

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## Changing Priorities in Higher Education: Promotion and Tenure

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A recent study involving over 23,000 faculty chairs, deans and administrators at research universities indicated that even those most directly involved with the present reward system feel that the balance between research and teaching needs to be modified. Most significantly, the results indicate that an effort to modify the system to recognize and reward teaching would be supported by a majority of those surveyed. It may be the time to propose a change in the system.

**Characteristics of an effective system** For an institution to address this balance in a dynamic fashion, the faculty reward system must have a number of characteristics rarely found in today's typical guidelines:

- *The system must fit appropriately with the mission statement of the institution.* There are institutions with a distinct research mission, while others are focused primarily on teaching and/or service. An effective promotion and tenure system must be sensitive to these differences and build on and support the mission statement of the institution. At the same time in order to support change in reward systems, the mission statement must be realistic, operational, and sensitive to the unique characteristics and strengths of the institution.
- *The system must be sensitive to the differences among the disciplines.* As part of a recent initiative spearheaded by

Syracuse University and supported by the Lilly Endowment and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, a number of professional associations established task forces to develop statements articulating the range of activities that could be considered "scholarly." As this project has progressed, significant differences among the disciplines have become clear. There are differences in what faculty do across disciplines as well as in the language they use to describe what they do. It is important that the reward system acknowledge and honor the inherent functional differences among the humanities, the social sciences, the sciences, and the professional schools.

The work of the professional associations to date reveals that one thing is common across disciplines: important faculty work is not being rewarded. The problem appears in drama departments with the production of a play; in English or writing departments when a faculty member works in the community to develop a literacy program; and in management, economics, sociology, or retailing when a professor's skills are used to help a community group address a significant problem. To put it bluntly, the focus on research and publication and the mad dash for federal funds and external grants has diverted energies away from important faculty work and has had a direct and negative impact on the quality of classroom instruction and the ability of institutions to provide support to and involve their communities. It also diverts energies from types of research that do not fall within the traditional publication realm. Real limitations exist for faculty who want to ensure recognition for their scholarly pursuits. The choice is often between research that intrigues and excites them and the type that can be represented in a publication and will appeal to the prestige journals or publishers. The result has been a proliferation of what might be called "establishment research."

- *The system must be sensitive to the difference among individuals.* We each bring to our work different strengths, interests, and perspectives. Establishing an identical set of criteria for all faculty, as we have tended to do, is unrealistic and can undermine the quality of an academic unit. The truth is that outstanding researchers are not necessarily great teachers, and

great teachers are not always exceptional researchers. The goal for each department, school, or college should be to bring together a group of talented individuals who can work together in a synergistic manner to reach the goals of that unit. The reward system must also recognize that faculty, at different times in their careers will focus their attention in different areas. This may be the result of a departmental assignment; on other occasions it will be inherent to the discipline. In some fields a faculty member's major research accomplishments are early in his or her career; in others a scholarly focus occurs later, when the individual has had the opportunity to expand his or her perspectives.

- *The system must develop an assessment program that is appropriate, perceived to be fair and workable.* To reach this goal, we suggest a "selected professional portfolio" that is tailored around the specific responsibilities of an individual faculty member. This system would permit an in-depth evaluation of representative items and activities rather than the more customary quick review of often overlapping and redundant studies and publications. It should be a system that, where appropriate, stresses process as much as product and in which the expert judgment of peers or colleagues is incorporated.

**Where to begin** Change must begin at the department and the discipline level. Faculty priorities are, for the most part, determined by their disciplinary associations. Their second loyalty is to their departments. Here faculty develop a support group, receive departmental administrative guidance, and basically work. It is, therefore, essential that faculty at the departmental level be actively involved in developing revised tenure and promotion guidelines for their programs. The role of administration is to facilitate the process while supporting the concept that different departments will, and should, develop different criteria. To assist the process the central administration must develop and disseminate a clear and concise institutional mission statement upon which the new tenure and promotion system can be based.

### **Some Final Observations**

- *Reconceiving faculty priorities requires a genuine commitment to change.* All too often major institutional initiatives have been characterized by extensive rhetoric and little action.
- *The entire academic community must be actively involved in the change process.* Unless the central administration, deans, chairs, and individual faculty members have ownership of any modifications in the tenure and promotion process that are being proposed, adoption and implementation will be problematic. This ownership can only come from giving faculty an active role in setting priorities, establishing criteria, and determining how revised tenure and promotion plans will be developed and assessed. Otherwise, the desired changes will not occur.
- *The process of changing the tenure and promotion criteria will be far more difficult in some academic areas than others.* While the data from the *National Study of Research Universities on the Balance Between Research and Undergraduate Teaching* (1992) show that the sciences, engineering, and some of the social sciences tend to be most comfortable with the status quo, change in these fields is essential for a number of reasons. First, the emphasis on published research has had, in many instances, a detrimental impact on the quality of teaching and the scope of research conducted, on students' attitudes toward these fields, and consequently on the number of students selecting science and engineering as careers. Second as federal resources for research continue to decline and as institutions begin to recognize that the number of research programs they support must be reduced to those that are of the highest quality, there will be increased pressure on many departments to re-establish priorities and re-assess the criteria by which faculty will be evaluated.

Other disciplines, particularly the humanities, performing arts, most professional schools, and some of the social sciences, will be facing a different problem. These disciplines have focused more and more attention on publishable research in order to gain "academic respectability." They will now be asked to refocus their efforts on activities that, until now, have received little attention.

## **It Isn't an Option: The Faculty Reward System Must Change**

Those of us in higher education must modify what we do and where we invest our energies. A chorus of voices from the public and private sectors are calling for change, and our most important clients - our students- are demanding it. The question is how significant a role we, as faculty and administrators, will play in this process. We can sit back and mildly protest the status quo until that point when frustrated governmental and external accreditation agencies define for us what we will do and how. Or we can take a proactive role in shaping our future. The initiative is ours to take or perhaps forever lose the opportunity to set our own priorities.

### **References**

Gray, P. J., Froh, R. C. and Diamond, R. M. *A National Study of Research Universities on the Balance Between Research and Undergraduate Teaching*. Syracuse: NY: Center for Instructional Development, Syracuse University, 1992.