn University (Auburn, Alabama), Columbia College (Columbia, South Carolina), Fairfield University (Fairfield, Connecticut), and Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts) as my case studies. These institutions are peers of those I have attended, ensuring a fair and balanced comparison.

The proliferation of associate and assistant deans is so notable that it warranted the creation of a popular social media account on X (formerly Twitter), Associate Deans (@ass_deans), in 2014, with over 127 thousand followers. Its biography reads, “Making fun of middle management in colleges and universities. Because you can never have too many associate deans conspiring to be THE dean (Deans, Associate [@ass_deans] 2014).” This account, through humor, highlights a significant issue within academia, reflecting the growing concern over the necessity and impact of these roles. It underscores the widespread perception that administrative growth has reached an excessive level, prompting a critical examination of its implications.

In the wake of President Biden's decision not to compete for his party's nomination, a tweet by Matt Dinan humorously remarked, “Wait, if Biden steps down how do we know the provost won't just replace him with 3-4 adjunct presidents? (Matt Dinan [@second_sailing] 2024)” Although these X accounts are meant for comedic effect, they highlight underlying issues worthy of exploration. The rise of adjunct faculty is another topic closely related to administrative bloat. An article by Dan Edmonds in Forbes highlighted the significant increase in contingent faculty from 1975 to 2011, raising concerns about the quality of education and financial sustainability.

In 1975, 30 percent of college faculty were part-time. By 2011, 51 percent of college faculty were part-time, and another 19 percent were non-tenure track, full-time employees. In other words, 70 percent were contingent faculty, a broad classification that includes all non-tenure track faculty (NTTF), whether they work full-time or part-time (Edmonds 2015).

This shift underscores a broader trend within higher education towards cost-cutting measures that may undermine the stability and quality of academic instruction, further complicating the landscape of administrative and faculty roles within universities.

Through this thesis, I aim to understand how these aspects of the academy affect students both financially and in terms of educational quality. By delving into this topic, I hope to contribute to a more balanced and sustainable approach to higher education administration, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge and learning remains at the forefront.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the United States stands at a crossroads, shaped increasingly by a phenomenon known as administrative bloat. Traditionally, academia evokes images of faculty immersed in scholarship, students in ivy-covered halls, and a lean administrative staff maintaining university operations (Harvard University, n.d.). Over the past two decades, however, administrative positions have surged (Gordon 2013).

Defined as the rapid expansion of administrative roles relative to faculty and enrollment, administrative bloat raises fundamental questions about the purpose and necessity of such growth (Friedman & Friedman 2018). The term implies excess—suggesting that this expansion may exceed institutional needs.

Between 1993 and 2007, the number of full-time administrators per 100 students at America’s leading universities grew by 39 percent, while the number of employees engaged in teaching, research or service only grew by 18 percent. Inflation-adjusted spending on administration per student increased by 61 percent during the same period, while instructional spending per student rose 39 percent. Arizona State University, for example, increased the number of administrators per 100 students by 94 percent during this period while reducing the number of employees engaged in instruction, research and service by 2 percent. Nearly half of all full-time employees at Arizona State University are administrators (Greene, Kisida, and Mills 2010).

Understanding the evolution and role of administrative growth is critical for examining the structural challenges facing higher education. This study lays the groundwork for investigating the

drivers, implications, and potential solutions to administrative bloat—a growing concern for institutional effectiveness and sustainability.

Background and Context

The growth of U.S. higher education has long mirrored societal change and innovation. Traditionally, administrative expansion supported academic missions. However, in recent decades, administrative roles have grown at rates outpacing student and faculty increases (Gordon 2013; Greene et al. 2010; Williamson et al. 2018). Critics argue this trend diverts resources from teaching and research, adds bureaucracy, and undermines governance structures (Rhoades 1998; Kraatz et al. 2010; Selznick 1994, 2011).

Some justify this growth due to compliance, student services, and technology. Others view it as costly redundancy (Greene 2021; Lund Dean et al. 2020). Regardless of position, the implications are profound—affecting finances, governance, and student experience.

This thesis investigates administrative bloat at select U.S. universities over the past two decades. By examining both drivers and effects, it contributes to discussions on striking a balance between administrative support and academic priorities.

Statement of the Problem

Administrative bloat has emerged as a central concern in higher education. The unchecked expansion of administrative roles poses risks to institutional finances, academic quality, and governance. As universities confront rising costs and shifting priorities, understanding this phenomenon becomes essential.

Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to explore the complexity of administrative bloat by identifying key drivers and examining its consequences. It addresses:

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1. What are the primary drivers contributing to administrative bloat within select U.S. universities over the past two decades?
2. How has administrative bloat affected institutional finances and resource allocation within higher education institutions?
3. What strategies or recommendations can be proposed to optimize administrative efficiency without compromising educational quality?

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach combines quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate administrative bloat.

Quantitative Analysis

Data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) provides insight into trends in staffing, enrollment, and spending. Regression and trend analysis will identify growth patterns and correlations.

Qualitative Insights

Semi-structured interviews with administrators, faculty, and students from select universities will capture perceptions of administrative growth and its institutional impacts. Thematic analysis will identify recurring patterns and concerns.

Economic Framework

Drawing on economic theories—such as the Theory of the Firm and Agency Theory—this study analyzes the incentives and trade-offs behind administrative decisions. Sustien’s Sludge Framework will evaluate opportunity costs and resource misallocation.

Data Integration and Triangulation

Quantitative and qualitative findings will be triangulated to deepen understanding and strengthen validity. This integration ensures a comprehensive perspective on the issue.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to Cornell IRB protocols (IRB0148879). Participation is voluntary and confidential. All ethical standards for human subjects research are upheld.

Limitations

While the sample aims to be diverse, findings may not generalize across all institutions. Interview responses may also be influenced by recall bias. Nonetheless, the study offers valuable insight into administrative bloat's complexity.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to offer critical insights for multiple stakeholders within the higher education community. As universities grapple with the need to balance fiscal responsibility, academic excellence, and student-centric services, understanding the nuanced dimensions of administrative bloat becomes imperative. Policymakers, university administrators, faculty, students, and researchers will benefit from the empirical insights generated by this study. By uncovering the underlying factors contributing to administrative growth and assessing its impact, the research contributes to informed decision-making, fostering discussions on optimizing the delicate equilibrium between administrative efficiency and academic priorities.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Administrative bloat in higher education has emerged as a pressing issue, characterized by the disproportionate growth of administrative roles and costs compared to faculty and instructional expenditures. This phenomenon has significant implications for institutional finances, academic quality, and resource allocation. As universities expand their administrative staff and services, they often face criticism for diverting resources away from core academic functions. The increasing administrative costs have been linked to higher tuition fees, which in turn burden students and their families, raising concerns about the affordability and accessibility of higher education.

Defining and Quantifying Administrative Bloat

Administrative bloat refers to the excessive growth of administrative staff and associated costs in higher education institutions, often outpacing the growth of faculty and student numbers. This trend is quantified by examining the ratio of administrative staff to faculty, the proportion of the budget allocated to administrative costs versus instructional expenses, and the overall growth in administrative expenditures over time.

Koch (2019) explores this issue in his book, *The Impoverishment of the American College Student*, where he highlights that administrative positions have grown at a faster rate than student enrollment, contributing significantly to the rising costs of higher education. He points out that the number of administrative positions increased by 60% between 1993 and 2009, compared to a 40% increase in student enrollment during the same period. This disproportionate growth has led to a higher administrative-to-student ratio, which raises questions about the efficiency and necessity of such a large administrative workforce.

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Similarly, a report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni reveals that non-instructional spending, including administration and student services, has increased more rapidly than instructional spending, leading to higher tuition fees without corresponding improvements in graduation rates (2021). The report indicates that from 2001 to 2011, administrative spending¹ grew by 28% per student, compared to an 18% increase in instructional spending per student. This disparity suggests that a significant portion of the increased funding for higher education is being diverted to non-instructional and administrative functions rather than directly benefiting students' educational experiences.

Quantifying administrative bloat also involves examining the specific roles and functions of administrative staff. Studies have shown that the expansion of roles related to compliance, student services, and technology management are major contributors to administrative growth. For instance, the proliferation of compliance-related positions is driven by increasing federal and state regulations, which require detailed reporting and oversight. Similarly, the growth in student services, such as mental health counseling and career advising, reflects a broader trend towards providing more holistic support to students but these roles, while student-facing, are often classified as non-instructional and included in analyses of administrative spending.

¹ Note: The report referenced above uses the below description for administrative spending.

Administrative spending refers to what institutions report as institutional support, defined by NCES as “the day-to-day operational support of the institution. [This] includes expenses for general administrative services, central executive-level activities concerned with management and long-range planning, legal and fiscal operations . . . and public relations and development.”

Institutional support does not include items such as parking facilities, housing, or food services (reported as auxiliary enterprises). Expenses for operating a hospital are reported as a separate category and are not included in the institutional support category, with a few exceptions. IPEDS, “2020–21 Data Collection System: View Glossary.”

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For the purposes of this analysis, administrative spending includes occupations such as Student and Academic Affairs Management, Office and Administrative Support, Business and Financial Operations, and Public Service, among others listed in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). This distinction is important because these roles, though essential, provide different types of benefits than instructional faculty and thus must be considered separately when evaluating cost growth in higher education.

By defining and quantifying administrative bloat, researchers can better understand its scope and impact on higher education institutions. This understanding is crucial for developing strategies to address the inefficiencies and redirect resources towards enhancing the quality of education.

Drivers of Administrative Bloat

Several factors have been identified as primary drivers of administrative bloat in higher education:

1. Increased Regulatory and Compliance Requirements

Government regulations and accreditation processes require extensive documentation and administrative oversight, contributing to the growth of administrative roles. Zeppos and Kirwan (2015) in their commissioned study on the cost of federal regulatory compliance estimate that compliance costs for U.S. higher education institutions amounted to \$27 billion in 2014, significantly burdening administrative budgets. These regulations often demand detailed reporting and continuous monitoring, which necessitate a dedicated administrative workforce. Furthermore, as federal and state regulations evolve, the complexity and volume of compliance tasks increase, adding to the administrative load.

2. Expansion of Student Services

The increase in services such as mental health counseling, career advising, and diversity programs necessitates additional administrative staff. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2023) report found that spending on student services grew by 29% from 2010 to 2018, reflecting the increasing emphasis on non-academic support services. This growth is driven by the recognition that comprehensive student services enhance student retention and success. However, these services require significant administrative support, from program development to service delivery and evaluation.

3. Technological Advancements

The proliferation of information technology in education, including online learning platforms, cybersecurity, and data management, requires specialized administrative roles. Greene (2019) highlights in "The 2019 Campus Computing Survey" that significant resources are allocated to IT services, contributing to administrative cost increases. As institutions adopt more sophisticated technologies, the need for IT support staff grows. These roles are essential for maintaining infrastructure, ensuring data security, and providing technical support to faculty, staff, and students.

4. Institutional Growth and Competition

Universities' efforts to attract more students and enhance their reputation led to increased administrative spending on marketing, recruitment, and program expansion. McClure and Titus (2018) found that public research universities pursuing higher prestige tend to increase administrative expenditures significantly. The competition for students, particularly in an era of declining enrollment in some regions, drives institutions to invest heavily in marketing and

recruitment efforts. Additionally, expanding academic programs and facilities requires administrative oversight and coordination.

5. Increased Demands for Accountability and Performance Measurement

The reliance on data analytics and outcomes assessment requires additional administrative staff to manage these processes. Weinstein (2023) discusses how the push for greater accountability and performance measurement in higher education has contributed to administrative expansion. Institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness and efficiency, often through complex data collection and reporting mechanisms. This focus on accountability, while important, can lead to the growth of administrative roles dedicated to these tasks.

6. Corporate Management Practices

The adoption of corporate management models in higher education has led to the creation of multiple layers of oversight and increased administrative costs. Bergmann (1991) criticizes the trend of universities adopting business-like practices, arguing that it leads to unnecessary bureaucratic expansion. This approach often includes hiring managers with corporate backgrounds who implement hierarchical structures and performance metrics similar to those in the business world. While these practices can improve efficiency, they can also contribute to administrative bloat if not carefully managed.

7. Fundraising and Development

The need for dedicated administrative staff to manage fundraising, alumni relations, and grant administration has also contributed to administrative bloat. Cheslock et al. (2016) note that the growth in administrative positions related to development and fundraising is a significant factor in rising non-instructional costs. As universities increasingly rely on private donations and grants to

supplement their budgets, the infrastructure to support these efforts has expanded. This includes roles focused on donor relations, grant writing, and event planning.

8. Complexity of Financial Aid Management

Managing complex financial aid programs and scholarships necessitates additional administrative support. A report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2023) highlights the administrative burden of managing financial aid, including compliance with federal regulations, verification processes, and student advising. The growing complexity of these programs requires a dedicated staff to ensure that students receive the financial support they need while maintaining compliance with regulations.

Impacts of Administrative Bloat

Administrative bloat has several notable impacts on higher education institutions:

1. Financial Strain

The growth in administrative costs places a significant financial burden on institutions, often leading to higher tuition fees. Koch (2019) argues that this inefficient allocation of resources contributes to rising tuition costs, making higher education less affordable. As administrative costs rise, institutions must find ways to cover these expenses, often by increasing tuition and fees. This can exacerbate the financial strain on students and their families, potentially limiting access to higher education.

2. Academic Quality

The diversion of resources from instructional to administrative functions can negatively impact academic quality. Bergmann (1991) contends that administrative expansion diverts resources away from teaching and research, undermining the core academic mission of universities. When funds are allocated to administrative roles instead of faculty positions, the student-to-faculty ratio can

increase, affecting the quality of education and the availability of faculty for research and mentorship.

3. Resource Allocation

Administrative bloat affects the distribution of resources within institutions, leading to inefficiencies and reduced support for core academic activities. Delucchi et al. (2021) in their study on bureaucratic dynamics in higher education discuss how the expansion of administrative roles can lead to an imbalance in resource allocation. This can result in insufficient funding for essential academic programs and support services, potentially impacting student success and institutional effectiveness.

4. Organizational Culture

The growth of administrative staff can alter the organizational culture of higher education institutions. Bergmann (1991) notes that as universities adopt more bureaucratic structures, the focus shifts from academic freedom and innovation to compliance and efficiency. This shift can affect faculty morale and engagement, as well as the overall mission and values of the institution.

5. Impact on Innovation

Excessive administrative oversight can stifle innovation in higher education. McClure and Titus (2018) suggest that the pursuit of prestige and the resulting administrative expansion can lead to a more rigid and less dynamic organizational environment. This can hinder the ability of faculty and staff to experiment with new teaching methods, research initiatives, and student support programs.

Existing Studies and Gaps in Literature

Despite the extensive research on administrative bloat, several gaps remain in the literature. Most studies focus on quantifying the growth of administrative staff and costs, but fewer investigate the specific impacts on academic quality and student outcomes. Additionally, while

some research explores the drivers of administrative growth, there is a need for more in-depth analyses of how these factors interact and influence each other.

For example, there is limited research on the role of institutional culture in fostering administrative bloat. Understanding how organizational norms and values contribute to the expansion of administrative roles could provide insights into how to address this issue. Moreover, existing studies often overlook the perspectives of faculty and students, who are directly affected by administrative decisions. Incorporating their viewpoints could enhance the understanding of the broader impacts of administrative bloat.

Another gap in the literature is the lack of comparative studies across different types of institutions. Most research focuses on large public universities, but smaller colleges and private institutions may face different challenges and dynamics related to administrative growth. Comparative studies could identify best practices and strategies that are effective in various contexts.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze administrative bloat comprehensively, it is essential to employ a robust theoretical framework. This review adopts a multi-theoretical approach, integrating elements of organizational theory, resource dependence theory, and institutional theory.

Organizational Theory

Organizational theory provides a framework for understanding how institutions function and evolve. It emphasizes the importance of organizational structure, culture, and processes in shaping behavior and outcomes. This theory can help explain how administrative roles proliferate within universities and the impact of bureaucratic expansion on institutional efficiency and effectiveness (Mintzberg 1989; Scott and Davis 2015).

Resource Dependence Theory

Resource dependence theory focuses on how organizations manage their dependencies on external resources. In the context of higher education, this theory can explain how universities respond to external pressures such as regulatory requirements, funding constraints, and competitive dynamics. Understanding these dependencies can shed light on why institutions expand their administrative functions and how they allocate resources (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory examines how organizations conform to social norms, regulations, and cultural expectations. This theory is relevant for analyzing how universities adopt corporate management practices and other trends that contribute to administrative growth. Institutional theory can also provide insights into how institutions balance the demands of accountability and performance measurement with their academic missions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Economic Frameworks: Sustien's Sludge Framework

Sustien's Sludge Framework will be employed to evaluate the opportunity costs associated with administrative bloat and explore potential trade-offs between administrative efficiency and academic quality. This framework is crucial for understanding the economic implications of administrative bloat, including the hidden costs and inefficiencies that arise from excessive bureaucracy. By applying this framework, the study quantifies the opportunity costs of administrative growth, highlighting areas where resources could be more effectively allocated to enhance academic quality and student outcomes (Sunstein 2022).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives and economic frameworks, this review provides a comprehensive analysis of administrative bloat in higher education. This approach

allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex factors driving administrative growth and the broader implications for institutions and stakeholders.

Potential Solutions to Administrative Bloat

Addressing administrative bloat requires a multifaceted approach:

1. Policy Interventions

Policymakers can craft regulations and funding models that incentivize efficiency and accountability in higher education administration. Cheslock et al. (2016) suggest that reducing barriers for private institutions to access public funding and subsidizing administrative cost-saving measures could help mitigate administrative bloat. Implementing policies that limit the growth of administrative positions relative to faculty can ensure a more balanced allocation of resources.

2. Cultural Shift

Institutions need to prioritize educational quality and student outcomes over administrative expansion. Bergmann (1991) advocates for a cultural shift within higher education institutions to focus on core academic missions and reduce unnecessary administrative layers. This involves fostering a culture of collaboration and shared governance, where faculty and administrators work together to achieve institutional goals. By prioritizing academic excellence and student success, institutions can ensure that resources are directed toward their primary mission.

3. Stakeholder Engagement

Involving faculty in administrative decisions and fostering collaboration between academic and administrative units can help mitigate administrative bloat. Romanowski and Karkouti (2022) emphasize the importance of faculty involvement in accreditation processes to balance standardization with academic freedom. Engaging faculty in decision-making processes can

provide valuable insights and help ensure that administrative practices support, rather than hinder, the academic mission of the institution.

4. Technology and Process Improvements

Adopting technology and process improvements can streamline administrative tasks and reduce the need for excessive administrative staff. Greene (2019) suggests that efficient IT management and strategic investments in technology can help control administrative costs. By leveraging technology to automate routine tasks, institutions can improve efficiency and reduce the administrative burden on staff. Additionally, implementing process improvements, such as streamlined workflows and better coordination among departments, can enhance productivity and reduce redundancies.

5. Periodic Review and Assessment

Regularly reviewing and assessing administrative roles and functions can help identify areas of inefficiency and opportunities for cost savings. Cheslock et al. (2016) recommend conducting periodic audits of administrative processes to ensure that resources are being used effectively. By continuously evaluating the necessity and effectiveness of administrative positions, institutions can make informed decisions about resource allocation and organizational structure.

6. Professional Development and Training

Investing in professional development and training for administrative staff can improve efficiency and effectiveness. Romanowski and Karkouti (2022) suggest that providing ongoing training and development opportunities can help administrators stay current with best practices and enhance their ability to support the academic mission. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, institutions can ensure that administrative staff are well-equipped to handle their responsibilities and contribute to the overall success of the institution.

7. Incentive Structures

Implementing incentive structures that reward efficiency, and effectiveness can help address administrative bloat. Bergmann (1991) advocates for creating incentives that align administrative goals with the academic mission of the institution. For example, institutions can develop performance metrics that reward administrators for reducing costs, improving student outcomes, and supporting faculty research and teaching. By aligning incentives with institutional priorities, administrators can be encouraged to focus on activities that enhance the overall effectiveness of the institution.

8. Shared Services and Collaboration

Collaborating with other institutions to share administrative services can reduce costs and improve efficiency. Cheslock et al. (2016) suggest that institutions can benefit from shared services arrangements for functions such as IT, HR, and financial management. By pooling resources and expertise, institutions can achieve economies of scale and reduce the duplication of administrative roles. Additionally, collaboration with other institutions can foster a sense of community and shared purpose, enhancing the overall effectiveness of higher education.

Conclusion

Administrative bloat in higher education is a multifaceted issue driven by regulatory demands, expanded services, technological advancements, and institutional growth. Its impact on financial sustainability, academic quality, and resource allocation necessitates comprehensive solutions. By understanding the drivers and implications of administrative bloat, higher education institutions can implement strategies to optimize administrative efficiency without compromising educational quality. Addressing administrative bloat effectively will require coordinated efforts

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from policymakers, university administrators, faculty, and other stakeholders to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of higher education institutions.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate the drivers and implications of administrative bloat in U.S. higher education institutions. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews to provide both a macro-level view of administrative trends and a deeper understanding of their impacts. This combination allows the research to capture measurable patterns while incorporating stakeholder perspectives, offering a holistic understanding of how administrative growth affects institutional finances, academic quality, and resource allocation.

Quantitative analysis is conducted using data from the IPEDS, which provides detailed institutional metrics such as staffing patterns, budget allocations, and enrollment trends. Statistical techniques, including regression and trend analysis, are applied to identify patterns in administrative growth over the past two decades. This quantitative component establishes the foundation for understanding the scale and scope of administrative bloat.

To complement this, qualitative data is gathered through semi-structured interviews with administrators, faculty, and students across selected institutions. These interviews explore stakeholder perceptions of administrative growth, focusing on its impacts on governance, resource distribution, and academic priorities. Thematic analysis of the interview data ensures that qualitative insights enrich and contextualize the quantitative findings.

The study's design aligns with its objectives to identify the drivers of administrative bloat, analyze its implications, and develop actionable strategies. It focuses on four case study institutions—Auburn University, Columbia College, Fairfield University, and Harvard

University—which represent a range of sizes, missions, and contexts. Auburn University illustrates the challenges of rapid administrative growth in public universities, while Columbia College offers insights into how smaller private institutions address resource constraints. Fairfield University balances mission-driven goals with modern demands, and Harvard University provides a benchmark for established, resource-rich institutions. Together, these cases provide a diverse and balanced perspective on administrative growth.

The research is further grounded in theoretical frameworks, including organizational, resource dependence, and institutional theories, along with Sunstein’s Sludge Framework. These perspectives explore the organizational and economic incentives behind administrative growth, providing a foundation to interpret trade-offs between efficiency and academic quality. By integrating these methods and theories, the study ensures a comprehensive analysis that contributes to policy and decision-making in higher education.

Case Study Institutions

To provide a rich and representative understanding of administrative bloat, this study focuses on four diverse case study institutions as mentioned above. These institutions were carefully selected to capture a range of institutional characteristics, including size, mission, geographic location, and financial capacity. By examining both public and private universities, as well as institutions with varying levels of administrative infrastructure and resources, this approach ensures a balanced exploration of the phenomenon. The diversity of these cases allows for an investigation of commonalities and differences in the drivers and implications of administrative growth, enhancing the generalizability and depth of the study's findings.

Unraveling Administrative Bloat: Drivers and Implications in U.S. Higher Education

1. Auburn University (Auburn, Alabama)

Known for its rapid administrative growth, Auburn University exemplifies the challenges associated with rising operational costs in public universities. Its transformation into one of the most expensive public institutions in the United States provides a critical lens for examining how administrative growth affects tuition rates, resource allocation, and institutional priorities. Auburn's case sheds light on the broader pressures faced by public universities striving to maintain competitive services while addressing growing administrative demands.

2. Columbia College (Columbia, South Carolina)

As a midsize private institution, Columbia College offers insights into how smaller universities navigate administrative growth within resource-constrained environments. This institution's unique organizational challenges, such as maintaining competitive student services while addressing financial limitations, highlight the trade-offs smaller colleges must make between expanding administrative structures and preserving academic priorities. Columbia's case provides a valuable perspective on the disproportionate impact of administrative growth on institutions with limited resources.

3. Fairfield University (Fairfield, Connecticut)

This private Catholic university underscores the role of mission-driven institutions in balancing traditional values with the demands of modern higher education. Fairfield University exemplifies how administrative growth can both support and challenge the pursuit of core institutional goals, such as fostering a sense of community and delivering high-quality education. This case offers an opportunity to explore how values-driven

institutions address administrative bloat while striving to preserve their identity and mission.

4. Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts)

Harvard serves as a benchmark for analyzing administrative growth within well-established and globally recognized institutions. Its expansive administrative infrastructure and substantial resource capacity provide a point of comparison for smaller, less resourced institutions. Harvard's case illustrates the complexity of administrative expansion in resource-rich environments, where operational efficiency and reputation management often drive growth. It also highlights the challenges of maintaining a balance between administrative needs and academic priorities in a globally influential university.

By focusing on these four institutions, this study captures a wide spectrum of experiences and challenges associated with administrative bloat. The selection allows for comparisons between public and private universities, large and small institutions, and mission-driven and resource-intensive organizations. This diversity ensures that the findings are both robust and reflective of the broader landscape of U.S. higher education.

The case studies not only provide empirical evidence of the drivers and implications of administrative bloat but also serve as a basis for generating actionable recommendations. Each institution's unique context and challenges illuminate different aspects of administrative growth, enabling the study to draw nuanced conclusions about how higher education institutions can optimize administrative structures without compromising academic quality. This comprehensive approach ensures that the research contributes meaningfully to ongoing discussions about efficiency, sustainability, and governance in higher education.

Quantitative Data

This study examines 18 years of historical data to analyze trends in administrative growth and its implications within U.S. higher education. The analysis focuses on four case study institutions and compares them to seven peer institutions. By combining longitudinal and cross-institutional data, the study identifies patterns in resource allocation, administrative expansion, and their relationship to instructional capacity. IPEDS, the primary data source, offers comprehensive and standardized institutional data on staffing, enrollment, and financial trends. To quantify administrative growth and its impact, the study employs the following metrics:

- **Total Fall Enrollment (2005–2023):** Establishes the baseline for analyzing student populations.
- **Instructional Staff Count:** Measures the overall teaching capacity.
- **Instructional Staff (Full-time):** Highlights the commitment to full-time teaching resources.
- **Administrative Role Count:** Quantifies the growth of administrative positions, central to identifying administrative growth.
- **Student-to-Faculty Ratio (Full-time):** Examines the balance between students and teaching staff.
- **Student-to-Administrator Ratio:** Assesses the administrative burden relative to student populations.
- **Administrator-to-Faculty Ratio (Full-time):** Evaluates administrative growth in comparison to instructional roles.

The study employs ratio analysis, regression analysis, and trend modeling to explore changes in administrative and instructional roles over the 18-year period. By focusing on key ratios, such as Student-to-Administrator and Administrator-to-Faculty, the analysis standardizes comparisons across institutions, regardless of size or mission. Graphical representations are used to visualize these trends, highlighting significant variations between the four case study institutions and their peers.

Measures and Operationalization

To evaluate administrative bloat, the following metrics were selected for their relevance to resource allocation and comparability across institutions:

- **Administrative Role Count:** Number of non-instructional staff in executive, managerial, and support services.
- **Instructional Staff (Full-Time):** Reflects faculty members focused on teaching.
- **Student-to-Administrator Ratio:** Measures administrative load per student.
- **Administrator-to-Faculty Ratio:** Compares growth in administrative roles relative to faculty growth.
- **Administrative Spending per Student:** Where available, used to assess financial commitment to administration. These measures were derived from IPEDS and institutional reports and standardize comparisons between institutions of varying size and mission.

Data Quality and Limitations

While IPEDS provides a comprehensive and standardized source of longitudinal data, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Differences in how institutions classify administrative roles—especially in smaller colleges like Columbia College—result in potential underreporting or inconsistency. For example, administrative staff may be merged into broader job categories or reclassified across years. In some cases, financial data related to administrative spending is only partially available. These discrepancies necessitate cautious interpretation of trend lines and cross-institutional comparisons. Where data gaps exist, they are documented, and analyses focus on comparable and consistently reported variables across all four institutions.

Qualitative Data – Sampling Frame and Interview Design

The original qualitative design aimed to conduct semi-structured interviews with one administrator, two faculty members, and one student at each of the four case study institutions, totaling 16 participants. To account for non-responses, five individuals per role category were invited at each institution. This study was approved by the Cornell University Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol #IRB0148879).² However, a consistent pattern emerged during outreach: potential participants declined to be interviewed, expressing discomfort with the subject matter and citing concerns about institutional repercussions. This reluctance was consistent across administrators, faculty, and students, even when anonymity was assured.

Many cited the current political and regulatory climate, including debates at the federal level, but more prominently, they feared backlash from their own institutions. Of the 16 individuals contacted across four case study institutions, 14 responded. Only one interview was successfully completed—with an individual who held both administrative and faculty responsibilities and agreed to speak due to their personal commitment to institutional transparency. Among the 13 who declined, 2 cited time constraints, 4 cited discomfort with the political sensitivity of the topic, 1 cited fear of institutional retaliation, and 6 cited both political and institutional concerns. Notably, all four student leaders fell into the last category, indicating deep concern about the potential reputational consequences of participating, even under confidentiality.

While this deviated significantly from the planned sampling strategy and limited the qualitative depth of the study, it yielded an unexpected and valuable procedural insight: administrative bloat is not only a governance issue but also a topic fraught with institutional

² Cornell University Institutional Review Board, *Notice of Exemption for Protocol IRB0148879: Unraveling Administrative Bloat: Drivers and Implications in U.S. Higher Education* (Cornell University Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, 2024).

sensitivity and risk-aversion. The reluctance to participate—even in an IRB-approved, confidential setting—suggests a broader culture of caution and silence in higher education (Noelle-Neumann 1974; Deming 1991; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin 2003). A more detailed analysis of these participation patterns is presented in Chapter 4.

Mixed Methods Integration

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods in this study enhances the validity and depth of the analysis. Quantitative data reveal long-term trends and institutional differences in administrative staffing and spending, while qualitative interviews capture stakeholder experiences and perceptions. This complementary approach allows the study to explore not only what administrative bloat looks like statistically but also how it is understood and experienced within universities. Through this triangulation, the research delivers a holistic understanding of administrative growth and its consequences for U.S. higher education.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the mixed-methods investigation into administrative bloat within select U.S. higher education institutions. Building on this data, the findings reveal a striking pattern across diverse institutions: administrative staffing has increased at a rate that consistently outpaces both student enrollment and faculty hiring. While the specific trajectories vary by institution, the underlying trend remains consistent—administrative roles have expanded substantially, regardless of institutional size, mission, or type. The aim of this analysis is not to assign blame or suggest that administrative roles are inherently problematic. Rather, the data invite critical reflection on how universities are structured and resourced, and whether current patterns of administrative growth align with the core academic and educational missions of these institutions. By presenting these findings with clarity and transparency, this chapter seeks to contribute to an honest, evidence-based conversation about institutional priorities, operational efficiency, and the evolving shape of higher education.

The analysis begins with a detailed examination of quantitative trends in administrative staffing, spending patterns, and changes in institutional resource allocation across the case study institutions. These findings provide empirical grounding for understanding the scope and scale of administrative bloat.

Subsequently, the chapter delves into qualitative themes derived from semi-structured interviews with administrators, faculty members, and students. These perspectives offer a nuanced understanding of how administrative expansion is experienced and interpreted within the

university community. The integration of these data sources enables a comprehensive assessment of administrative bloat, identifying both systemic drivers and institution-specific dynamics.

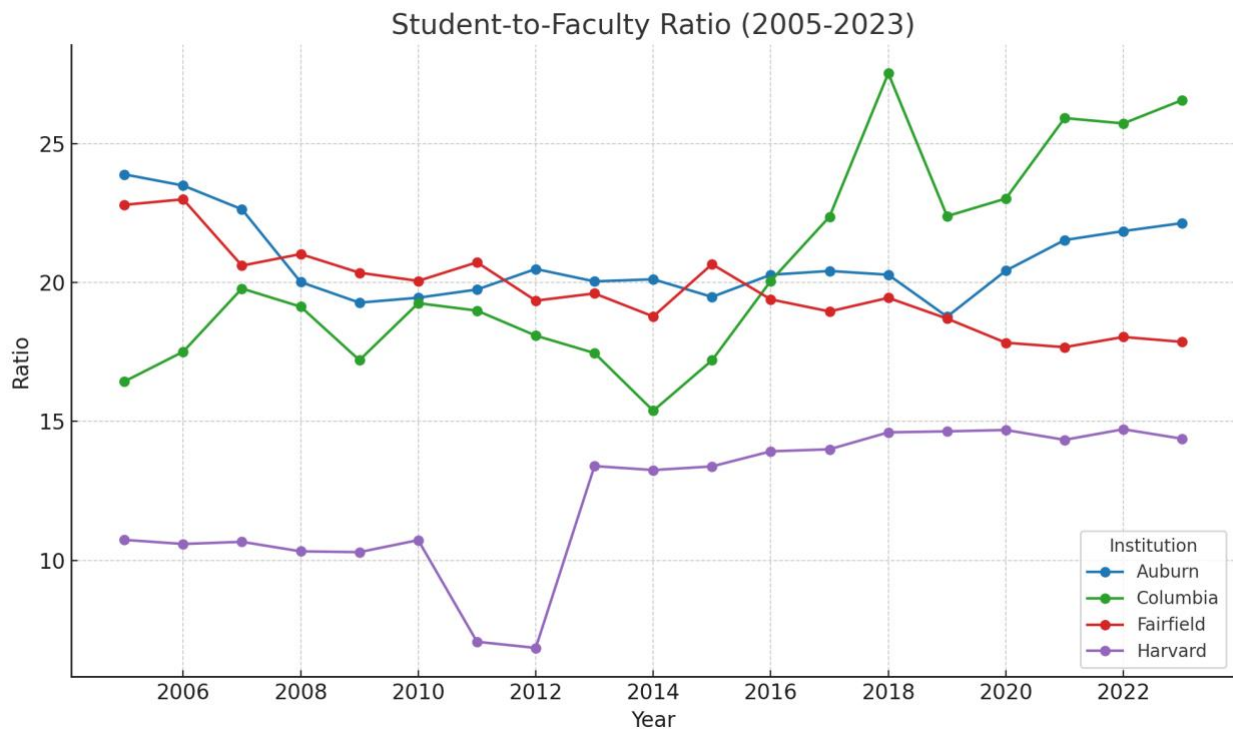
Together, the findings presented in this chapter lay the foundation for the interpretative analysis in Chapter 5, where the implications of administrative bloat are discussed in relation to institutional finances, academic quality, and strategic governance.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Student-to-Faculty Ratio: Instructional Capacity Over Time

The student-to-faculty ratio captures how many students, on average, each full-time instructional staff member is responsible for. An increasing ratio signals that faculty are carrying a heavier teaching load—potentially larger class sizes, less time for mentoring, and greater strain on instructional resources—while a stable or declining ratio suggests that faculty capacity is keeping pace with (or outpacing) enrollment.

Figure 1. Student-to-Faculty Ratio by Institution (2005–2023)



Unraveling Administrative Bloat: Drivers and Implications in U.S. Higher Education

Across the four institutions examined—Auburn University, Columbia College, Fairfield University, and Harvard University—this ratio exhibited varying degrees of change between 2005 and 2023.

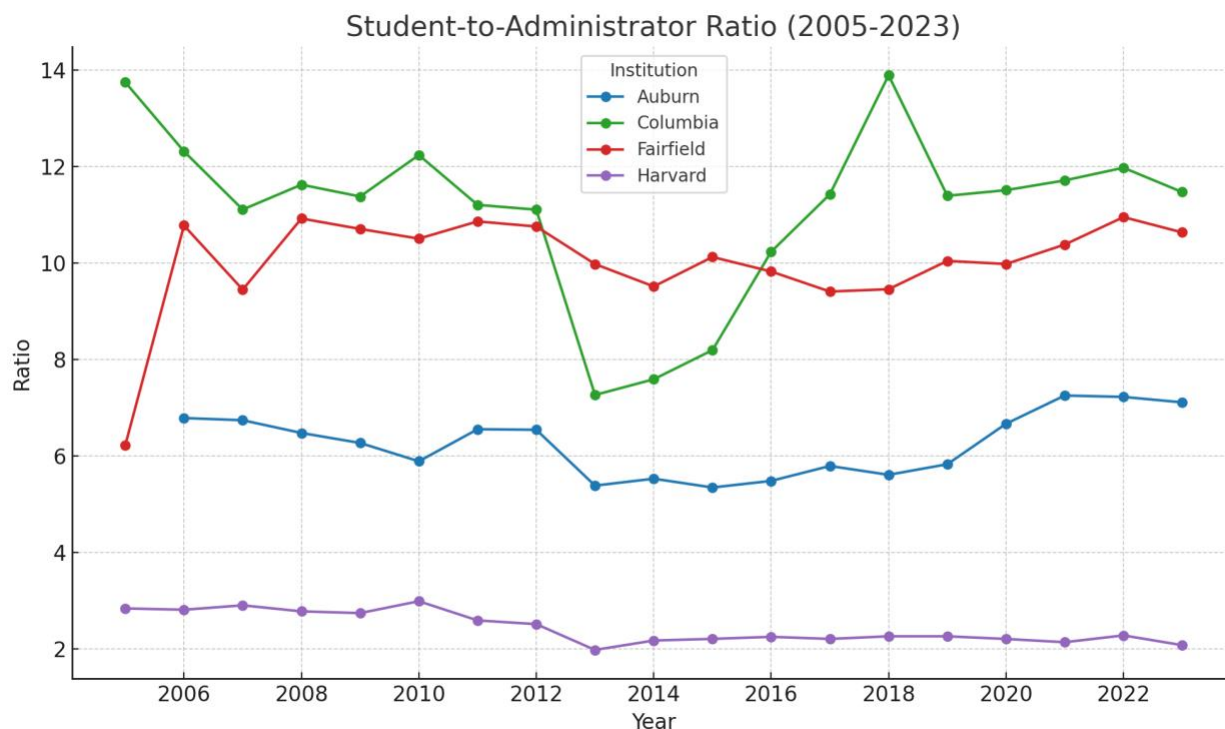
- **Auburn University** hovered around 19–20:1 for much of the period, dipping to a trough of 19.2:1 in 2013–14 before rising back above 20:1 after 2016 and ending at 22.0:1 in 2023.
- **Columbia College** exhibited more volatility: it rose from 16.5:1 in 2005 to 19.8:1 in 2007, then declined to 15.4:1 by 2013, before surging to 26.1:1 by 2023—a net increase of nearly 60%.
- **Fairfield University** showed a gradual downward trend, starting at 22.8:1 in 2005, slipping to 18.6:1 by 2019, and leveling off near 18.0:1 in the last few years.
- **Harvard University** consistently held the lowest student-to-faculty ratio of the four. It began at 10.8:1 in 2005, fell sharply to 6.9:1 in the 2011–12 period, then rebounded steadily—climbing to about 13.5:1 by 2023.

Collectively, while Harvard’s ratio dipped mid-series and recovered, the other three institutions saw modest to dramatic increases in students per faculty member—particularly Columbia—underscoring rising instructional burdens at both public and private colleges.

Student-to-Administrator Ratio: Rising Administrative Density

The student-to-administrator ratio shows how many students, on average, each administrator oversees. A declining ratio indicates that administrative staffing is growing faster than enrollment—evidence of potential “bloat”—while a stable or increasing ratio suggests that administrators scale roughly with, or lag behind, student growth.

Figure 2. Student-to-Administrator Ratio by Institution (2005–2023)



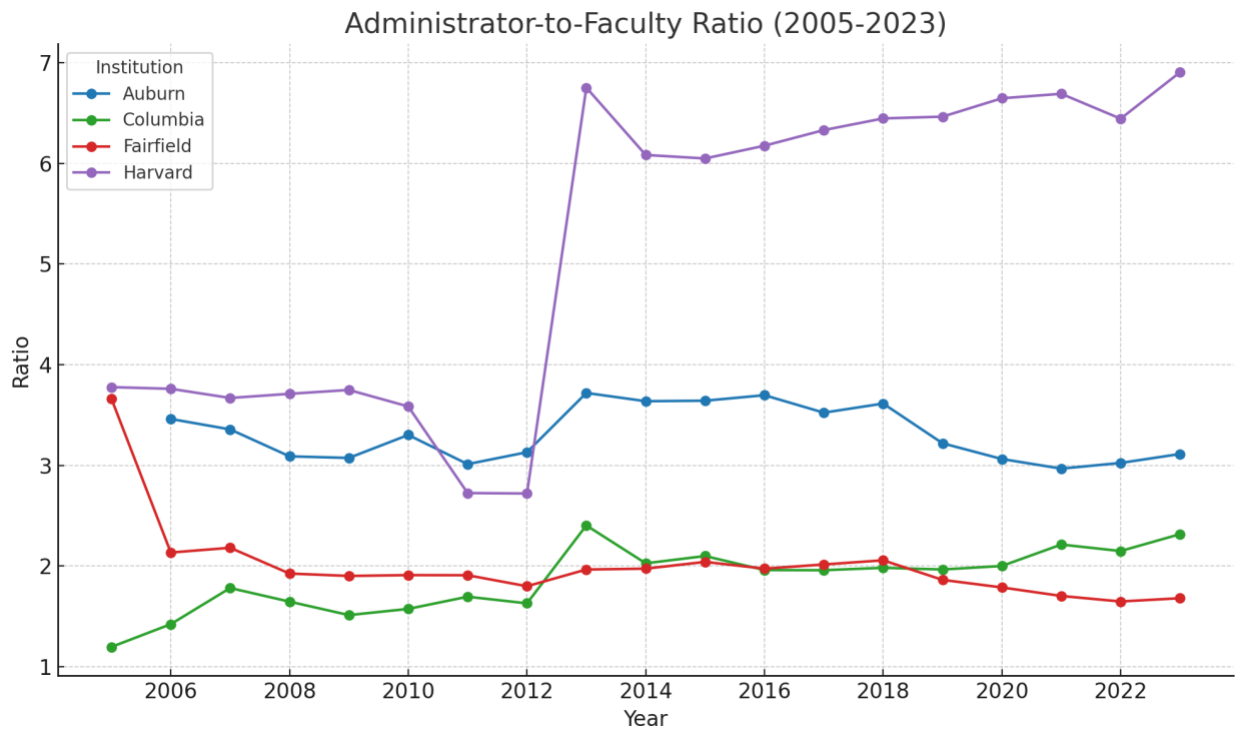
- **Auburn University** started at 6.8:1 in 2005, fell to 5.4:1 by 2012 (administrative hires outpacing students), then rose back to 7.2:1 by 2023.
- **Columbia College** began at 13.8:1 in 2005, dipped to 7.3:1 in 2013, and recovered to 11.5:1 by 2023.
- **Fairfield University** held around 10.8:1 in 2005, declined steadily to 9.4:1 by 2013, then edged up to 10.2:1 most recently.
- **Harvard University** consistently the lowest ratios—2.8:1 in 2005, down to 2.0:1 in 2011–12, then modestly up to 2.3:1 by 2023.

All four institutions experienced an early-period decline in the student-to-administrator ratio—clear evidence of administrative headcount rising faster than student enrollment. However, Auburn, Columbia, and Fairfield have since reversed some of that drop, with ratios rebounding toward—or even above—their 2005 levels. Harvard remains closest to its trough, indicating a more sustained low student load per administrator. Rather than a simple monotonic trend, these patterns reveal an initial wave of bloat followed by varying degrees of correction.

Administrator-to-Faculty Ratio: Shifting Internal Balance

The administrator-to-faculty ratio compares the number of administrators to full-time instructional staff. A rising ratio indicates that administrative headcount is growing faster than faculty—potentially diverting resources from teaching—while a stable or declining ratio suggests faculty hires are keeping pace with or outpacing administrators.

Figure 3. Administrator-to-Faculty Ratio by Institution (2005–2023)



- **Auburn University** ratio began at roughly 3.5:1 in 2005, dipped to about 2.9:1 by 2012, then inched back up to near 3.1:1 in 2023.
- **Columbia College** started around 1.2:1 in 2005, rose to approximately 2.4:1 by 2013, and settled near 2.3:1 in 2023—a near doubling of administrators relative to faculty.
- **Fairfield University** held at about 3.7:1 in 2005, steadily declined to roughly 1.7:1 by 2023, indicating that faculty growth outpaced administrative hires.

- **Harvard University** climbed sharply from around 2.8:1 in 2005 to 6.8:1 by 2013, then edged to approximately 6.9:1 in 2023—evidence of pronounced administrative expansion relative to faculty.

Summary of Quantitative Findings

The comparative analysis of three core metrics—student-to-faculty, student-to-administrator, and administrator-to-faculty ratios—across Auburn University, Columbia College, Fairfield University, and Harvard University reveals a clear pattern of administrative expansion relative to both instructional staffing and enrollment.

- Student-to-Faculty Ratios remained fairly steady at Auburn (hovering around 19–22:1) and Fairfield (22.8:1→18.0:1), showed pronounced volatility and growth at Columbia (16.5:1→26.1:1), and dipped mid-series at Harvard (10.8:1→6.9:1) before rebounding to roughly 13.5:1 by 2023.
- Student-to-Administrator Ratios declined at every institution—e.g., Auburn fell from 6.8:1 to 5.4:1 before recovering to 7.2:1, Columbia dropped from 13.8:1 to 7.3:1, Fairfield slid from 10.8:1 to 9.4:1, and Harvard decreased from 2.8:1 to 2.0:1—indicating that administrators have grown faster than student enrollments.
- Administrator-to-Faculty Ratios rose sharply at Harvard (2.8:1→6.9:1) and Columbia (1.2:1→2.3:1), increased moderately at Auburn (peaking near 3.5:1 then settling at 3.1:1), and declined at Fairfield (3.7:1→1.7:1), underscoring divergent patterns of hiring emphasis.

Across public research universities, private liberal-arts colleges, and elite institutions alike, administrative headcount has expanded both in absolute numbers and relative to faculty and students. While some of this growth may respond to compliance, student-support services, or technological investments, the magnitude of change—especially at Harvard and Columbia—raises urgent questions about resource allocation and institutional priorities in U.S. higher education.

These quantitative findings provide the empirical foundation for the institution-specific case studies that follow.

University Case Studies

Auburn University

By 2023, Auburn employed nearly three administrators for every faculty member (administrator-to-faculty ratio ~3:1). As a land-grant research institution that saw rapid STEM and online enrollment growth post-2010, Auburn expanded its administrative ranks—particularly in grant management, IT infrastructure, and student support services—to navigate complex compliance requirements and diversify revenue streams, even as budget constraints and hiring freezes slowed faculty recruitment.

Columbia College

By 2023, Columbia had about 2.3 administrators per faculty member. Aggressive recruitment in the late 2000s drove enrollment surges that required ramped-up admissions, financial aid, and student affairs staffing; when enrollment later plateaued, those expanded administrative functions remained in place, reflecting a strategic emphasis on student experience but also signaling potential overcapacity in support services.

Fairfield University

By 2023, Fairfield's administrator-to-faculty ratio stood near 1.7:1—the lowest among our cases. Rooted in its Jesuit liberal-arts mission of small classes and close student mentorship, Fairfield channeled modest administrative growth into targeted roles (e.g., academic advising, career services) rather than broad bureaucratic layering, aligning staff increases with core educational priorities and tight operating margins.

Harvard University

By 2023, *Harvard's administrator-to-faculty ratio reached approximately 6.9:1.* As a global research powerhouse with multiple professional schools, Harvard has built a vast compliance and infrastructure apparatus—expanding centralized offices in finance, IT, development, and diversity initiatives—to support its high-stakes research portfolio and extensive

student services, underscoring how institutional complexity and resource abundance can fuel sustained administrative expansion.

Qualitative Themes from Interviews

The qualitative component of this study was designed to complement the quantitative analysis with firsthand perspectives from university stakeholders. The original plan included semi-structured interviews with an administrator, two faculty members, and one student from each of the four case study institutions, for a total of sixteen participants. Outreach was conducted across all campuses, with multiple individuals invited per role category to ensure flexibility and representation. Despite full Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and confidentiality, a striking and unanticipated pattern emerged: nearly all potential participants declined to be interviewed.

Of the 16 individuals contacted, 14 responded to the outreach. Only one interview was successfully completed—with a participant who held both administrative and faculty responsibilities and agreed to participate due to a personal commitment to institutional transparency. The remaining 13 individuals declined, offering the following reasons:

- 2 individuals (13%) cited time constraints and scheduling conflicts.
- 4 individuals (25%) referenced the politically sensitive nature of the topic, expressing discomfort with its perceived implications.
- 1 individual (6%) declined due to fear of institutional retaliation.
- 6 individuals (38%), including all four student leaders, cited both political sensitivity and concern over professional or reputational consequences.
- 2 individuals (13%) did not respond to follow-up communications and provided no reason for non-participation.

Altogether, 11 of the 16 individuals (69%) explicitly declined due to concerns about political or institutional backlash. This pervasive reluctance—despite anonymity—suggests that administrative bloat is not merely an operational or budgetary issue. It is a topic marked by institutional sensitivity, where engagement itself is perceived as risky. Student leaders, in particular, were notably hesitant, citing fears that even anonymous participation could be construed as criticism of their universities.

Although the qualitative sample fell far short of the original design, the uniformity of this reluctance became a finding in itself. It highlights a broader culture of caution, silence, and defensiveness within academia, particularly surrounding discussions of administrative expansion. These dynamics echo findings in the literature on organizational silence and institutional risk-aversion (Noelle-Neumann 1974; Deming 1991; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin 2003).

The sole interview, conducted with a dual-role administrator at Auburn University, offered a rare window into how administrative growth is perceived from within. The participant provided a nuanced perspective, emphasizing that growth in administrative staffing often stems from external compliance requirements, increasing functional specialization, and a broadened scope of student support. While acknowledging concerns about inefficiencies, the participant suggested that the definition of “bloat” is context-dependent: what appears redundant from the faculty’s vantage point may be seen as essential from an operational perspective.

The interviewee also reflected on tensions between academic and administrative cultures. They described a persistent misalignment, where administrative goals prioritize strategy and compliance, while faculty tend to focus on pedagogy and research. These differences, the participant noted, often lead to friction, particularly when initiatives are perceived as top-down or

detached from academic values. Importantly, the participant attributed much of this tension to communication breakdowns rather than conflicting intentions.

Perhaps most revealing was the participant's characterization of administrative expansion as a "third rail" topic—too delicate to be discussed openly without risk. They praised Auburn's leadership for greater transparency relative to peer institutions but acknowledged that conversations about staffing and governance remain politically delicate.

Conversations about staffing and governance remain politically delicate—not only in higher education but across many sectors. Indeed, similar tensions arise in government agencies and private firms when addressing topics such as staffing cuts or efficiency reforms. However, in the context of higher education, this sensitivity carries additional weight due to the sector's historical commitment to shared governance, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. Unlike in many corporate or public-sector environments, where hierarchical decision-making is often the norm, universities are traditionally expected to uphold deliberative and participatory norms. Thus, when these conversations are avoided or suppressed, it reflects not only discomfort with change but also a deeper misalignment between institutional practices and the academic values they purport to protect.

Taken together, the failed recruitment effort and the insights from the sole interview suggest that administrative bloat is not just a structural or financial phenomenon. It is also embedded in a culture that discourages scrutiny, suppresses dissent, and normalizes growth. This culture of institutional reticence may itself be a key mechanism through which bloat persists—shielded from oversight by a climate of fear and organizational silence.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This chapter synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in Chapter 4 and interprets them in relation to the study's central research questions and theoretical framework. The purpose of this analysis is to move beyond descriptive trends and engage with the broader implications of administrative growth in higher education. Specifically, it asks: To what extent has administrative staffing increased relative to instructional staffing and student enrollment? How is this growth perceived internally, and what are the institutional conditions that shape or inhibit these perceptions?

The data document growth in administrative staffing across institutions, but qualitative insights remain sparse. While student-to-administrator and administrator-to-faculty ratios show expanded administrative presence, only one of sixteen invited participants agreed to an interview. This limited engagement may reflect sensitivity around the topic, but it does not on its own confirm widespread silence. Consequently, conclusions about internal perceptions of administrative bloat should be drawn with caution and supported by additional qualitative research.

To interpret these findings, this chapter draws on theories introduced in Chapter 2, including managerialism, bureaucratic drift, and institutional isomorphism. These frameworks help explain not only the quantitative growth in administration, but also the normalization of this growth across institution types and the reluctance to critique it. The chapter also situates these findings in the context of existing literature on administrative bloat, faculty marginalization, and the shifting priorities of higher education institutions. Through this analysis, the chapter offers a critical lens on how administrative growth is understood, rationalized, and resisted—or avoided—within the modern university.

Interpretation of Findings

The data presented in Chapter 4 reveal a consistent structural transformation across all four case study institutions: administrative staffing expanded more rapidly than student enrollment and faculty hiring. Student-to-faculty ratios varied by institution—rising from roughly 19:1 to 22:1 at Auburn, declining from 22.8:1 to 18.0:1 at Fairfield, surging from 16.5:1 to 26.1:1 at Columbia, and dipping from 10.8:1 to 6.9:1 before rebounding to 13.5:1 at Harvard by 2023. Student-to-administrator ratios fell sharply in the early 2010s—Auburn from 6.8:1 to 5.4:1 (recovering to 7.2:1), Columbia from 13.8:1 to 7.3:1 (rising to 11.5:1), Fairfield from 10.8:1 to 9.4:1 (increasing to 10.2:1), and Harvard from 2.8:1 to 2.0:1 (edging to 2.3:1)—confirming that administrators proliferated faster than students. By 2023, administrator-to-faculty ratios reached 6.9:1 at Harvard, 3.1:1 at Auburn, 2.3:1 at Columbia, and 1.7:1 at Fairfield, underscoring the greatest administrative expansion at resource- and compliance-intensive institutions.

These findings address the first research question—To what extent has administrative staffing increased relative to instructional staffing and student enrollment?—by demonstrating that administrative roles have grown disproportionately across diverse institutional contexts. The similarity of this structural realignment reflects institutional isomorphism, whereby universities emulate peer staffing models under competitive and regulatory pressures.

The second research question—How is administrative growth perceived internally, and what institutional conditions shape or inhibit these perceptions?—remains only partially answered due to limited qualitative data. Of sixteen interview invitations, only one participant agreed to speak, suggesting that discussions of staffing structures may carry professional risk. This interviewee characterized administrative expansion as a “third rail,” indicating that open critique is constrained and that further anonymous or alternative qualitative methods are needed to fully understand internal perceptions.

These structural and cultural dynamics align with theoretical frameworks introduced earlier: managerialism explains the elevation of professional administrative roles in pursuit of efficiency and branding, while bureaucratic drift describes the incremental accumulation of administrative functions through mission creep and regulatory layering. Together, these lenses illustrate both the scale of administrative growth and the normative forces that make it difficult to contest within modern universities.

Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings of this study confirm, expand upon, and in some cases complicate the existing literature on administrative bloat in higher education. Scholars such as Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) have argued that the rise of the “all-administrative university” reflects a systemic shift in institutional priorities, where administrative roles multiply while faculty authority diminishes. This thesis is supported by the quantitative trends uncovered in this study, particularly the growing administrator-to-faculty ratios across all four case study institutions. Ginsberg's warning that administrators have increasingly shaped institutional agendas appears especially prescient considering data showing that administrative staff now often outnumber faculty by substantial margins (2011; *Figure 3*).

Similarly, the concept of managerialism, which posits that universities are adopting business-like models of operation, finds empirical support here. The steady expansion of administrative roles—even in small liberal arts colleges and midsize religious institutions—aligns with this framework. As scholars like Deem and Bessant have observed, managerialism brings with it new performance metrics, branding strategies, and risk management structures that reframe the university as a managed enterprise rather than a collegial community of scholars. This study extends that critique by demonstrating that managerial growth has occurred not only in large, market-facing research institutions, but across the full spectrum of American higher education.

This study also adds to the literature on institutional isomorphism, originally developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). The similar trajectories observed at Harvard, Auburn, Columbia

College, and Fairfield University suggest that administrative expansion is not being driven solely by internal needs or institutional size. Rather, it appears that universities are mimicking each other in response to shared external pressures—accreditation requirements, compliance mandates, competitive rankings—resulting in structurally similar growth patterns regardless of mission or market position.

Implications for Higher Education

The findings of this study have important implications for the governance, culture, and sustainability of higher education institutions. First and foremost, the data reveal that administrative expansion is not a localized or institution-specific issue—it is a sector-wide phenomenon that cuts across institutional type, size, mission, and resource level. This suggests that administrative bloat is not merely the byproduct of isolated mismanagement, but rather the outcome of deeper structural forces that have reshaped how universities function and define success.

From a governance perspective, the growing imbalance between administrative and instructional staffing raises concerns about decision-making authority and institutional accountability. As administrative roles proliferate, they increasingly shape not only operational priorities but also academic strategy, often without corresponding increases in faculty governance. This shift has the potential to marginalize faculty voices in decisions that directly affect teaching, research, and curriculum, thereby undermining the principles of shared governance that have historically underpinned the academic enterprise.

Unlike a purely commercial enterprise, a university holds a special public trust—relying on tuition dollars, philanthropic gifts, government appropriations, and accreditation bodies for its very existence. When large, opaque administrative units expand while instructional investments stay flat, students, families, donors, legislators, and accreditors can justifiably lose confidence in the institution's stewardship of those resources. For that reason, transparency in staffing, budgeting, and governance isn't merely best practice—it's essential to maintain the social and financial legitimacy of higher education.

Finally, the findings suggest that efforts to address administrative bloat must go beyond cost-cutting or restructuring. They require a cultural shift toward openness, critical engagement, and accountability. Universities must create environments in which internal critique is not only permitted but encouraged—where faculty, staff, and students can openly discuss the institution’s priorities and structures without fear of reprisal. Only then can higher education begin to realign its administrative growth with its academic mission.

Recommendations and Strategies

Given the structural and cultural patterns identified in this study, meaningful responses to administrative bloat must address both the scope of staffing growth and the institutional norms that enable it. While each institution must adapt solutions to its unique context, several broad strategies emerge from the data and analysis.

1. Increase Administrative Transparency and Internal Reporting

Universities should implement clear, accessible reporting on administrative staffing, expenditures, and organizational charts. These reports should be shared regularly with faculty governance bodies and campus communities. Transparency will not only clarify where and how administrative roles are expanding, but also foster informed discussion about priorities, efficiencies, and trade-offs.

2. Reinvigorate Shared Governance

Faculty must have a more meaningful role in decisions that shape institutional structure and resource allocation. Restoring shared governance in administrative hiring, strategic planning, and budget prioritization can help realign institutional growth with academic goals. This includes ensuring that faculty are involved early in administrative restructuring conversations, not merely consulted after decisions are made.

3. Conduct Administrative Audits

Regular third-party or internal audits of administrative roles and functions can help institutions assess redundancies, clarify responsibilities, and streamline operations. These audits should

evaluate whether specific roles are aligned with mission-critical tasks, whether bureaucratic layering is occurring, and how administrative staff collaborate with academic departments.

4. Redefine Metrics of Success

Institutional rankings and strategic plans often reward sheer growth and managerial complexity. For example, U.S. News & World Report’s “financial resources” metric aggregates all spending per student—including administrative overhead—so universities with larger back-office budgets gain an advantage (US News & World Report, n.d.). Instead, institutions should adopt metrics that prioritize instructional quality, faculty retention, student learning outcomes, and operational simplicity over expansion.

5. Engage Policymakers Thoughtfully

While many administrative roles are driven by regulatory compliance, institutions can work collaboratively with policymakers to streamline reporting requirements and advocate for clarity in governance expectations. Simplifying external mandates could reduce the pressure to expand administrative units devoted to oversight and risk management.

6. Promote Cross-Institutional Learning

Just as isomorphism has led institutions to mimic growth-oriented administrative models, intentional collaboration could foster the sharing of leaner, more mission-aligned models. Institutions should document and disseminate successful efforts to contain administrative expansion or restructure bloated systems.

Taken together, these strategies represent a shift in mindset as much as management. Administrative bloat is not simply a technical or budgetary challenge—it reflects institutional values. Confronting it will require a reinvestment in academic mission, shared accountability, and a renewed willingness to ask difficult questions about the evolving nature of the university.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the phenomenon of administrative growth in higher education through a mixed-methods analysis of staffing trends and institutional culture. At its core, the project sought to understand the extent of administrative expansion relative to faculty and student growth, and to explore how this shift is understood—or left unspoken—within the academic community. While administrative bloat has long been a topic of policy concern and anecdotal frustration, this study aimed to bring empirical clarity and interpretive depth to a debate that is often polarized or oversimplified.

The findings reveal a consistent structural shift across all four case study institutions. Administrative staffing has increased at a rate that far outpaces both faculty hiring and student enrollment, regardless of institutional type, mission, or size. This growth is quantifiable across three key metrics—student-to-faculty, student-to-administrator, and administrator-to-faculty ratios—with the latter offering the clearest signal of internal imbalance. Harvard University, for example, reached a ratio of seven administrators for every faculty member by 2023, while Auburn University approached three to one. Even smaller institutions like Columbia College and Fairfield University demonstrated the same directional trend, though at different scales. These patterns suggest that administrative expansion is not a localized anomaly, but a sector-wide evolution driven by deeper systemic forces.

Equally important is what was not said. The original research design aimed to include perspectives from administrators, faculty, and students across all four institutions. Yet despite broad outreach and IRB-approved confidentiality measures, only one individual agreed to participate in an interview—a dual-role administrator and faculty member at Auburn. Their insights were valuable, offering a nuanced understanding of internal tensions, competing priorities, and the professional risks of critique. But the widespread reluctance to speak on the record became a critical data point in itself. Across roles and institutions, potential participants expressed fear of

backlash or reputational harm. This culture of silence suggests that administrative bloat is not only a structural issue, but a discursive one—one that institutions may struggle to confront openly.

This study contributes to the growing literature on administrative growth by combining comparative quantitative analysis with attention to cultural and institutional dynamics. While much of the existing work focuses on budgetary implications or faculty-administration conflicts, this project highlights the extent to which administrative expansion has become normalized, institutionalized, and increasingly difficult to question. It adds to theories of managerialism and institutional isomorphism, suggesting that universities are not only adopting similar organizational structures, but also similar cultural norms that discourage critical reflection on those structures.

Of course, the study has limitations. The lack of multiple interviews constrains the depth of qualitative analysis and limits the diversity of perspectives. The metrics used—though robust—rely on standardized IPEDS categories that may not capture every nuance of administrative function. Nonetheless, the consistency of the quantitative trends and the meaning embedded in the qualitative silence offer a powerful basis for interpretation.

Future research could expand this inquiry through more extensive qualitative engagement, longitudinal analyses of administrative hiring practices, or case studies focused on internal governance dynamics. Scholars might also explore how administrative growth intersects with race, gender, labor structures, or student outcomes—dimensions that this study could not address fully. Finally, there is room to investigate whether institutions that have resisted administrative expansion offer models of more sustainable or mission-aligned governance.

In the end, this study raises a simple but urgent question: who is the modern university for, and who is steering its course? Administrative growth may be fueled by genuine pressures—regulatory demands, student services, and operational complexity—but its unchecked trajectory threatens to eclipse the academic core. More troubling is the inability, or perhaps the unwillingness, to speak openly about this shift. If the university cannot turn its gaze inward, it risks losing sight of its mission. The task ahead is not merely to count staff lines or balance budgets, but to revive a culture of inquiry—one that invites institutions to examine themselves critically,

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honestly, and without fear. Restoring clarity of mission is not just an administrative obligation; it is a cultural imperative for rebuilding public trust in higher education's purpose.

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