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Deconstructing Faculty Work

By John V. Lombardi November 27, 2007 1:49 pm

Over the past decade much discussion has focused on the growing percentage of college teaching done by contingent faculty. Variouslly seen as the exploitation

of an academic proletariat, the consequence of hostility towards tenure, or a response to difficult economic circumstances, this issue manifests itself in many forms. While we worry about the declining percentage of tenure-track faculty as a symptom of lost significance for the professoriate and struggle with ways of empowering contingent and part-time faculty to participate more fully in academic life, we also need to reflect on the causes for this long-term shift in the employment structure of college faculty.

Many of us who are old imagined that the norm of faculty life revolved around a full-time tenured position in a college or university where we would become permanent and engaged members of an academic community, participating in teaching, research, public service, and governance responding to a holistic conception of faculty responsibilities. We didn't think much about the relative value of these various functions or the appropriate amount of effort needed to do them. We imagined that sometimes we'd do more teaching or more research or more service, depending on the needs of the institution or our department and our own commitments. We recognized that a job at a state college would entail more teaching than research and a job at a research university would require more research than teaching, but the distinctions remained casually defined and rarely examined in depth.

With successive cycles of financial hard times, the rise of the accountability movement, and the growing intensity of competition for research competent faculty, many of these graceful notions of the faculty job faded. In pursuit of efficiency or at least the effort to demonstrate efficiency, universities began calibrating their investments in different faculty functions. We constructed the artifact of faculty assignment; a quantity set at 100 percent, and then partitioned that assignment into sections assigned to teaching, research, service, and other duties. Although most institutions do not explicitly quantify these assignments, the work recorded in our faculty annual reports make clear that we parcel out our actual effort into categories defined by what we do for teaching, for research, and for service. Our administrative work became defined by the released teaching effort traded for the administrative effort, further subdividing our faculty work. When our colleagues came up for promotion and tenure, we looked at their file and the distribution of their work. If they appeared to spend 100 percent of their time on teaching, we could not insist on a strong research record, and if they appeared to spend 100 percent on research we could not worry much about their teaching. Some colleagues appeared for tenure with a full time commitment to service activities, and neither their teaching nor their research would be relevant.

We designed accountability systems to measure the cost of teaching as an item separate from research so that we could calculate the return on the investment in teaching separately from the return on investment in research. Teaching produced credit hours which produced dollars. Research produced grants, contracts, and publications which produced prestige. These became the measurable quantities for effective optimization and management in our increasingly accountable world.

Recurring hard financial times required us to focus more closely on what we purchased and how much it cost in a short term maximizing mode. Rather than invest in our faculty for a generation we found it necessary to invest in some faculty for much shorter periods. Rather than attack tenure, we simply hired people on non-tenure tracks, sometimes full time, sometimes part time, but with the opportunity to design their work load and measure and pay for their productivity on a retail, piece-work basis. Although we'd always done this before through graduate teaching assistants, the transfer of this temporary status to the regular employment of academic talent became much more significant in our institutions. As we continued to refine the work of academics, we became precise in our ability to price their contributions. Our expertise focused primarily on teaching, and we could determine the spot price of a history course for 100 students with considerable accuracy and buy the faculty talent to provide that course at the market price. Sometimes we bought this talent on a course by course basis (a model adopted by many for-profit educational enterprises and many distance education subsidiaries of major universities). In other circumstances we looked to full-time, non-tenured faculty hired for fixed periods of 5 years or less with an option to renew in the event the demand for their services continued and the quality and productivity of their work remained high.

With somewhat less precision we also developed our skill at deconstructing the research component of faculty work, in many cases by a process of subtraction. We assumed that 100 percent effort would be equivalent to a certain amount of teaching, and then for different levels of research productivity, we would deduct teaching obligations in return for research achievement. Grants and contracts bought faculty released time from teaching to do research. We hired term research faculty to work full time on grant-supported and other activities, giving us the option to terminate them when the money ran out or their productivity declined.

We also priced administrative tasks by releasing teaching obligations in exchange for service as graduate coordinator or department chair or dean.

Once fully engaged in this complex process of deconstructing faculty work into its components to be able to operate more efficiently and effectively in the highly competitive and resource constrained academic world of the late 20th century, we undermined the power of the unified theory of the tenured professor. Rather than symbolizing the lifetime commitment of individual and institution to the academic work of teaching, research, and service and the freedom to pursue these tasks as our conscience dictated, tenure became a job entitlement that created a container of faculty effort, the content of which would be negotiated with institutions to define each faculty member's responsibilities within the lifetime security of tenure. Further reducing the significance of tenure as identifying anything other than job security, many of our institutions saw fit to include full-time or even part-time contingent faculty within the context of faculty governance with full rights to vote and participate in the academic process.

For the institutions, however, the deconstruction of faculty work offered a great incentive to reduce their commitment to an inflexible work force of tenured faculty and increase their investment in short-term, highly efficient faculty dedicated to specific purposes for specific periods of time and whose productivity and performance could be reliably maintained. The argument about whether it's better to have part-time or full-time contingent faculty is surely important, but it may obscure the remarkable transformation of much academic commitment from an investment in a person who produces many products over a lifetime to the investment in specific products that ensure the competitive position of the employing institution.

This transformation is still in process, elite private liberal arts colleges feel it the least while mid to lower level public and private institutions feel it the most. Major research universities experience all of this to one degree or another simply because they are large and complex and the deconstructed faculty member is often the most effective individual for a particular purpose. The continuing development of accountability metrics that attempt to measure exactly what each faculty member does in research, or teaching, or service and how those activities produce particular measurable outcomes will accelerate the deconstruction of the faculty. While we will surely never completely lose the role of those

8/6/2009

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tenured full-time faculty who constitute the permanent core of significant academic institutions, the demand for high levels of student access, high productivity demonstrated through measurable output, and low cost will drive more and more institutions to reduce the tenured core to a minimum and increase the deconstructed elements of faculty work to the maximum.

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