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## **Will social critique force the faculty role to evolve?**

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The American college professor has traditionally filled three primary roles in institutions of higher education: that of teacher, of scholar, and of servant leader. But a call of alarm has been sounded of late and some suggest that the economic turbulence of recent years has given rise to a Pandora's box of public scrutiny resulting in fissures that threaten to fracture the venerable triumvirate. The purpose of this essay is to examine the evolution of the faculty's role in higher education, to invite thoughtful comparison between these past and present functions, and to provoke discussion regarding the future of the professoriate in an increasingly critical social milieu.

**Keywords:** faculty, professoriate

### **Teaching**

Since the inception of higher education in the United States, the faculty has comprised the nucleus of the educational atom. Modeled after the European universities, the first American colleges recognized the value of utilizing their own graduates as faculty (Geiger, 2011). Thus evolved the ancient model of education, whereby knowledge had been bestowed from a learned professor unto a novice apprentice through a format of lecture and Socratic questioning. Although pedagogies have since greatly expanded and society no longer views the professor as the omniscient master writing on the tabula rasa, this essential role of teacher, of examiner, of guide, still lies at the very heart of what it means to work in academia.

Most constituents would agree that teaching should remain the professor's primary purpose, yet often denigrate the very role that facilitates learning. Ernest Boyer (1992) emphasizes the student-centered nature of America's first colleges: "teaching was a central – even sacred – function" (p. 87). However, as viewed through a modern day lens, society has since drastically devalued teachers and the profession of teaching: "today, teaching is often viewed as a routine function, tacked on, something almost anyone can do" (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). Society trivializes the profession even further by encouraging individuals to obtain teaching licensures as mere fail-safes, a sentiment

echoed by George Bernard Shaw's oft-repeated line "those who can, do; those who can't, teach" (McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal verbs).

However, while public esteem for educators has certainly decreased, college instructors report that their enthusiasm for the art of teaching has not waned. A 2010 study entitled "Why Do They Teach?" reveals that college professors rated "the joy of teaching your subject . . . as the strongest factor contributing to their job satisfaction and persistence in the classroom" (Marston, para 17). Leslie (2002) concurs that faculty "derive measurable job satisfaction from teaching" (p. 69), and even indicates that the intrinsic benefits associated with teaching can be more important than extrinsic factors in terms of job selection.

Other studies further support teaching as most professors' *raison d'être*. "By more than 2-1, they consider teaching more interesting and more important" than research (Schuster, as cited in Bok, 2013, p. 186). From an international perspective, American professors have also been found to gain more pleasure from their teaching responsibilities than professors in comparable nations (Bok, 2013). Additionally, a study of professors who prolonged retirement until after the age of 70 found that the primary reason they had continued their work was because they enjoyed it, and specifically that they enjoyed teaching more than any other professional task (Dorfman, 2000).

### **The Public Demand for Accountability**

Unfortunately, even the assurance of a faculty that avows an affinity for teaching and an inherent belief in the process of education no longer wholly satisfies an increasingly critical public. Constituents today demand not only quantifiable but widely disseminated evidence of learning outcomes. A much-publicized study conducted by Arum and Roska (2011) indicates that students demonstrate few measurable learning gains during their college years, especially regarding the development of writing and critical thinking skills. Findings such as these have led critics to question the effectiveness of college faculty and to cast doubt on even the value of the college degree in today's precarious economic climate. Reports of rising tuition prices, high unemployment and underemployment rates for new graduates, and overwhelming student loan debt have increased the public demand for evidence justifying costs and assuring satisfactory return on investment (Bok, 2011).

### **The Risks of Linking Assessment to Accountability**

Historically the college classroom has been considered inviolable, and collegiate faculty has primarily been shielded from external pressures to modify instructional practices to meet a standard set of goals and objectives. However, "ultimately, public institutions of higher education are broadly answerable to the people who support them" (Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011, p. 74). The resulting calls for greater accountability measures threaten to erode faculty autonomy in many facets, not the least of which is distancing faculty from the most creative aspects of teaching, such as curriculum design. Economic pressures resulting in transformations in university management and a move toward a business model have also given rise to curricular changes. Champagne (2011)

asserts that when employment is used as an assessment outcome “the academic freedom of individual faculty members is eroded by the imperative to reshape course content in light of the demands of the job market” (p. 3). Additionally, one only needs to look to the K-12 arena to view myriad examples of teacher demotivation and dissatisfaction, widely anecdotally attributed to the mandated adoption of state prescribed curriculums and the resulting pressures of high stakes testing (Berryhill, Linney, & Fromewick, 2009).

Instituting greater accountability measures not only diminishes professional *joie de vivre*, it also casts doubt on the professors’ very ability to do what they love to do. Faculty members are viewed as the bedrock of academic institutions and are employed with the mutual understanding that they possess the requisite capabilities to fulfill the duties of their assignments. As such they possess a unique level of professional autonomy in comparison with administrative staff (Kuo, 2009). However, in an environment where administrators become the collectors, analyzers, and disseminators of aggregate rank data, it is not far-fetched to envision an institutional blame game whereby the professors become sacrificial lambs and contention abounds. Lewis and Altbach (1996) emphasize the faculty’s pessimistic outlook toward faculty/administrator relationships and note that internationally faculty generally describe these associations as only fair or poor, believe that faculty has little influence in shaping policy, and do not believe the “fractious” nature of the relationships can be improved (p. 3). They also express concern that “an alarming number [of faculty members] feel victimized” (p. 4) because of trends such as increasing assessment efforts.

Bok (2013) states that “top-down efforts to measure progress for the purposes of accountability almost always arouse suspicion and opposition from the faculty, and not without reason” (p. 196). Concerns that student assessment data could be used by states as a central component of performance-based funding models are no longer purely speculative. Additionally, it is feasible that assessment data could even be used institutionally to justify awarding raises or bonuses, creating friction among faculty members and tempting some to teach to the test, an outcome that would result in the erosion of student learning gains in key areas such as critical thinking skills. The concern also exists that the data obtained will not be useful in any capacity and all efforts put forth throughout the process of collection and analysis will be nothing more than a futile exercise in waste of time, money, and manpower.

Thus, as the public continues to demand more evidence of student learning gains, it is important that institutions emphasize the limitations related to efforts of standardizing assessment. Schmidlein and Berdahl state “complex learning outcomes are extremely difficult to identify, to agree on and then assign priorities, and to communicate to government officials and the public” (2011, p. 79). For example, in some disciplines such as the fine arts it can be nearly impossible to define and to quantitatively assess standard objectives. Moreover, many faculty members view additional assessment as simply redundant. They argue that course artifacts such as projects, compositions, and exams are the true measures of the specific student learning that occur within the confines of the course. Additionally, they contend that accountability is already inextricably tied to

student learning in the form of student evaluations, which serve as safeguards to learning and provide valuable qualitative feedback.

Despite public concern regarding faculty quality, Schmidlein & Berdahl (2011) assert that “the assessment of student learning outcomes and their implications for academic programs appear best accomplished within institutions, by faculty, who are the ones with detailed knowledge of the students and their academic progress and accomplishments” ( p. 80). However, as these learning artifacts are not transmittable in aggregate form, the public is often unaware to what extent student assessment actually takes place. Thus, it is imperative that the professor adopt the additional role of public relations person. Faculty members today must assure the public that they are skilled planners, facilitators, and evaluators of student learning. In essence, they must defend their competency to teach.

### **Faculty Workload**

In addition to how well college faculty are preparing students, how much time they spend doing so has also been a recent target for media scrutiny. A recent Forbes article quotes Governor of Wisconsin Scott Walker as postulating “maybe it’s time for faculty and staff to start thinking about teaching more classes and doing more work” (Lindsay, 2015, para 1). Similar criticisms abound in other outlets despite evidence that indicates “American professors seem to be working longer, not shorter, hours, and classroom hours have not declined in recent years” (Altbach, 2011, p. 238). Schuster and Finkelstein (2006) indicate that between 1984 and 1998 the number of hours collegiate faculty worked per week increased from 40 to 49, despite no increase in typical wage earners work week. Additionally, they found that “the proportion of faculty working more than 50 hours a week has doubled since 1972, rising from a significant minority (23.2% in 1972) to two-fifths by 1998” (p.81). Dennison (2012) also notes that faculty members report work weeks that extend well beyond the traditional 40-hour week, often averaging 55 to 65 hours per week.

### **Public Input**

However, critics who question faculty productivity cite Zemsky and Massy (2005) whose theory of the “academic ratchet” (p. 15) supports the public perception that faculty members neglect their teaching duties in order to spend more time on research. They note that faculty greatly benefit from receiving their own undergraduate educations at a “smaller, teaching-oriented institution,” but that “after years of graduate teaching and experience in the academic profession, however, college faculty learned to seek “relief” from the responsibilities of teaching, mentoring, and curriculum development within their departments and institutions” (Zemsky & Massy, 2005, p. 26). By conferring such duties to administrative staff, professors can increase their allotted amount of discretionary time, ostensibly to increase their chances of obtaining tenure. Zemsky and Massy observe that “faculty everywhere understood that professional status depended as much, if not more, on one’s standing within a discipline as on one’s role as a master instructor within an increasingly complex institution” (p. 26).

Theories such as this and findings from other productivity studies such as have resulted in a call to action such that “some legislatures [are] considering mandated faculty teaching loads” (Schmidlein & Berdahl, 2011, p. 78), an act that would threaten to undermine faculty autonomy. However, Milem, Berger, and Dey (2000) found that while time spent on teaching and research correlates with type of institution, “across the system of education, there was a significant increase in the amount of time faculty reported allocating to teaching and preparing for teaching” (pp. 466-467). Authors of the same study acknowledge that faculty members have likewise increased the amount of time spent on research endeavors. Thus, their findings did not support the assumption that increases in one area of responsibility (i.e. research) negatively affects another area of responsibility (i.e. teaching). This lends credence to the theory that college professors are indeed working more hours overall.

### **Teaching Versus Research**

Philip Altbach (2011) asserts that “the appropriate balance between teaching and research in academe, goes to the heart of the university as an institution and is crucial for the academic profession” (p. 238). And while both the general public and faculty agree that institutions of higher education should prioritize teaching over research, it is a commonly accepted fact that the tenure system does not reward excellence in teaching to the same extent that it rewards excellence in research. A 1993 study by Fairweather (as cited in Chen, 2015) found that rank and salary increased with increases in research output, but decreased when associated with teaching load. Leslie (2002) affirms that correlation between faculty status and salary with research productivity. Additionally, a disheartening follow-up study from Fairweather (2005) indicates a continuation of that trend: “despite decade-long efforts to enhance the value of teaching in 4-year colleges and universities, this study shows that spending more time on teaching, particularly classroom instruction, still means lower pay. Traditional scholarly productivity remains the strongest behavioral predictor of faculty pay” (p. 418).

However, this is not to say that universities do not value the teaching abilities of their faculty. Instead, just as it is difficult to quantitatively assess student learning, it is very difficult to assess teaching expertise. It is undisputed that the faculty is the “intellectual capital” (Schuster, 2011, p. 4) of the institution. It is an entirely different matter to put a dollar value on an individual’s worth for a valuable but intangible good, especially since there is an implied level of competency. Thus, in order to remain equitable, many institutions choose to use the publish or perish razor as the best quantitative measure available to separate the good from the great.

### **Scholarship**

Conducting scholarly research as a primary professorial task is a relatively new occurrence. Research was not a consideration in the early American colleges; it was not until the United States began to require research for the purposes of increasing national security and eradicating disease *and* the federal government began funding that research

that it truly took root (Derek Bok, 2013). Although large-scale research endeavors and significant discoveries of the past immediately come to mind when the typical constituent imagines the science professor's role in academic research, the average professor's daily contributions to the research community likely remains unclear. Schuster (2006) agrees that the role of researcher is a less well-defined role than that of teacher. As such, scholarly research tasks can run the gamut from traditional scientific research conducted in a laboratory of a large research-based institution to searching for articles in the library in order to keep up to date with advances in one's field in a community college (Schuster, 2006). Thus, it is especially important for the purposes of public edification to note that scholarly productivity can be operationalized differently in different types of institutions.

### **Benefits of Scholarly Activity**

It is noteworthy that while studies show that research efforts resulting in publication are increasing at all types of higher education institutions, Schuster (2006) finds that when queried about how they would like to spend their time, "faculty members almost universally expressed a desire to shift some portion of their time from teaching to research" (p. 87). Since evidence has substantiated the assertion that most professors enjoy teaching, and indeed most prefer teaching more than conducting research, credence is again given to the assumption that research is more highly valued than teaching in institutions of higher education. In fact, beyond the external rewards of financial gain and job security, recognition of scholarly productivity has been shown to be positively associated with job satisfaction. Bozeman and Gaughan (2011) find that "believing that one's departmental colleagues appreciate one's research contributions is the most important predictor" of job satisfaction (p. 175). This positive emphasis on the social aspect of scholarship moderates other negative assertions regarding the myriad pressures associated with publishing requirements, including the lack of available time and funding.

A professor's scholarly work also positively contributes to the whole of the institution. Especially in elite institutions where reputation is especially meaningful, works of particular importance or interest give a university cachet and can provide the extra hook necessary to compete for the most qualified students. Even at lower and mid-level institutions, and in the light of current economic times, an influential professor can lure in potential students with the promise of collaborating on an interesting research topic. Thus, in some regards it is the professor's role to act as a kind of academic bait to attract both the most capable students and the most qualified colleagues.

### **Service**

At odds with Gene Rice's idea of the "complete scholar" (as cited in Plater, p. 36) is the notion that service to one's university and community is a mere footnote in the broader discussion of the teaching/research debate. Indeed, the third traditional faculty role is most often described as tertiary in terms of importance. Regularly (and perhaps purposefully) termed last when listing the job functions of professors, studies indicate that faculty members consider this facet of their workload subordinate to both teaching

and research (Reybold & Corda, 2011). Labeled by Reybold and Corda as the “lesser role” (p. 121), described by Brazeau (2003) as a victim of the “middle-child syndrome” (p. 1), and referred to by Ward (2003) as a peripheral task that is “thought outside the “real” work of scholars” (p. 3), the service role is often considered superfluous. These assertions are reflected in the faculty evaluation process as well despite attempts by scholars like Boyer (1990) to broaden the definition and valuation of scholarship to equally include all tenets of the triad. Unfortunately, although this ideal is valued in theory, it has not been practically applied, a fact that is evidenced in surveys of deans and directors’ rankings of task importance wherein commitment to service consistently ranked last in terms of earning a promotion or gaining tenure (Green, 2008).

### **Definition of Service**

Perhaps one of the reasons service contributions are undervalued can be explained by the nebulous nature of the role itself. Many researchers point out that conceptually the service role is often considered too broad and overly vague, poorly understood by faculty, administrators, and the general public, and replete with expectations that are ill-defined and inadequately communicated by institutions (Schuster, 2008; Ward, 2003; Reybold & Corda, 2011; O’Meara, 2002). In fact, Reybold and Corda found that new faculty members often held a “distorted” view of the service role, did not clearly understand what type of tasks were associated with this role, and had little comprehension of the requisite time commitment (p. 132). It appears that this uncertainty has also been handed down to the faculty progeny. A study conducted by Austin (2002) investigated doctoral students’ perceptions of professorial tasks and concluded that the students had little knowledge regarding the faculty service role (pps. 133-134). Moreover, an earlier study indicated that only 19% of doctoral students felt that they were adequately prepared by their programs to participate in service related tasks (Golde, as cited in Austin, 2002).

Although new and future faculty members may struggle to define the service role, veteran professors recognize their responsibility to internal constituents. As noted, Driscoll and Lynton (1999) emphasize that “no widely accepted typology or categorization exists of the kinds of service” (p. 16). Thus, service tasks run the gamut from serving on faculty committees to advising student groups to performing administrative tasks, and these responsibilities may vary widely within different institutions. Additionally, many tasks such as answering student e-mail and mentoring can be time consuming and are only meritorious in the sense that they provide intrinsic rewards. However, in light of heightened social criticism, it is important that professors understand that the service role should also extend to include their external constituents. For example, expanding the service role to include outreach to the K-12 arena would demonstrate a commitment to the community at large and would likewise provide a defense to those who criticize faculty workload.



## Conclusion

The faculty role has traditionally consisted of three main components: teaching, research, and service. However, the professoriate is currently enduring a period of unrest. Social, economic, and political factors have combined to create an environment where commentary, assessment, and judgement have become the norm. As a result, today's professor can no longer afford to rely simply on competence in these three areas. Therefore, the role of the professor must evolve. As institutions of higher education become increasingly accountable to their external constituents, college professors can no longer afford to leave their heads in the sand. Instead, they must become more aware of perceived societal obligations, and they must respond appropriately. This will include taking on more tasks and will eventually result in the expansion of the faculty role.

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