

The Academy as a Public Works Project

BY THOMAS P. MILLER

We need to reassess where, how, and whom we serve in the same way we have reassessed teaching.

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Our varied views of service come to the fore when we evaluate one another's work, most notably in promotion and tenure reviews. If you have worked on such reviews, you may have observed the differences among your colleagues' service contributions. One faculty member may have served on an editorial board and evaluated grant proposals. Perhaps another did committee work and served as a program director, while a third was involved with outreach and bridge programs for minority students.



Each of these service activities involves different collaborators and purposes, though we rarely have the time to pause and reflect on the differences in how our work serves our disciplines, our institutions, and the broader public. These differences have become more important as we have been pressed to account for our contributions in terms that make sense in the prevailing service economy. Nowhere are our accounts of our contributions more definitive than in the promotion and tenure process. Tenure defines not only individual academic careers but also the very nature of academic work, and deliberations on tenure provide our most explicit and carefully considered evaluations of our work.

REVIEWING THE VALUES OF SERVICE

Our promotion and tenure reviews generally con-

centrate on research and teaching, often leaving little time to delve into the vagaries of service and outreach contributions unless an individual has served in a particularly prestigious role. Service to our disciplines typically has the most prestige because being invited to serve on an editorial board or review grants indicates that someone has gained national recognition in his or her field. Committee and administrative assignments confer the least status. They are generally taken into account only if faculty members refuse to meet their obligations or do them so badly that others are left to do all the work. Outreach often falls somewhere in between—depending on how committee members understand the mission of their discipline, department, and institution. In virtually every case, service “obligations” carry less weight

than research or teaching. After all, service commitments commonly account for the smallest fraction of our workload assignments. As a result, we often try to “protect” junior faculty by advising them to limit their service duties to avoid having committee assignments take time away from the research needed to earn tenure, promotions, and raises.

Such advice often comes up in my discussions of promotion and tenure. As part of my work as associate provost, I help coordinate the review of up to one hundred promotion and tenure dossiers each year. By the time I see them, every dossier has been read by more than twenty external reviewers, committee members, and administrators. Together they write about thirty to fifty pages of commentary on each candidate’s work. Ironically, none of that feedback

and misperceptions tend to arise from the lack of transparency in the process. I hold workshops for faculty in departments and colleges across campus. This mentoring helps assistant and associate professors select service commitments that will expand their programs of work. I advise faculty to focus on the impact of their service contributions and to use that impact to underline the significance of their research by showing how their work makes a difference in their discipline, in their institutions, and to the broader public. This advice prompts faculty to reflect on how their service and teaching relate to their overall programs of work. Some of my workshops focus on the professional statements that candidates compose to represent their contributions. These candidate statements frame dossiers for

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will actually get back to a candidate unless there is an appeal. Each external reviewer will write as many as seven pages of detailed analyses of the strengths and weaknesses of candidates’ publications, and perhaps of their courses and even their service contributions. These letters include some of the richest analyses that faculty members will receive in their entire career, and yet they will never read them.

This fact can be rather disconcerting to consider if you have spent time writing external letters or serving on promotion and tenure committees. To protect confidentiality, those who serve on departmental committees are not generally informed about how their assessments were viewed by those who are involved in later stages in the process, or even how the process itself turned out. As a result, the promotion and tenure process tends to function as a sort of black box that records our most carefully developed assessments of the values of our work, including the services we provide to our disciplines, our institutions, and the public. In most institutions, that box is opened only when a case goes badly and an appeal is made.

In my work with promotion and tenure, I draw on the assessments of internal and external reviewers to advise faculty going up for promotion. As you may have observed in your own conversations with junior faculty, a host of half-truths

reviewers by setting out a vision of how the faculty member’s work matters, not just in his or her area of research but also within the institution and to the constituencies it purports to serve.

When I advise candidates on how to characterize the progress and impact of their work, I encourage them to reflect on what they have learned and what they hope to achieve. From my work as a researcher and teacher of writing, I know that such reflections are the key to fostering the “metacognition” that enables people to transfer what they have learned to new tasks and situations. The ability to reflect on the broader lessons to be learned is diminished when people do not get feedback on their efforts, and also when situations are shrouded in mystery and misperceptions. Reflective learning can also be dampened when complex challenges are reduced to routine tasks, as occurs all too often when reviewers do not have opportunities to confer with others involved in the process. Such constraints limit our deliberations on promotion and tenure to assessing individual dossiers and make it hard for us to reflect on broader questions about whether compartmentalized assessments of teaching, research, and service still make sense given the increasingly interdisciplinary, collaborative, and unbounded nature of our intellectual work.

WHAT ARE WE WORKING ON—AND FOR?

Despite the limitations imposed on promotion and tenure reviews by the need to get through lengthy dossiers and preserve the confidentiality of our evaluations, the process provides us with a vital opportunity to consider how we understand the purposes our work serves. Such reviews are based on detailed criteria that specify what we value and how we measure it in far more explicit terms than in any other area of the academy. These values tend to remain implicit in most of our daily transactions. For example, if a colleague in passing asks us what we are working on, we know intuitively that the question is about our individual research and not our teaching or service because we tend to think of our research as our real work. We generally do not respond by discussing the committees or classes that fill most of our workdays. In fact, we may respond guiltily that we have not been able to get any work done because we have been so busy with teaching.

Such tacitly perpetuated priorities have to be articulated in more explicit terms in promotion and tenure criteria. Over the decades that I have been serving on promotion and tenure committees, I have observed that teaching has been given increased attention in reviews. Across the academy, most promotion and tenure committees will now do a classroom observation, and some will also review a portfolio of the candidates' instructional materials—unlike annual review committees, which may bewail the limitations of student evaluations and then base their teaching assessments entirely upon them. While the status of teaching has risen, service and outreach remain peripheral to how we assess what we do, though this standpoint is beginning to shift, and for some of the same reasons that have led us to attend more fully to teaching.

Our increased attention to teaching has historical sources that reach back to the challenges that arose with the expansion of access to higher education in the 1970s. Those challenges came to the fore in such pivotal works as Ernest Boyer's 1990 report *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Teaching is currently gaining renewed significance as a result of the cuts in state funding that have made our institutions more dependent on tuition. Rising tuition costs are fueling accountability pressures to retain students and graduate them more quickly. These pressures have led to a shared concern for outcomes assessments, student advising and mentoring, capstone and gateway courses, internships and outreach partnerships, and collaborative learning and teaching centers. The highly collaborative dynamics of these initiatives blur

traditional distinctions between teaching and service, and they often call for studies of best practices that can also make research more integral to teaching.

When we teach online, as more and more of us are doing, such changes become particularly apparent. To compensate for the absence of the teaching subject, online courses press faculty to reflect upon what they assume students know, how they are to learn, and what they are to do with what they learn. As you may know from your own experience, teachers of online courses have to be much more explicit about designing cumulative sequences of instruction that build to well-defined outcomes. When we teach online, we are challenged to anticipate and attend to differences in learning styles and cultural assumptions, in part because online courses often serve working adults, high school students, and other "nontraditional students" who are less familiar with academic conventions. Connecting with such underserved groups is a primary reason why our institutions are investing their limited resources in developing online courses. Like many other universities, my institution has made developing online courses a priority. I headed up a working group that surveyed faculty members across campus who had created such courses. In assessing what these faculty members were teaching and how they were thinking about their teaching, we found that discussions of courses often give rise to a more collaborative ethos as faculty come to see the curriculum as a shared undertaking.

Such collaborations parallel some major trends in our scholarship. At the same time that our programs of study are devoting increased attention to internships, service learning, and new media, our research programs are placing more emphasis on translational research that applies academic findings to practical problems and ethnographic and community-based methodologies that position researchers not as autonomous investigators but as people embedded in reciprocal relationships through which knowledge is developed in a collaborative manner that is more contingent and contextual than we have often acknowledged. This epistemological shift toward more engaged models of inquiry was aptly characterized in Boyer's 1996 article "Scholarship of Engagement." Boyer's work has been pivotal to efforts to articulate



the scholarly dimensions of service, as is evident, for example, in reports on the evaluation of outreach in promotion and tenure reviews such as the American Association for Higher Education's *Making Outreach Visible: A Guide to Documenting Professional Service and Outreach* and the National Collaborative for the Study of University Engagement's *Points of Distinction: A Guidebook for Planning and Evaluating Quality Outreach*.

ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

These trends challenge us to reflect on how we hire, support, and promote junior faculty, especially those advancing applied, translational, and community-based programs of work. As already noted, confidentiality concerns impose constraints on our deliberations, including our discussions with other faculty members who review dossiers at the department, college, and university levels. To foster such discussions at my own university, we hold forums for faculty who review dossiers as well as candidates who compose them. In these forums, we have considered

that serves the needs of our varied constituencies. Continuing-status faculty work in a wide range of departments, including my own, the English department. One of my colleagues on the continuing-status track, Anne-Marie Hall, is a noted scholar whose nationally recognized outreach efforts have helped shape the research agendas of many graduate students.

The humanities are well positioned, intellectually as well as institutionally, to contribute to the converging trends that are redefining the relations of research, teaching, and service. My colleagues in the English department and I, along with faculty in many other language departments, have developed outreach partnerships with local schools, and we also conduct research on pedagogy, including outcomes assessment, peer learning, faculty development, and experiential learning. Our scholarship incorporates ethnographic methodologies, action research, and the community-based programs of research that are included in fields ranging from women's and ethnic studies to history and cultural studies. Our expanding interest in "public scholarship" is generally identified with the land-grant

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the fact that community-based programs of research often require more time than other types of research, as do clinical service duties and the translational research needed to take discoveries from bench to bedside. We have revised our procedures accordingly to offer faculty members the opportunity to postpone their promotion and tenure reviews.

To support faculty who do applied research, our university also has an alternative to the tenure track that provides continuing contracts with all the rights of tenure, including the rights to due process, promotions, and sabbaticals that tenure-track faculty have. Our continuing-status track has criteria that value research

mission, but the humanities have a much broader civic tradition founded on the assumption that a general education in the liberal arts is the best preparation for citizenship. From classical figures such as Isocrates and Cicero up to modern sources ranging from Ernesto Grassi to Antonio Gramsci, a civic stance values the contingent, contested, and holistic dynamics of knowledge in the making. This practical philosophical tradition provides a value-laden frame of reference for assessing the rising emphasis on the "scholarship of engagement" that is redefining how we articulate the purposes that our work serves in our disciplines, in our institutions, and for the public. ■

