Decoding Byzantium

This quarter's team challenge invites students to explore the intricate and expanding bureaucracy at Stanford University, a system that has doubled in size since 2000. Much like the Byzantine Empire, known for its vast and complex administrative structures, Stanford's bureaucracy influences nearly every aspect of campus life—yet its performance and values are rarely scrutinized.

This project challenges students to investigate whether this growth reflects a responsive system that excels at meeting the needs of its users or one that struggles under inefficiencies requiring constant reinforcement. Understanding how this bureaucracy functions is critical for any student who intends to navigate the university effectively, advocate for change, or bring new ideas to life. What's more, as systems practitioners interested in the workings of broader complex issues, you will inevitably run into other forms of bureaucracy in the broader world, and may find the lessons gleaned from this experience furthermore useful.

The broader institution will be investigated through specific Focal Areas. Students will select a Focal Area and use its concrete problems to illuminate and understand the broader bureaucratic challenges at play. This focused analysis provides a concrete entry point to engage with these issues at a human-centered scale, and eventually discuss and propose necessary changes. By interviewing key stakeholders, analyzing user experiences with a particular focus on unexpected tensions, and proposing new design imperatives that might resolve those tensions, students will uncover insights into the functionality, impact and future of Stanford's administrative empire.

The goal is to demystify this modern "Byzantium". Whose needs are the bureaucracy serving right now? Whose needs are not being met? Are there "expert navigators" we can learn from, who have figured out how the system *really* works? While we are unlikely to find a "silver bullet" to end the chaos, we aim to clarify and identify key opportunities to harness, reimagine, or even circumvent the bureaucracy to better align with people's needs.

Potential Focal Areas

The only way to understand a system is to see it in action, especially when the action involved represents a difficult-to-resolve challenge to existing norms (a kind of stress test). Each of the following Focal Areas relates to understanding and navigating the bureaucracy while addressing a "Wicked Problem" – a complex, multifaceted issue that is difficult to resolve and influenced by multiple conflicting factors. Using these Focal Areas as a starting point, your challenge is to uncover non-obvious tensions that can lead to promising design opportunities for the future.

1. Handling Protests and Demonstrations
- Problem: Protests and demonstrations are essential to student expression, but university policies governing them can feel opaque or overly restrictive.
- Focus: Understanding how Stanford's bureaucracy handles protests and demonstrations reveals critical insights into the university's approach to freedom of expression, institutional control, and student engagement.

2. Free Speech and Academic Freedom
- Problem: Universities are battlegrounds for free speech debates, with conflict between open discourse and protecting individuals from harm.
- Focus: A deeper dive into free speech and academic freedom will reveal how bureaucratic systems balance institutional policies with personal rights with academic autonomy.

3. Increasing Graduate Student Wages
- Problem: Graduate students often advocate for higher wages to meet the rising cost of living but navigating the bureaucracy to achieve pay increases can be a slow, frustrating process.
- Focus: This issue can expose how well Stanford's bureaucracy responds to changing economic conditions, student advocacy, and labor relations.

4. Divestment from Problematic Industries
- Problem: Students regularly campaign for divestments from Stanford's *"controversial investment portfolio"*, but the university's decision-making process is often seen as opaque, resistant to change and/or mired in conflicts of interest.
- Focus: Investigating the bureaucratic process around divestment initiatives will provide insights into how Stanford engages with student-led activism and social justice causes within an institutional context.

5. Starting a New Interdisciplinary Institute
- Problem: Stanford is known for innovation, yet establishing new interdisciplinary institutes can be bogged down by administrative hurdles – case in point, the d.school's Interdisciplinary Status itself.
- Focus: Analyze the processes for proposing and launching a new institute, students can uncover roadblocks in funding allocation, approval processes, mediation of conflicting departmental interests required for interdisciplinary initiatives.

6. Accessing Emergency Student Support
- Problem: Emergency resources, such as funds, housing, or mental health services, are often hard to access due to system delays or unclear processes.
- Focus: This issue will highlight the responsiveness and accessibility of bureaucratic services during times of crisis, identify bureaucratic barriers such as slow application processes, unclear guidelines, or the lack of a coordinated response.

7. Streamlining Green Campus Initiatives
- Problem: Students eager to implement sustainability initiatives often face challenges navigating administrative processes, like gaining approval for reducing waste or diminishing "first class" services.
- Focus: provide a clearer picture of how well Stanford's bureaucracy aligns with its own environmental goals, showing whether its structures support long-term sustainability or fail to enable change.

8. Choose Your Own Adventure
- Problem: An issue, chosen by you and your teammates, in which a central user group (e.g. students) must face off against the systems of the bureaucracy in order to gain what they perceive as a valued asset, e.g. time, money, attention, legitimacy. Please share with the teaching team so we can help you land on an appropriate scope for the class.
- Focus: provide a clear picture of this group and their interests – what are they hoping to achieve, and how do they see Stanford's bureaucracy as being useful for those purposes? Show how the institutional structure interacts with lived experience and begin to imagine alternatives.

Getting Started: Potential Field Guide Subtopics

These are potential lenses through which to approach, and make more concrete, a problem that can otherwise feel abstract or overwhelming. It is not a requirement to include these sub-topics, but rather our way of getting you started on what can be a challenging topic. If you have your own vision for how to write your field guide, proceed accordingly.

Please note: these are research questions, not interview questions. Do adjust as needed.

> **User Experience of Bureaucracy:**
> - What are students, faculty, and staff experiencing while interacting with specific administrative systems? What are the touchpoints and what is the experience of the entire process – in real time, overlapping with their actual lives and everything in them?
> - Where does bureaucracy add value and where does it create friction?
>
> **Decision-Making and Accountability:**
> - How are decisions about bureaucratic growth or restructuring made? Who makes them? Have they always, or does the power tend to shift?
> - Which, if any, feedback loops from students and faculty play a role in big bureaucratic decisions?

- o What have been successful moments of accountability in the history of this system? What factors made that possible? In the final analysis, the bureaucracy is accountable to whom?

Metrics for Evaluation:
- o What metrics, if any, are used to evaluate the success or necessity of bureaucratic growth?
- o How does the bureaucracy evaluate its own administrative performance?
- o How do students experience the outcomes of this expanded bureaucracy, better support or more friction?
- o What would "better metrics" look like, and who would reinforce them?

Project Requirements and Deliverables:

1. **Preliminary "Analyst's Desk" Presentation:**

   Research Requirements
   2*n interviews done, where n is the number of people in your team
   Please interview at least two different user "types" to get a sense of various parts of the system, e.g. students and faculty, or faculty and admin, or insiders and outsiders, or grantees and granters, etc.

   Presentation Requirements
   - ○ Share with us your evidence for, and current conclusions about:
     - i. What is the CURRENT FRAME this system is operating under, and how is it currently being experienced? Please provide rich evidence (quotes, video clips, etc.) for your insights.
     - ii. What is a POTENTIAL REFRAME that might resolve the problems or gaps you have identified? It could involve the institutional systems of Stanford (e.g. a reformed bureaucracy) or not (e.g. a more anti-institutional, grassroots approach). Propose new design imperatives for this potential solution, or a potential evaluation framework as to its success.
   - ○ This presentation is meant to be more of an analyst's "studio tour" than a polished pitch. Please allocate your resources towards conversing, analyzing and gathering evidence – there are *no* grades here for aesthetics or polish, only the quality of your thinking.

   You will have 15-20 minutes to present to select members of the teaching team. Come prepared to receive targeted, supportive feedback.

2. **Final "Immersion" Presentation:**

Research Requirements
3*n interviews done (in total, including the 2*n from before) where n is the number of people in your team

The final presentation has four main phases, meant to create a compelling storytelling arc.

- ○ **IMMERSE** us in the STORY-IN. What frame is the system operating under? Make us feel it! This can be through storytelling, a designed experience, or whatever you believe will serve your goals best.
- ○ **EXPLAIN** the current FRAME. How does it make sense? Why are things this way? Bring us along your research journey, sharing how you arrived at your key findings. Please provide rich evidence (quotes, video clips, etc.)
- ○ **EXPLAIN** a potential REFRAME. How can we look at this problem differently? Why is this a promising REFRAME? What opportunities, or potential new solutions, does this reframe offer? Please provide rich evidence (quotes, video clips, etc.)
- ○ **IMMERSE** us in the STORY-OUT. How would it feel to operate under this reframe? This should feel grounded and realistic, based on what you feel is possible. Show us what this experience would be like. This can be through storytelling, a designed experience, or whatever you believe will serve your goals best.

You will have 15-20 minutes to present to the teaching team, your peers and select guests who are concerned members of the bureaucracy. Your core audience is your guests, and your core aim is to make a grounded, but generative case for change. Good luck!