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Faculty Roles and Collective Responsibilities

Virginia Commonwealth University is into the fourth year of implementation of Faculty Roles and Rewards Policy. The policy is deceptively simple. It is producing, however, a change in the institutional understanding of the roles of faculty, department chairs, and departments. The authors discuss the implementation of the policy from the perspectives of a college, a department, and three individual faculty members

A definition of faculty guaranteed to draw a laugh at any meeting of university administrators is that they are individual contractors organized around a common complaint about parking. We laugh because we recognize in the joke the faculty culture of many of our institutions. Herein lies our challenge. We hire strong-minded, idiosyncratic, self-motivated, and entrepreneurial faculty. We evaluate and reward them based on their individual achievements. Yet as academic leaders we are expected to harness their talents around institutional missions and collective goals.

How to achieve a more collective sense of responsibility among our highly individualistic faculty is at least one of the motivations for the process of rethinking faculty roles and rewards that is taking place at many universities. There are other motivations as well. Many of our faculty spend the larger part of their careers at a single institution. Because of that, we need to be more conscious of the entire career cycle of our faculty—how the institution changes and

how interests, needs, and contributions of a faculty member change over a career span. Universities need a way of formulating faculty roles and of evaluating faculty contributions that is responsive to differing mixes of teaching, research, and service of a faculty member over time and in terms of changing needs of the institution.

Changing an Institution's Understanding of Faculty Work

Virginia Commonwealth University was among the first institutions to take part in the very innovative "Faculty Roles and Rewards" initiative of the American Association of Higher Education. As a result of this involvement, a university-wide task force was established in the fall of 1992 charged with undertaking a comprehensive review of faculty roles in light of the career cycle of faculty and the university's need for flexibility, clarity, impartiality, and variety in understanding and rewarding faculty work. After nearly a year of work that included consultants, workshops, open hearings, participation by task force members in an AAHE "Faculty Roles and Rewards" conference, and formal responses, the task force report, a faculty roles and rewards policy was adopted by the university trustees in the fall of 1993. Implementation of the policy included workshops for university administrators, the development of school-based implementation plans, and the revision of the university's "Promotion and Tenure Policy" in light of the new policy. Three years after its adoption, the "Faculty Roles and Rewards Policy" has been integrated into the faculty evaluation system and has changed the institution's understanding of faculty work.

In this article, we will illustrate our experience with rethinking faculty roles within a collective framework by describing what happened in a college, in a department, and with three faculty members. We bring to this article a variety of perspectives. One author, now vice provost for academic affairs, was dean and served on the university-wide task force during development and implementation of the faculty roles and reward policy. Another author was chair of the university-wide task force and is chair of the department we discuss. The third author was on the implementation committee for the new policy and is now interim dean.

Our institution is a public, urban, research (Carnegie Research I) university of approximately 22,000 students and 1400 faculty on its academic, Medical College of Virginia, and Virginia Biotechnology Research Park campuses. Our faculty roles and rewards policy is meant to embrace the complexity and diversity of this institution and its faculty. Given this goal, the policy is deceptively simple. It rests on four premises:

- that faculty roles and rewards must be understood within the context of the work unit or department;
- that faculty and their chairs must create faculty work plans that are personally meaningful and consistent with the department and institutional mission;
- that faculty must be fairly and accurately evaluated for excellence within the context of their department; and
- that departmental as well as individual performance must have incentives and rewards clearly tied to them.

While simple, the policy has brought about a fundamental change in the culture of faculty work. It has also resulted in greater responsibility for chairs in managing faculty talents and departmental goals.

The Department as the Unit of Productivity

The most significant feature of the culture change has been a shift away from thinking of the individual faculty member as the ultimate unit of productivity. In this shift, the department has become the primary focus of accountability, and individual faculty roles and rewards are formulated in terms of the departmental mission. Within this context, faculty work is viewed more flexibly and evaluated in terms of a balance between individual aspirations and abilities and the mix of activities that best contributes to departmental goals at a given time. The process through which this is realized has included the articulation of departmental missions and performance goals, development of standards of excellence appropriate for the department, a clearly articulated evaluation system of monetary and nonmonetary rewards, faculty work-plans agreed upon with the chair, and annual evaluations based on the agreed-upon workplan.

Changes in a College

The faculty roles and rewards policy was implemented in the College of Humanities and Sciences, the largest academic unit within the university, in conjunction with a college strategic planning process and a departmental performance planning process. Through the strategic planning process, the college established college-wide priorities including implementing a new general education program, improving advising and retention, program review and assessment, increasing funded research, expanding alumni and private giving, developing more interdisciplinary and collaborative teaching and research, and providing more international opportunities for faculty and students. The

department performance planning process began with a department-specific performance baseline that included certain quantitative measures such as student credit hours, number of majors, graduate rates, cost per credit hour, publication productivity, and sponsored research, as well as qualitative measures such as results of program reviews or accrediting reviews, involvement in disciplinary and community service, faculty and student achievements, and so forth. The goal of establishing a baseline of performance was not to compare departments but to give departments a basis for setting performance goals and assessing progress.

With the baseline established and the college-wide priorities in place, each department developed a three-year performance plan. That became the basis for establishing faculty work plans and for assessing departmental as well as faculty performance. Finally, a portion of the annual salary merit raise pool was distributed based on departmental progress rather than being used for individual merit raises.

Successful implementation hinges on departments moving toward a culture of collective responsibility. This places a great deal of responsibility on department chairs to lead faculty in shaping a collective vision and in working with individual faculty to make the most of their contributions to that vision. It requires greater attention to the leadership development of chairs, and it also requires that chairs be evaluated and rewarded based on departmental performance and their success with faculty development. We have begun a regular program of workshops for chairs to assist them with developing the skills necessary for leading in this changed culture. Chairs in the college are evaluated in terms of their statements of annual goals, which must include their proposed faculty development initiatives and the department's progress on its performance plan.

This roles and rewards process is premised on the ability of faculty to negotiate between individual and departmental work expectations. It requires a commonly understood and held set of departmental goals and a fair and consistent performance planning and evaluation process. To succeed, faculty must join in a collaborative model of discussion to articulate the departmental mission, strategic direction, workload policy, and outcome expectations at both individual and departmental levels.

Transformation of a Department

The Department of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University is a fairly large and complex academic unit, with 32 faculty, approximately 1000 undergraduate and 120 graduate students, considerable sponsored research,

and a high demand for professional or community service activity. Historically, it had a highly individualistic work environment, with considerable competition and tension between faculty and across applied and experimental program areas. In the university, the department was viewed as somewhat isolated, unwilling to engage in interdisciplinary or institutional objectives, and uninterested in undergraduate education. In addition, the department had not had a strong sense of collegial governance or common purpose.

Getting the faculty to change this culture and to "buy in" to collective responsibility has been a continuing process. It began by developing an atmosphere of full disclosure and open communication, including regularly scheduled and productive faculty meetings, an open budget process, and a faculty performance evaluation procedure that is deemed fair and consistent. Most importantly, it required the chair to create an environment in which faculty come to see their individual interests in terms of the interest of the department as a whole.

To move to this culture, the Department of Psychology used a combination of ad hoc and standing committees and faculty retreats to accomplish several objectives:

- a faculty governance document that clearly delineated responsibilities of the chair and the faculty;
- an elected personnel committee charged with evaluating individual performance within the context of negotiated work expectations; and
- a departmental mission statement and strategic plan to guide the department and serve as a basis for workload expectations as well as such things as developing new initiatives or recruiting new faculty.

The department engaged in a fairly formal mission writing process, with an analysis of faculty and staff values; identification of department, institutional, regional, and national/international trends; and discussion of what excellence and uniqueness meant to each person. A mission statement was written that defined excellence for the department by stating scholarly, educational, service, and employee goals or standards. A set of values was identified (e.g., scientific rigor, improved quality of life, mutual respect) as necessary to achieve the mission. This led to the formulation of a departmental strategic plan that identified 13 items targeted as most critical for moving the mission forward, including identification of the person responsible for overseeing the initiative, time expectations, and benchmarks of success.

Translating the departmental mission and strategic plan into individual performance expectations required a reservoir of good will between the chair,

faculty and the personnel committee. Together, they developed for each faculty member a workload and performance plan that included:

- a three year period for the evaluation;
- a requirement that each faculty negotiate percent effort in research, teaching, and service areas, with no one able to do less than 20 percent minimum in research and teaching, and 10 percent in service; and
- an expectation that demonstrable markers of excellence be used in *all* categories.

This approach balances individual faculty interests and department service needs by creating flexibility in assignments without sacrificing minimum expectations within research, teaching, and service areas. Implementing an equitable and consistent evaluation procedure is critical to reinforce individual faculty effort within a culture of collective responsibility. The fundamental value that faculty must agree on is that excellence will be rewarded based on the agreed-upon work plan and its mix of teaching, research, and service.

The department is in the fourth year of implementing the roles and reward policy. Perhaps the greatest testament to its metamorphosis from a highly individualistic and competitive culture to a collaborative culture is that, for the first time, faculty show up to meetings! This may seem a small matter, but a great deal can be understood when observing the interplay of faculty meetings: Is there an esprit d'corps within the faculty and staff? Are faculty able to confront controversy and disagreement, and can they choose from competing "goods" without personal attack? Is there support for the chair? In this last regard, after almost twenty years of besieged chairs, the current chair has 85 percent approval ratings despite several difficult personnel decisions and within an institution where budgets have been very tight in recent years.

From an administrative perspective, the department is maximizing its greatest resource: the faculty. Several have opted for increased teaching and service loads with a renewed enthusiasm. At the same time, sponsored research proposals moved from over two million dollars four years ago to over six million dollars this year, with several faculty developing research institutes or research cluster groups. The department was highlighted and featured in the university's periodical *VCU Teaching* because of its success in reinvigorating undergraduate teaching and advising. It also has the fastest growing undergraduate honor society in the country. The department has also engaged in interdisciplinary hiring, with three faculty recently hired jointly with another department and two interdisciplinary research centers.

When the Department of Psychology began its mission writing process, the faculty were asked, "who is the customer?"   The large majority said themselves! Now the Department of Psychology faculty understand the payoffs of a cooperative work environment that includes in its mission staff, students, and the society at large.

Impact on Individual Faculty Members

While departmental planning and implementation are the keys to success of any roles and rewards program, the real change takes place at the individual level. The goal of the policy is to respond meaningfully to the career cycle of individual faculty as well as the needs of departments. Thus the success of the policy must also be measured in how it facilitates faculty careers. Individual workplans not only establish the basis for evaluation and reward, they can also serve as the basis for faculty development and renewal.

When individual performance is on track, the process of developing individual work plans should not be overly elaborate or burdensome. When difficulties are identified, however, planning for improvement can become a more elaborate process, resulting in a contractual relationship between the faculty member and the chair for faculty development. In some cases, a plan covering several years may offer a faculty member the opportunity to catch up with a rapidly evolving institution. In others, the individual and the department may decide to capitalize on specific interests by establishing a different mix of responsibilities. Such cases work best when they involve formally developed and mutual responsibilities, clear agreements about resources, and measures of accountability. Some illustrations may prove useful.

Easing Re-Entry After Serving as Chair

An accomplished and promising scientist was hired into a department of modest achievements with the expectation that he would build upon his solid track record and enhance the department's research and teaching stature. He was ten years post-Ph.D., had taught at another institution, had already published a number of papers and abstracts, and had begun to make a name in his field. During his first four years, his teaching remained very solid and his research productivity increased. However, he continued as chair for another seven years. In that time the department hired very well, attracted impressive extramural funding, and brought international attention to the institution. Meanwhile, the chairman's research productivity and grantsmanship slowed, even though he continued to be a devoted and effective teacher. But it was clearly

time for a change for him. When he left the chair, his successor and the dean, recognizing his contributions and his potential, were eager to cooperate in a plan to bring him back into the mainstream of his discipline and of the institution.

The faculty member, chair, and dean agreed on a written plan covering a three-and-a-half-year period intended to support the faculty member while he reinvigorated his research program. They agreed to a semester-by-semester schedule, including summers. Emancipated from the administrative burden of the chairmanship, and spared heavy service assignments, the faculty member took on a slightly reduced teaching load while he moved in two fresh directions. He concentrated on research to produce publications that would increase his competitiveness for grant support. Simultaneously, he developed computer applications to enhance his teaching.

The dean endorsed the plan, provided support for the department to meet its overall teaching obligations, allocated some graduate research assistance to the enterprise, and gave the faculty member summer salary as well as modest travel support to interact with his research contacts and attend professional meetings.

A recent evaluation showed that the faculty member had the highest recorded student rating scores in introductory courses, had developed a computerized teaching package, and had published several papers with an equal number in preparation. These achievements earned him a merit salary increase and proved that the program is firmly on track toward accomplishing everyone's positive goals.

Maximizing Contributions to Teaching

A senior faculty member in the humanities had come to the university years earlier when the primary responsibility was teaching. Three years post-Ph.D., and with four years of teaching experience, he quickly became a popular teacher, particularly of less gifted students. Tenured in that early era, with a modest publication record, he continued to attract many students and became much in demand for university service. Meanwhile the institution evolved as a Carnegie Research I university. More recently hired colleagues taught very well but also published extensively, won grants, and represented a different profile in the discipline and the institution. The long-term faculty member added a few publications and continued to work slowly on a book, but he also continued to be active in advising student organizations and working with undergraduate majors in his department. Because the college was placing greater emphasis on undergraduate advising and retention and his department was implementing

a new graduate program, there was an opportunity for some divisions of labor that could take best advantage of his contributions. With the approval of the dean, he and his chair worked out an agreement and set of expectations that oriented the mix of his contributions to teaching and undergraduate advising.

This faculty member now teaches three courses a semester, often different preparations, to approximately 400 undergraduates a year. He advises all departmental majors, with emphasis on quality of advising and availability to students, and he has developed an advising handbook. He continues to make progress on his book. Because of the quality of his contribution to teaching and advising, however, his merit raise last year was among the highest in the department.

Changing the Profile of Activities

A faculty member arrived at the institution with a freshly minted Ph.D., but no post-doctoral training, at a time when the university's emphasis had not yet broadened from teaching to give equal weight for research. He developed into a fine teacher, produced more than a dozen papers by the time he earned tenure, but had only a few modest internal and external grants. Over the next decade, as the institution evolved, he published another dozen papers, but major funding agencies were not looking at the same scientific problems he chose to investigate.

In order to enhance his already strong teaching, he became involved in writing across the curriculum, developed assessment instruments, and wrote both a study guide and a test bank that were distributed by a major commercial publisher. His classroom experiences ignited his interest in scientific literacy, and he attended workshops on race and gender and on science and gender.

A few years ago, he and his department faced some critical questions.

Should he now shift his research and virtually begin again? Or should he and the institution find a win-win formula in the direction he had been going? He and his chairman agreed, and the dean endorsed, a three-year plan in which he would develop interdisciplinary courses particularly aimed at nonmajors, lead curricular reform, make presentations on scientific literacy and science education, and participate in education reform in middle and high schools. He undertook to seek external funding for a thematic interdisciplinary course and for in-service training of teachers.

The results are impressive. A new thematic interdisciplinary course has been developed, piloted, assessed, revised, and put into place. A dramatically renovated general education curriculum is being implemented. And this faculty member is part of a team awarded a five-year multimillion dollar grant

for a project that promises to have enormous impact on elementary education in mathematics and science.

These cases put a human face on mission-centered and faculty-centered development. We believe they also show how joining faculty roles and collective goals can serve the interests of both individual faculty and departments in our pursuit of excellence.

Difficulties and Detractors on the Road to Success

Nearly four years into the implementation of the faculty roles and rewards policy, we are able to report considerable success. But this does not imply that implementation was without difficulties and detractors. Initially, there was a high degree of skepticism from both faculty and department chairs. Some faculty worried that a more flexible understanding of faculty's contributions was a veiled attempt to undermine the research mission of the university. Some saw it as a sinister attempt to import "management by objective" techniques into the university setting. Others worried that we were creating an overly burdensome bureaucracy by requiring faculty to develop individual work plans or departments to develop performance goals. These worries are not unfounded. It is indeed possible that the process of changing the culture of faculty work can become a retreat from the overall commitment of an institution to excellence across its full mission of teaching, research, and service. The process could turn into "just a management technique." The attempt to be more flexible about faculty work in terms of departmental mission could degenerate into generating new forms and reports.

To prevent this, it was essential that we be clear to ourselves and that we continually make clear to our colleagues that our goal was to create a sense of collective purpose in our work; to be responsive to the varied and changing ways that faculty contribute to that collective purpose of excellence in teaching, research and service; and to "raise the bar" of expectations for departments in fulfilling their missions. For faculty and departments who already had such a sense, our best approach was to encourage them, reward them, and stay out of their way as much as possible. An elaborate faculty work plan for a faculty member who is working hard and well in the interests of the department serves no real purpose. Nor does an elaborate planning process for a department that already has a strong sense of mission and common purpose.

In the early stages of our implementation, some departments did not take to process seriously. After all, anyone with an hour to spare can write a mission statement and departmental goals. And it is easy enough for a chair to develop

a workload policy and go through the motions of requiring faculty work plans. Their attention was caught, however, when additional dollars in the faculty salary pool were allocated to departments that did take it seriously. It was also the basis for reallocating such things as equipment funds or travel support based on departmental goals and success. The attention of chairs who did not take the process seriously at first was caught through their own annual evaluation by the dean. Chairs and faculty are more likely to understand their own efforts in terms of collective departmental goals when progress on those collective goals is recognized and rewarded.

Because we are attempting to change part of the faculty ethos of our institutions, we should not only expect a certain amount of skepticism, but should use it as a reality check to assure ourselves that we are clear about why we are undertaking these changes, that we are mindful of our need to prepare our institutions and involve our faculty in changing the way we think about faculty roles and rewards, and that we implement processes and procedures that are consistent with the purposes we have set for ourselves.

Suggested Readings

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