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Reversing the Telescope:

Viewing Individual Activities within a Collective Context

Academic institutions, and especially metropolitan universities, must increasingly view the work of faculty members within a collective framework so as to ensure that each contributes optimally to the multiple and complex institutional mission. In order to set and carry out institutional priorities, the university must have the flexibility to assign different tasks to different units. In turn, there is a need for different profiles of activity for individual faculty members within the unit. This flexibility requires equivalence of recognition and rewards, which in turn is possible only with the assurance of equivalence of standards and achievement among the triad of teaching, professional service, and research. Such equivalences can exist because all three can constitute scholarship. Demonstrating this scholarship requires adequate documentation so as to subject all dimensions of faculty work to peer review.

When we review the work of faculty, we use a telescope to single out the individual from among the group. We judge a person's work in isolation and make little or no attempt to place it within the broader context of the collective task of his or her department, college, or university. We essentially take for granted that anything the individual does in research, teaching, and professional service is consistent with and contributes to the mission of the institution.

I believe that it is time to reverse the telescope so that we can view individuals as part of the departmental or collegiate unit within which they operate and assess the extent to which their work contributes to collective needs and priorities. To do so is essential for any organization, academic or not. An organization ultimately cannot function as a collection of autonomous individuals in which everyone pursues personal priorities and in which the overall achievements consist, in essence, of a casual aggregate of unitary ac-

tivities. That, of course, is an exaggerated description of the traditional view of an academic institution as a community of independent scholars. This community operates within a shared intellectual and ethical framework that ensures a degree or coherence and reciprocal reinforcement as well as common standards. Furthermore, faculty members act collectively in certain areas, such as the overall design of a degree program, the content of a core curriculum, and the setting of degree requirements. However, even in these shared decisions, participation is not universal. And beyond that degree of commonality, most individual faculty members follow their own drummer in the content and manner of their teaching, the emphasis of their research, and the amount and kind of their professional service.

Paradoxically, the apparent individual autonomy is actually somewhat illusory under the currently prevalent system of faculty expectations and rewards. That system is pretty much "one size fits all." Almost without exception, promotion and tenure in universities depend in first instance on a substantial amount of research leading to refereed publications. Serious attention to teaching is also increasingly expected, but its quality and creativity are usually documented only by student evaluations.

Professional service activities, listed but rarely documented at all and even less frequently assessed, are given little recognition. As a result, junior faculty members put their advancement at risk if they spend much time either on pedagogic innovation or on a creative outreach project—even if such activities would fit both their personal preference and departmental needs.

Metropolitan universities cannot meet their multiple tasks as long as these conditions prevail. We must find ways of striking a better balance between individual autonomy and collective needs. A substantial degree of individual autonomy is necessary so as to optimize individual initiative and creativity. It is important that academic institutions continue to be communities of professionals who are encouraged to generate new ideas and embark on new ventures. However, in this era of shrinking resources and increasing demands, it is equally important to view individual activities within a more collective context and to have the flexibility to vary the profile of these activities so as to achieve an optimal fit between collective needs and individual preferences.

I will argue in this article that the necessary flexibility can be achieved

only if there exists equivalence of recognition and rewards across the spectrum of faculty intellectual activities. In turn, such equivalence is justified only if there exists, as well, equivalence of standards and achievement. Such equivalence is possible because teaching, professional service, and research can indeed constitute scholarship of equivalent intellectual challenge and creativity. And the equivalence can be assured because all these activities can be fully documented and subjected to equally searching peer review.

To bring this flexibility about is important for all colleges and universities. It is essential for our metropolitan universities because they are subject to a broader and more complex array of demands than other academic institutions. Hence, it is especially important for them to be able to set priorities and to differentiate among collective as well as individual tasks.

The Complex and Multidimensional Mission of Metropolitan Universities

Metropolitan universities face especially complex and difficult tasks across the whole range of the scholarly activities of teaching, professional service, and research. Within the broad category of undergraduate teaching, our institutions must meet the very wide variety of instructional needs of a highly heterogeneous student body, diverse in background, preparation, age, career aspirations, and mode of attendance. Most metropolitan universities, whether located in the core city or not, reach out to students with a lower average family income, a higher average age, and a less adequate secondary preparation than is the case for more traditional institutions. More students are not native English speakers. A higher percentage of students attend on a part-time basis; place-bound and time-constrained, they often combine their studies with full-time jobs and family obligations.

In addition, the broad array of public and private sector organizations, enterprises, and agencies that characterize most metropolitan regions create multiple and increasingly diverse demands for graduate and professional degree programs as well as for continuing professional education.

As a result of these various factors, metropolitan universities face a particularly broad and complex spectrum of instructional tasks that pose very difficult pedagogical challenges. They require a high degree of creativity and innovation in content and modes of instruction, as well as in the format

and method of delivery.

Metropolitan universities face the same kind of enhanced demands in research if they are to be responsive to the needs of their metropolitan region. Increasingly, our institutions need to engage in applied and problem-oriented research, which in many ways creates a greater intellectual challenge than much traditional basic inquiry. It is likely to involve a variety of disciplines and require a collaborative approach, something we don't know how to do terribly well.

What is even more important and more difficult is the need to tackle the complexities of real problems. To use Don Schon's well known metaphor from his book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, engagement in applied research forces us to move from the "high hard ground," where problems are well defined and variables controlled, to the "swampy lowlands...[where] problems are messy and confusing." We need to make this move because, as Schon put it in a recent article in *Change*, "the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or to society at large, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern."

And, of course, the plunge into the complexity and messiness of real situations is quite inevitable in the third broad dimension of a metropolitan university's mission, professional service. In booklet published in 1985 by the National Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities (NASULGC), Elman and Smock define professional expertise *that contributes to the mission of the institution* [emphasis mine]. This perspective places individual activity firmly within a collective context.

My recent monograph, *Making the Case for Professional Service*, discusses the nature and importance of professional service in some detail and describes how it poses as much of an intellectual challenge as does applied research or the creative instruction described earlier. Indeed, quality professional service almost invariably overlaps with these other dimensions of scholarly work. Working with an external constituency, government agency, private enterprise, or community group requires the best kind of professional expertise. But, it also demands creativity. Because no two situations or problems are identical, there rarely exists a packaged solution or set protocol. Almost every professional service project will require a degree of adaptation and innovation. It will also have, in just about every case, a strong element

of teaching and learning as the clients gain understanding of their situation and enhance their ability to cope with it.

In the area of professional service, the demands on metropolitan universities are again particularly varied and challenging. Because of their location, our institutions are involved in what is probably the most intractable set of societal problems at this time: the condition of our urban areas. Furthermore, metropolitan universities interact with a broad range of constituencies, including municipal and often state governments, small as well as large businesses and other private sector enterprises, and many different not-for-profit and community agencies and organizations. The impact of this broad constituency base on demands for preparatory and continuing graduate and professional education has already been mentioned. It also clearly affects the need for professional service.

Thus, metropolitan universities face intellectual challenges of particular difficulty in all three classical dimensions of institutional mission, teaching, research, and service. And, metropolitan universities must place great emphasis on all three, unlike research universities on the one hand and four-year liberal arts colleges on the other, each of which in its own way can place primary emphasis on one of the three areas. Liberal arts colleges are primarily teaching institutions, and, although many of them carry out both research and professional service, those functions are secondary. Similarly, a research university is primarily a research-oriented institution. It can take the position that, while trying to do a good job in instruction and outreach, those dimensions are not its primary mission. But metropolitan universities do not have that luxury of choice. They must pursue all three of these activities and accommodate in their institutional mission a multidimensionality that is enormously demanding.

The Need to Set Priorities and Make Choices

Metropolitan universities, for much the same reasons that make their tasks more challenging, also are under greater pressure to set priorities. Their regional focus exposes them to a greater variety and larger number of external demands than is usually the case for more traditional institutions. Opportunities as well as expectations abound across the board. The metropolitan area has instructional needs that range from degree programs for full-

time students just out of high school to short courses and workshops for practicing professionals. There are likely to be calls for professional service and technical assistance from large numbers of organizations, agencies, and groups in both the public and the private sector. And in many, indeed most of these, effective outreach will also require applied research.

But, with resources severely limited, a metropolitan university cannot teach everything to everyone, it cannot carry out research in all areas, and it cannot provide professional outreach to all potential clients. It must make choices and set priorities .

To some extent, these decisions need to be made at the institutional level. For example, a metropolitan university can decide as a matter of policy to limit professional programs to certain areas, to emphasize part-time graduate programs, to develop systematic collaborative programs with certain constituencies (such as the local school system and/or small businesses), and similarly to develop centers for problem-oriented research efforts in some areas but not in others. But, these broad delineations of institutional mission need to be disaggregated into more specific statements of priorities and responsibilities of each individual school or college, and these, in turn, to the level of the academic unit such as a department or program. The priorities of the institution must guide the priorities of each unit. For example, when a metropolitan university decides to give high priority to collaboration with the local school system, it must translate this into unit-level specifics: What will be the involvement of the school or college of education? What will the arts and sciences college be expected to contribute to the collaborative effort? Which departments need to be included? What other units within the institution should be part of this outreach?

In this fashion, the overarching mission of the university is translated into quite specific expectations for its component units at the collegiate and departmental level. Different units are likely to have very differentiated tasks. Some departments with large introductory service courses might be asked to place special emphasis on continuing innovation and improvement of these offerings, making, for example, optimal use of educational technology. Some professional colleges and some arts and sciences departments might be expected to devote substantial resources to outreach. And many units, across the board, will be requested to provide support for major basic

and applied research projects under the aegis of special centers or institutes. Thus, the profile of unit activities is likely to vary widely even though it is likely to include some elements of the triad of teaching, research, and professional service in all cases.

Determining Collective Tasks is a Collective Responsibility

Setting specific tasks for its operating units is necessary for any complex organization, academic, industrial, or governmental. However, a principal and fundamental feature distinguishes academic institutions from all others. In the spirit of shared governance, collective tasks must be determined in a collaborative way that provides substantial input from the academic professionals—the faculty members who are the ones charged with carrying out the work. On the one hand, proliferation of demands coupled with limited resources makes it impossible for an academic institution to function as a collection of substantially autonomous individuals, each following only personal priorities and preferences. On the other hand, it is equally impossible for such an institution to change into an industrial organization in which tasks are set from the top. Indeed, that model does not work very well even for a nonacademic organization, and it certainly would cripple an academic one. It is essential that faculty members have a substantial—though not fully determining—voice in the delineation of the collective tasks of the unit in which they work. It is equally essential that there remains room as well for individual initiatives that may not appear to fit comfortably or to contribute in the short term to the collective task but, nevertheless, are likely to have long-term benefits.

Thus, it is necessary to develop ongoing processes that ensure appropriate faculty input into discussions between a university's chief academic officer and the deans and directors of individual schools or colleges in which the overall profile of activities of that unit is delineated. In turn, the faculty of an academic department or other subunit within a school or college must participate actively in the determination of the priorities and tasks of that unit. The kinds of decisions that need to be addressed in that collaborative process include, but are not limited, to the following:

- the degree programs to be offered by the unit
- the service courses the unit needs to provide to students in other

departments, including the contributions of the unit to general education and core curricula

- principal research directions of the unit with particular emphasis on contributions to organized interdisciplinary research activities in centers and institutes

- unit contributions to collective outreach activities such as collaboration with local school systems, small business development centers, and multidisciplinary continuing education programs.

The dialogue between dean and department, as well as the dialogue between dean and chief academic officer, must be ongoing. The profile of activities for any academic unit—school or college—or one of its departmental or other subunits, must be projected over several years; but, it must also be reviewed and, where appropriate, adapted on a yearly basis as both needs and resources change.

The rendering of collective accountability on a periodic basis is an essential element of this ongoing process of delineating and adapting collective responsibility. The academic unit needs to be held responsible for accomplishing the agreed-upon shared tasks in accordance with performance standards developed as part of the ongoing dialogue. As Chait pointed out back in 1988, collective rewards can play an important motivating role in recognizing the quality of the unit's aggregate performance. Even in a tight academic budget, there is always some degree of discretion in the allocation of collegiate or departmental funds.

Determining Individual Activities

In turn, once the collective responsibilities of an academic unit are delineated by means of a dialogue between dean and the unit, the faculty members within that unit, under the coordinating leadership of the departmental chair, need to decide who among them does what. The challenge at this stage is to arrive at the optimal match between collective needs, on the one hand, and the preferences and expertise of each individual on the other. These, of course, will already have influenced decisions with regard to the overall activities of the department. To a considerable extent, the decisions will reflect the special interests and capabilities of the faculty members within

the unit.

What is described here is a systematic and collaborative process by which individual assignments are placed within the context of the collective responsibilities of the academic unit in which these individuals work. There is nothing particularly new about this process. It is what happens now in most academic units with regard to the instructional activities of a department or similar unit. Discussions between chief academic officers and deans, and between deans and departments, result in decisions regarding degree programs as well as other teaching tasks of the unit. In turn, decisions are made within the department as to who teaches what, who will take responsibility for the large introductory course, who will teach the graduate seminar, who will supervise the advanced laboratory for majors, etc.

But, there are two principal—and crucial—differences between what happens now in most universities and what is advocated here. In the first place, the recommended process includes the full range of unit activities, including not only teaching but also research and professional service. And secondly, it is more systematic and more collaborative than is usually the case. The common mode of operation in most academic departments is for teaching assignments to be made by means of one-on-one discussions between the department chair and the individual faculty member. The remainder of the department often takes little interest and assumes no responsibility, concerned only that all necessary courses are covered.

The importance of a more collective and inclusive approach was first pointed out by Don Langenberg in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. At issue is not only the principle of shared governance, but also the need to give every individual within the academic unit a stake in each component of the collective task, whether or not that individual is personally involved in the particular activity. When there exists collective accountability and resulting collective rewards, each faculty benefits personally from good performances by his or her colleagues and may forego certain benefits if that performance is inadequate. This sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the full range of departmental activities is essential if, on the one hand, there is to be an insistence on equivalence of quality across the board and, on the other hand, a willingness to accord equivalent recognition and rewards to all work of comparable quality. I will return to this crucial matter presently.

The Need for Flexibility

Flexibility is central to the identification of collective responsibilities at the unit level and of specific tasks for each individual. As I stated earlier, the complex and multidimensional mission of a comprehensive metropolitan university can be met only by means of differences among what the units are doing and, within units, by means of differences in the assignments of individual faculty. Not every department will participate in a collaboration with the local school system, in a major interdisciplinary research program, or in providing large service courses. The profile of responsibilities of an arts and sciences college will differ substantially from that of a professional school, and there will also be variations within these entities. And, at any one time, there will be variations among the principal assignments of individual faculty members, not only in terms of specific activities but also in terms of the balance between research, professional service and outreach, and teaching. For example, at a given period, an individual in a science department may devote most of her or his effort to a major overhaul of undergraduate laboratories to make greater use of computer technology, while one colleague may be asked to concentrate on a major project of applied research and yet another on a collaborative revision of high school science curriculum. For any one individual, there also needs to be flexibility of assignment over time, with the possibility of shifts in emphasis among the principal components of faculty work.

Essential to that kind of flexibility is equivalence of recognition and rewards. An institution can assign different tasks to different units only to the extent to which each of these is deemed of equivalent importance and value to the institution and is rewarded in an equivalent way. And that, of course, holds equally for individuals: there can be variations in profile of activity only to the extent to which the entire range is given equivalent recognition. Or, to put it negatively, as long as research is viewed as the paramount measure of both collective and individual esteem and achievement, an institution will lack the flexibility of deploying its resources in an optimal fashion to meet its multidimensional and complex mission.

But that equivalence of recognition and reward is possible and justified only under one condition: that there exists, as well, equivalence of standards and achievement. The freedom, at both the individual and the collective

level, to concentrate on different portions of the range of activities within the triad of teaching, research, and professional service can exist only to the extent to which work of any kind within that range is held to equivalent standards. Everyone who advocates greater recognition of the need for a broader conception of scholarship must at the same time insist that institutions develop ways of documenting and evaluating the quality of faculty work across the board. At this time, faculty skepticism about the scholarly quality of teaching and outreach is a major barrier to the assignment of individual responsibilities in a flexible manner. In turn, this situation inhibits an institution's ability to define different expectations for different units. The necessary flexibility will not come about until faculty peers—and academic administrators—can judge for themselves that their colleagues' work in areas other than traditional research is intellectually demanding and creative and that it contributes to the knowledge base of their field or profession. What faculty members do in the classroom or in an outreach project must become visible to their peers. It must, as Lee Shulman put it, become community property, amenable to critical peer review. Evaluation of these activities must become part both of the performance reviews of collective units such as departments and the reward system for individual faculty members. Is that a realistic expectation?

For two reasons, I firmly believe that the answer to that question is *yes*. In the first place, the intellectual challenge is equally high across the board, with comparable potential for creativity, for new interpretations and innovative approaches. There exists as great an opportunity for the creation of new knowledge, and hence for scholarship, in designing and carrying out a project of technical assistance, in the development of new approaches to instruction for a highly diverse and nontraditional student body, or in designing and carrying out in the messy world of practice an applied research project as exists in a traditional, basic research effort under controlled laboratory conditions. None of these activities can be carried out adequately by merely taking a packaged solution from the shelf, repeating what has been done before, and ignoring the situation-specific aspects of the current task. Because such specifics exist almost invariably, each of the activities has the potential for creativity and innovation, which, in turn, adds to new understanding and knowledge. That is the key point made by the late Ernest Boyer

in *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1996).

Secondly, it is possible to document these activities and make them visible to colleagues, and hence it is possible to subject them to searching peer review. The nature of scholarship derives as much and more from the process that is followed than from the outcomes it produces. It is manifested by the why and the how something was done and not only by what was done. Scholarship is a habit of the mind, a process in which the scholar analyzes the situation and identifies unique aspects:

- defines the problem
- sets clear objectives
- chooses the most appropriate approach
- reflects on the ongoing process
- makes corrections as necessary
- assesses the outcomes
- draws appropriate inferences to inform future work
- shares what she or he has learned

This list is applicable equally well and with only minor modifications to scholarly research, scholarly teaching, and scholarly outreach activities. And the same is true for the outcomes, which for outreach can be described in terms of the following components:

- meeting the specific goals of the project
- enhancing the capability of the target audience (colleagues, students, or clients) to deal with similar problems in the future
- obtaining new ideas and insights from the project that can enhance the individual's own capabilities and contribute to the knowledge base of the field
- having an impact on other scholarly activities of the individual and his or her colleagues
- contributing to the mission of the institution and the unit of which the individual is a part

We can use different language to describe outcomes, but, whatever the formulation, it will demonstrate their depth and multiplicity.

Portfolios for Teaching and for Professional Service

As Edgerton and his colleagues, as well as others and I, have repeatedly pointed out, the evaluation of an individual's work therefore requires a rich and inclusive documentation that captures the full extent of both process and outcomes. Such a documentation is possible by means of a portfolio of pertinent materials, combining an explanatory personal statement with illustrative work samples and products. Each part should reinforce and illuminate the other. The challenge is to find an effective way of doing this that does not require excessive time either on the part of the individual to be reviewed or on the part of the reviewers.

With adequate documentation, it is possible to evaluate the individual's scholarship. The measures of quality to be applied can be formulated in various ways, of which the following is just one example:

- the depth of expertise and thoroughness of preparation
- the appropriateness of the chosen goals and methods
- the quality of reflection both during and after the project
- the impact of the activity on its various stakeholders
- the degree of originality and innovation
- the effectiveness of the activity in furthering the institutional and unit missions

A great deal of work on the development of useful teaching portfolios has been carried out in recent years under the auspices of AAHE. Among the highlights of these activities have been the publication of *The Teaching Portfolio* by Russ Edgerton, Pat Hutchings, and Kathleen Quinlan in 1991 and *Making Teaching Community Property* by Pat Hutchings in 1996. The latter is part of a major project entitled "From Idea to Prototype" that involves faculty from many different campuses.

A number of institutions have begun to develop methods of documenting and evaluating faculty outreach activities. Some are making use of *Making the Case for Professional Service*, in which I discuss portfolios in some detail and provide a few illustrative examples. Others are using a somewhat different but basically equivalent approach generated at Michigan State Uni-

versity. In addition, the Kellogg Foundation is supporting a new project in which   faculty members at Michigan State, Portland [Oregon] State, University of Memphis, and Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis [IUPUI] work together to generate a set of prototype portfolios that might serve as models. A progress report on this project will appear in the next issue of *Metropolitan Universities*.

Effective, informative documentation is the necessary condition for quality assurance by means of thorough and critical peer review. But it also has a deeper significance, which brings us back to the original argument of this article: the need to reverse the telescope and view individual activity within a collective context.

Adequate documentation can contribute to this process in two important ways. In the first place, as suggested in the preceding paragraphs, it should explicitly contain evidence of the impact on collective activities and mission. More importantly, the kind of documentation described opens the way to a collective approach by making visible to all colleagues the full range of scholarly activities in which members of their unit are engaged. In this way, it can convert the formerly hidden activities of teaching and professional service into what Shulman calls community property and thus part of collegial discourse. I mentioned earlier the importance of giving each member of a department or other unit a personal stake in all intellectual activities of his or her colleagues. That much is reinforced, perhaps made possible only if the full range of activities is well described and explicated.

In this way, the development of portfolios is not only a normative device to ensure equivalence of quality among all manifestations of scholarship. It is also a developmental tool for each individual who is forced to reflect on her or his work during and after its course. In addition, it widens the intellectual horizons of colleagues.

Conclusion

When a metropolitan university has reached the point at which it can adequately document and evaluate all dimensions of faculty scholarship, it has achieved the flexibility it needs. It can then assign different tasks to different units, so as to ensure that each unit contributes optimally to the priorities of the institution. The units in turn then have flexibility to ask

different faculty members to undertake different assignments that best match both collective needs and individual preferences and to ask with the assurance of equivalent quality and equivalent recognition. Only in this fashion can a metropolitan university make the choices and set the priorities that it needs in order to deal with multidimensional demands in an era of limited resources.

Note: This article is adapted from a presentation at the 1996 annual conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities in Orlando.

Suggested Readings

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