Visit Kansas University Chancellor Robert Hemenway's office, and you may not see Mary Burg, but the executive assistant to the chancellor is there.

"I'm at his back door," Burg said. "You don't see me. If you come into the office and you ask for me, you have to go through a little maze to get back to me."

For nearly two decades, Burg has been Hemenway's backup, his assistant, his ear and, at times, his mouthpiece. She's a behind-the-scenes player and insider to the operations of the major public university of about 30,000 students.

"She is the chancellor's right hand, so to speak, and I depend upon her a great deal to communicate my wishes," Chancellor Robert Hemenway said. "Frequently she is asked to explain what the chancellor may mean, and she does an excellent job of interpretation when needed to do so."

Burg, who held a similar post with Hemenway at the University of Kentucky, came to KU in 1996 not long after the chancellor's arrival.

"Right away, everyone took to Mary," said Kathleen McCluskey-Fawcett, professor of psychology and a former vice provost."Mary's really the heart and soul of the Chancellor's Office."
Burg admittedly struggles to explain all her many roles within Strong Hall.

"It's really a jack-of-all-trades position," she said.

Officially, she is Hemenway’s executive assistant and chief of staff in the Chancellor’s Office. She’s Hemenway’s liaison to such entities as the Board of Regents and KU Endowment Association. But she also is a troubleshooter and a fire extinguisher, putting out flames or stopping others from starting.

"I guess you could also say I’m the fixer," she said. "It’s not all ad hoc, but a lot of it is, which is why I love it."

Burg handles many assorted issues that often arrive at the Chancellor’s Office. If a former student who didn’t complete a degree wonders what it would take to finally receive a diploma, Burg may take on the case and assist that person. If a current student has an issue regarding a scholarship, Burg may investigate and find out what the Chancellor’s Office can do to solve the issue.

"I just try to eliminate the bureaucracy as much as I can," she said.

Internally, she attends some meetings with Hemenway and other administrators and makes sure that the promises or directives laid out in the meeting actually get carried out. If someone needs the chancellor at some point in the day, Burg can help make the link. But, Burg and the chancellor aren’t attached at the hip.

"I’m not like his military attache person who goes always beside him taking notes," she said. "He would hate that."

When students, faculty or others have met with Hemenway, the chancellor may take them out his back door to Mary, where she handles the next step.

"My job is to help the chancellor, to make him as successful as he can possibly be," she said. "And there’s a village of us that do that."

Burg's route to her current post was a bit circuitous. The Eden, N.C., native lists newspaper reporting as one of her early occupations, followed by a stint as a VISTA volunteer in Raleigh, N.C.

She also worked as an arts council director and managed a modern dance company before assuming her first post in higher education at Penn State University. Burg later moved to Kentucky, accompanying her husband, who was doing post-doctoral work.

She was working for the dean of arts and sciences at Kentucky when Hemenway arrived from the University of Oklahoma in 1989. Burg began working with Hemenway in 1990. She marvels at the longevity of their working relationship.

"Isn’t that amazing?" she said. "I didn’t intend on having the same job and working for the same person for 18 years, and yet that’s what I’ve done. I never would have guessed when I started working for him in 1990 that I would end up in Kansas and end up at a job that I absolutely love."

Hemenway said their long history means Burg understands his values and goals for the institution.

"I trust her and her judgment," he said, "and she frequently gives me good advice."

Burg seems to bring the breezes of her native North Carolina to her Midwestern post.

She laughs freely and can put people at ease.
"She is the one who keeps track of everything going on in the Chancellor's Office," McCluskey-Fawcett said, "and she does it with such grace and humor."