

The Role of the Faculty in a Research University

The emergence of UIC as a major research university has required us to think about some of the most difficult questions that faculty members face. Why do we do what we do, and how do we do it? Why do we demand what looks like extraordinary privileges? Do faculty, particularly tenured faculty, escape review of their work? And finally, what do we want for UIC? This essay attempts to grapple with some of these issues.

Faculty members often find it hard to explain to the public and even to themselves just what it is that they do. This is particularly true in research universities where nominal teaching loads are low and much of what we do is hard to translate into tasks which can then be allocated fixed amounts of time. How long does it take to create a work of art, to design a crucial experiment, to resolve an apparent paradox, to re-conceptualize a stale research question? How long does it take to come up with the germ of an idea for a grant proposal or the theme of one's next book? How long does it take to be creative?

I would argue that what binds a very diverse research faculty together is the recognition that the best works of scholarship are exactly that -- creative, and that creativity is hard to find. We share an understanding that administrative arrangements must maximize a researcher's capacity for productive and creative work. But we are a diverse lot. Some of us are most creative when surrounded by students and colleagues, but others prefer solitary confinement. Some of us reserve blocks of time for creative work, and others wait for lightning to strike. Some of us work best in familiar labs and offices and others find that novel environments bring novel thoughts. The reason that academic departments try not to place strictures on when, where and how faculty should work is because we recognize the diversity of work styles that characterizes an active faculty. And the reason that work loads and styles (like salaries) are adjudicated at the department level is because the nuances of faculty work flow and individual effort, which rarely conform to neat yearly cycles, are understood at that level and nowhere else.

Creativity can't be legislated or negotiated as "contractual obligations" or "conditions of work," nor can it be accounted for on forms that one sends to deans and

provosts. We can count students taught, papers published and all the other things that go into a computer file, but in a given year the best ideas we have may never show up in those kinds of counts. Because many of these things can't be legislated or quantified, the faculty, in effect, asks for a blank check to be backed by an infinitely large "trust account." The problem is that to outsiders' eyes what matters most is hardest to see. Faculty work -- both its creative side and the drudgery that often accompanies creativity -- mostly takes place out of sight.

Not only is the creative side of faculty work unappreciated and ill understood, so also are the basic goals of research universities. It is sometimes difficult to explain to a legislator just why the State of Illinois should pay anyone to do research. Yes, it's easy to explain that one is searching for a cure for cancer, but harder to demonstrate the importance of research on, say, labor unrest in 17th century France. Why *should* the state support a stable of Shakespearian scholars? Many of the recurring attacks on "pampered faculty" are really attacks on the goals of the academy itself and reflect the persistent anti-intellectualism of American life.

There is one important political justification for supporting a research university, although one many of us find distasteful to emphasize. Despite qualms about the value of scholarship, what the citizens of Illinois want, among other sometimes contradictory outcomes, are prestigious universities, so that diplomas from them will have some clout. And that prestige comes, ultimately, from the creative efforts of the faculty, and from nowhere else, not from football teams, not from monumental architecture and not from students.

Think about it for a moment. Suppose that there were no big time athletics on this campus. Could we survive? Of course, lots of schools do, including our neighbors in Hyde Park. What about student services -- dormitories, cafeterias, counselors and all the rest? Can a university exist without those? Of course, there are examples throughout the world where most of these things, if provided at all, come from the private sector. How about administrators -- Vice Chancellors, VP's for Business, and hordes of accountants? Could we get along without them? Well, things might be a bit cha-

otic, but universities in other parts of the world seem to make do with a small fraction of our administrative structure.

In any case, one can imagine a university, defined as a place of research and scholarship, with few of the trappings of American higher education. But now put all those things back -- basketball teams, cheerleaders, dormitories, vice presidents and assistant vice chancellors, accountants and auditors, along with 20,000 students and take away the faculty. What do you have? You have an institution without a heart, without a soul, and without a purpose. A university *is* its faculty, and, ultimately, it is nothing else.

Does the essential role of the faculty mean that we should somehow escape evaluation, particularly after attaining tenure? Of course not, and we don't. Tenured faculty members are evaluated constantly, although not always in ways that show on the record. Aside from the routine evaluations of teaching that we undergo, aside from annual reports and counts of papers published, faculty undergo constant evaluation within their discipline. We submit to peer reviews of grant applications and journal submissions. We get (sometimes hostile) responses to public presentations at academic meetings and colloquia at other universities. We face peer reviews of book manuscripts prior to publication and published reviews of those same books after their publication. Within a discipline, the flow of awards, invitations to conferences and access to resources makes clear who the winners and losers are.

Within any field, the reputations of active scholars are well known to all the players and a topic of constant conversation. An active researcher's work is evaluated often and rigorously. It doesn't usually occur in public, and it is rarely seen on paper, but make no mistake; there *is* evaluation and any faculty member competing in his or her discipline is supremely aware of it. There is no question that the public knows the results of those evaluations, at least in the aggregate. If it doesn't, both the National Academy of Science and *U. S. News and World Report* are

happy to provide the (somewhat contradictory) information. Most reasonably well educated citizens of the state can tell you a good deal about the academic reputations of tax supported institutions and *they care* about those reputations.

We have been told that our goal is to attain membership in the Association of American Universities. I support that goal. To reach it, we have to build a better research university that we now have. But building one requires a rather strange pact with a rather demanding devil. Like it or not, building a first class research university requires the faculty to be left largely to its own devices. In the past two years several new layers of faculty regulation have been introduced -- sanctions short of dismissal, statements of responsibility and a proposed post tenure review. Unfortunately, one can't have it both ways -- a highly regulated faculty is likely to be neither creative nor productive.

And what about the hardest question? Why do we want a first class research university in the first place? Stripped of all the instrumental reasons, the only rationale is because we want to have an institution in which things are done at the very highest level. Ironically, the rationale for having a national championship basketball team is not all that different from the arguments in favor of having championship professors: as in all human endeavors being the best is its own reward. What does a research oriented faculty member have to give an undergraduate in the course of a liberal arts education? The details of late renaissance art, the most recent speculations of the cosmologists? Yes, but what we *really* teach is what it means to investigate and to know, what it means to explain and what it means to be definitively sure. We do that better than anyone else.

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