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Scholarship Reconsidered: The Changing Reward System

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THE thesis of this paper is that changing the reward system to respond to the current criticism of higher education being voiced in the larger society and manifest in legislative actions in reducing funds available to higher education and efforts to monitor or control certain aspects of the higher education process—accountability, outcome measures, workload studies, hours of classroom contact—to a degree that may be perceived as being micromanagement requires a paradigm shift by those of us within the academy. Typically, ala Kuhn (1970), one would think of a paradigm shift as occurring within a discipline or field. But changing the reward system in higher education will require what may be seen, metaphorically, as a paradigm shift as well.

Paradigm shifts within higher education are not new. In *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Ernest Boyer briefly traces the move from colonial colleges with their emphasis on building character and preparing new generations for civic and religious leadership through the intellectual and moral development of students to the emphasis upon applied research, particularly in the land grant tradition, and to basic research. Following World War I, and markedly in the 1960's, the nation moved from a model of higher education of the elite to one of mass education. In the 1960's an average of one community college per week was being established. Despite the move to open higher education for all students rather than an elite group of students, higher education increasingly moved away from an emphasis upon educating undergraduate students to an emphasis upon the professoriate conducting research and publishing the results as a condition of tenure, promotion, and merit salary raises.

You will recognize overstatement and stereotyping in what follows. But surely it is not an exaggeration to say that higher education has increasingly adopted at all levels, including some community colleges, an image of the tenurable and promotable faculty member as being a publishing researcher, with growing prestige in the discipline, attracting external funds when available. We have developed a model of the entrepreneurial faculty member. Mobility equals power and a higher income. Mobility is not the result of consummate service

to the institution nor excellent teaching. Mobility largely depends upon the disciplinary response to research and publication within the discipline. While we should not decry the decline of “the old boy network,” that decline intensifies the emphasis upon “manifest indicators of quality” recorded on a vita rather than knowledge of outstanding teaching or effective discharge of needed institutional responsibilities.

We socialize our younger colleagues away from a concern for the university or college as a whole toward a focus on the discipline which provides the publication and paper presentation outlets. Our graduate schools typically focus narrowly upon excellence in the discipline; broad programs of study and stress upon preparing for teaching have largely been abandoned. Many graduating with Ph.D.s are unprepared to work in liberal arts settings or community colleges whose emphasis is not upon narrow disciplinary specialization. I know of more than a few newly minted Ph.D.s who insist they cannot teach any of the introductory courses in the department because they are unprepared in terms of the content. Many departments routinely tell new faculty members not to become involved in governance activities, not to serve on committees, not to devote too much time to their teaching, but to build the record, i.e., publications list that presumably reports quality research, necessary for promotion and tenure. I have heard more than one promotion committee argue that a young scholar with a sound research record is not being productive enough in research. The proof? The faculty member is active on committees, in governance, spends a great deal of time with undergraduate students, and/or is actively involved in community issues.

The exemplars for younger faculty may well be faculty who do not teach, or do not teach undergraduates, or teach only the most specialized courses. One’s mentor should be the most productive scholar in publishing and getting external funding, not the faculty member who is actively involved in teaching, does some research and fulfills a wide range of institutional and disciplinary leadership roles over time. Particularly pernicious is the fact that most faculty recognize they do not meet this icon of the perfect researcher. It is as if they can compensate for the gnawing internal feeling of not quite measuring up by elevating to an unreasonable level the standards demanded to achieve tenure or to be promoted.

Members of a department may argue that its credibility will be damaged if it recommends a particular individual for tenure given the research record (number of items to list). Yet, upon appeal, the college and campus are often in the embarrassing position of approving the promotion without hesitation or trying to justify the denial in the face of a lawsuit. A frequent defense is that the unit is simply striving to be better and past standards allowed too many other factors to compensate for the lack of a strong research record.

This illustration in its outline is more common at the comprehensive research university but its variation is played out in institutions at every level. Those who are among the first women appointed in the unit, who do interdisciplinary research or publish research in appropriate journals that are not “mainstream” can supply parallel instances. Such cases are found at every type of institution.

How do we move toward a new paradigm of rewards for faculty in higher education?

One move toward a new paradigm for the reward structure is to focus upon the mission of higher education. “The ultimate role of higher education is to educate, to agitate the brain cells of our students. The rest we do is incidental: generate money, do research, help society” (Ward, 1993). Further, we must accept the reality that the mission of different institutions vary. This is not to say that one mission is higher in the pantheon than others, to differ in kind is not to be better than or poorer than, it is to be different. We need to stop seeing a difference in mission as being a value statement concerning intrinsic worth. Is it true that the faculty of a community college that does an outstanding job of educating marginal students is of less worth than a faculty at an elite prep school who can’t conceive of teaching a marginal student? Is a faculty that publishes marginal research obviously better than a faculty that does not publish but provides a sound education to its undergraduates? Clearly I have loaded the dice,

so that the answer is no. But, why is it that we cannot look to the mission of the university, a college, a department, and evaluate the quality of its faculty by assessing the degree to which they actually achieve that mission?

Is the “dirty secret” of higher education the reality that what our students want and what the taxpayers are willing to support is higher education that takes seriously the responsibility of agitating the gray cells of all our students while our internal system of rewards tends to push us away from that task?

Central to a shift of the reward paradigm is the realization that it is a myth that we can all be research superstars or that a department can be composed only of superstars. Also, we need to recognize that we have usually substituted quantity of publication for quality and significance (two quite different dimensions) of research, not to mention teaching and service. We need to recognize that there is not one role or template to be served by faculty in higher education but many templates. A particular individual may fit one and then another with the possibility of moving through several different career stages, each legitimating a different criteria to evaluate that individual’s contribution.

Boyer’s book calls for a rebalancing of the academy, with greater emphasis upon the scholarship of integration of knowledge, upon the scholarship of application of knowledge, and upon the scholarship of teaching that knowledge to balance the emphasis given to the scholarship of discovery of knowledge. Boyer in some sense is calling us back to the halcyon thrill of putting it all together again. He recognizes that success in rebalancing the academy means changing what is rewarded within the system.

There are serious attempts at rebalancing. The American Association of Higher Education has devoted several conferences to issues tied to Boyer’s book including the San Francisco Convention keynoted by Boyer. (The only convention I have ever attended where everyone registered later received a free copy of a book, *Scholarship Reconsidered*.) The Kellogg Foundation funded a Conference for the CIC (Big Ten Athletic Conference plus the University of Chicago) and a few other AAU schools on rebalancing the academy. They next funded planning grants for the CIC institutions and this last month all the CIC institutions except Ohio State University and the University of Chicago submitted proposals which will be shaped into a major grant for funding by Kellogg with particular attention to enhancing the teaching and outreach activities of their institution. Northwestern, a private institution, focused on teaching; Michigan State a public land grant institution, on outreach and teaching.

Currently it is the rare institution that does not provide competitive awards for outstanding teaching with public recognition including the inevitable press release. Tangible rewards include bonuses, permanent salary increments. The administration stresses a concern for undergraduate education and for students to the public and to parents. Meetings of administrative groups are replete with concern for and worries about how to increase the attention given to undergraduate education.

But if the paradigm shift is to occur, it must occur at the departmental level. Central to this task is the definition of the mission of the individual department and rewards to individuals as they contribute to that mission. Yes, we could move to the standard I am now told that operates in some departments where faculty members are required to bring in at least half of their salary. How long can a college dean even at our most prestigious institutions tolerate a department of “superstar researchers” who provide no care or feeding of the intellect of the undergraduate students? If they earn their own salary, shift to soft money, bring in sufficient overhead and yield their tenure as members of the professoriate, the dean might be content. But the dean should not be content to hire part-timers and close off the opportunity for new faculty to gain access to tenure lines. That is why I stipulate the yielding of tenure by those who no longer wish to participate in the ultimate mission of higher education—to educate.

If the shift is to occur at the departmental level, the department head must lead the faculty

to an understanding of the diversity of roles and the necessity of those diverse roles in the department that is to accomplish its missions. These faculty must then establish a different balance within the reward system. The departmental faculty are in the best position to evaluate teaching and service—a task not suitable for external review letters. And the dean and higher levels of administration must reinforce the change in the reward system. At the University of Illinois, President Ikenberry recently challenged a faculty group to devise a system that would reward the well-ordered department that was maximally accomplishing its mission with the goal of rewarding the total department, not just individuals within it. An interesting thought.

Depending on the locus of the reward system it may be that the dean, provost, or president needs to shift paradigms. Certainly in some cases that will be true, but outside pressures are already producing those shifts. In twelve years of observation above the departmental level, I have seen the dean and the provost overruling faculty review committees by promoting individuals who have a quality record of teaching and service weighed along with research.

Thomas Kuhn argues that normally the individuals who work within the paradigm find it almost impossible to discard it. More and more explanatory devices are brought into play to explain anomalies and deal with cases that appear not to fit the paradigm. He argues it is someone new to the area (or at least outside the old paradigm) that offers a new paradigm. Those of us who participated in the development of—or at least internalized—the system of rewards that now characterize higher education may be particularly challenged by the thought that we must lead in restructuring the reward system, to develop a markedly altered paradigm of what is to be rewarded. Yet, I confess to be one of those who looking at higher education in terms of the balance of rewards for the various activities, is asking, “What hath we wrought?” I do not like much of what I see. This does not mean that I accept as valid many of the accusations being directed against higher education, nor condone the lack of a substantial effort to understand higher education on the part of legislators, the press, the intellectual leadership in the nation. Nor do I condone the lack of a substantial effort on the part of the faculty to understand the concerns being expressed by external constituencies and our own students about higher education and our roles as faculty.

It is important to note that alumni and individual students report very high levels of satisfaction with their own experiences in college while simultaneously reporting growing disenchantment with higher education generally. While administrators express great concern about the deteriorating relationships with external constituencies in terms of perceptions of higher education, they tend to see their institution as doing reasonably well. While faculty are greatly concerned about what is happening in terms of lagging fiscal support; administrative trustee or legislative interference in educational policy; and perceived threats to their freedom to continue to pursue their academic interests, faculty as individuals typically report reasonable satisfaction with their personal situation. This suggests that there may be less pressure to change the reward system than the ferment of current conditions internal and external to the academy would suggest.

However, I believe we are well advised to take seriously the notion that we need to think again very clearly about the mission of higher education, to return the education of students to the central position within that mission, and to work actively to reshape the reward structure so that those who follow us will have the same satisfaction with and security in their role that those of long tenure within the professoriate have had the good fortune to enjoy.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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