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[Home](#) [News](#) [Faculty](#)

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To Monitor Office Behavior, Colleges Add Windows to Professors' Doors

And faculty members, to regain their privacy, hang curtains or tape up paperwork

By Peter Schmidt

A few questions for college faculty members who are reading this article in their offices, alone, with their doors closed:

Can anyone else in your building see you now?

Are you visible enough to be hesitant to do anything there you would not do in public? If someone were to accuse you of some outrageous act—say, dancing around your desk wearing nothing but a feather boa—would anyone else in the building be able to peer into the room to ascertain the truth? What about a much more serious accusation of sexual harassment?

As you answer such questions, are you glancing over at a window located in or near your office door?

If you repeatedly answered yes to those questions, you are hardly alone. In fact, there is a decent chance that administrators arranged to have that window installed partly because they knew it would make you think about how visible you are.

That glass portal, it turns out, is a window into the thinking of college administrations. And what it reveals is a profound ambivalence about whether, in this day and age, faculty members should work in rooms where no one can see them.

"Society has moved us to have more observable interactions," says Janice M. Abraham, president of United Educators, a higher-education insurance and risk-management company. Considering that completely private settings provide opportunities for sexual harassment and other untoward behavior—as well as false allegations of such deeds—installing office windows to afford a view into the room "is certainly a reasonable practice," she says.

Seeing Danger

Of course, safety and security are hardly the only considerations, or even the main ones, prompting colleges to install windows in or near professors' doors. Being able to look through them lets people enter or leave the room without worrying that the swinging door might clock someone on the other side. It also lets students

determine, without potentially disruptive knocking, if faculty members are in their offices and free to talk.

Architects, who encourage the installation of such windows as a means of allowing "borrowed" light to pass in and out of offices, argue that the windows provide academic buildings with a feeling of openness that fosters collaboration and a sense of community. Such "open" work environments have become all the rage in corporate America in recent years, and many colleges have embraced the idea that offices should be structured in ways that promote interaction and teamwork.

That said, the goal of allowing borrowed light to flow in and out of faculty offices can be accomplished by placing interior windows *above* doorways, too high up to be peered through, or installing frosted- or etched-glass windows that allow light to pass through without affording a view.

If the window is clear and at eye level, however, there is a good chance that considerations of safety, security, and legal liability were raised by the administrators who worked with architects to determine the room's specifications.

Although no national organization involved with educational-facility design or campus risk management has formally urged colleges to install interior windows on faculty offices for such purposes, administrators at a growing number of colleges have been factoring them into building plans, often at considerable added expense, to discourage sexual harassment, violence, and false accusations of such behavior. Long thought of as necessary to help people keep an eye on students in meeting and study rooms on campus, office windows now also are commonly thought of as a means of ensuring faculty members are not hidden from sight in their interactions with others.

"If there is something horrible that happened on your campus, you start to think about it more," says Carole C. Wedge, president of Shepley Bulfinch, a Boston-based architecture firm.

Mark Rodgers, the University of Denver's in-house architect, says his institution began using transparent, rather than translucent, glass in such windows for security reasons about a decade ago, at the urging of an academic-program director who had seen a former colleague at another college accused of inappropriate behavior during a private, unwitnessed meeting. Mr. Rodgers's office lets the deans or directors of academic programs decide what kinds of windows they want for those working under them, and many discuss the matter with their faculty and staff members. Typically

they choose an arrangement that allows employees the option of privacy. "Most often, they decide on clear-glass sidelights with blinds," he says.

Steven H. Kaplan, president of the University of New Haven, says clear interior windows are now standard in most of his institution's new or newly renovated faculty offices, and administrators there are given the option of having them as well. "People feel more comfortable when there is openness on all sides," he says.

Blind Spots

There is a big crack in the argument for such windows, however: It rests on the assumption that faculty members will not permanently block them, with blinds or otherwise. That assumption, it turns out, has almost no basis in reality. The desire of administrators to deny faculty members complete privacy bumps up against the desire of faculty members to maintain it, even if that means sacrificing the borrowed light and other benefits such windows afford.

Mary P. Cox, Virginia Commonwealth University's in-house architect, says faculty members at its recently built business school were "very disturbed" by the installation of windows affording views into their offices. "They don't want to be sitting at their desk looking like a lab specimen for anybody walking in the corridor," she says.

Persius C. Rickes, president of Rickes Associates, a Boston-based firm that plans higher-education facilities, has made a hobby of mentally cataloging, during her tours of academic buildings, the lengths faculty members will go to to avoid being looked in on. She estimates that at least 90 percent deliberately obstruct the view in some way. They tape up course-related paperwork, hang curtains, install stained glass, create tchotchke displays—whatever it takes. Their desire for privacy, she says, entails "privacy in its entirety," not just spatial or acoustic, but visual as well.

"Personally, I don't care to have somebody walk down the hall and look in to see me. I feel exposed and a little vulnerable," says Patrick D. Nolan, a professor of sociology at the University of South Carolina, who has hung up poster board and a book cover to block an eye-level window in his door.

Elementary and secondary schools routinely prohibit their employees from blocking such windows, out of a desire to protect children. College officials, however, have shown an unwillingness to take such a step, perhaps because they fear the outcome would be faculty rebellion.

Professors' sense of vulnerability in being seen makes sense to Ann H. Franke, president of Wise Results, a Washington firm that

advises colleges on risk management. She questions the assumption that windows in or near office doors offer any safety benefit, especially considering how college employees are widely advised to try to stay hidden in locked offices if ever faced with a Virginia Tech-like shooting situation.

Colleges, she says, can achieve many of the safety and security benefits associated with such windows by giving faculty members one simple piece of advice: When a student is in your office, prop open the door.

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