

Mission-Driven Public Service and Outreach *Judith W. Meyer*

Abstract

Both land grant, research institutions and small private colleges, particularly church-related schools, may identify public service and outreach as critical components of their missions. Five challenges exist for institutions that wish to encourage faculty involvement in public service and outreach: (1) focus on areas of strength within the institution; (2) respond to high priority needs in the region of concern; (3) assure that the activities are assessed for impact; (4) develop reward structures for faculty beyond the intrinsic rewards; and (5) manage the logistics of public service and outreach.

Mission-Driven Public Service and Outreach

Can common elements associated with faculty involvement in public service and outreach possibly exist between a land-grant research university and a small, urban Catholic college? Based on my experience as a faculty member and academic administrator in both settings, I would answer that query with a resounding YES!

I came to outreach work initially as a faculty member seeking a relevant project for an upper-division geography course at the University of Connecticut. As my class and I worked with a local planning agency on a survey about transportation needs, I found that they demonstrated greater understanding of both principles and analytical techniques than previous classes. At the same time, I had the basis for a scholarly paper that was eventually published and the agency had an analysis to use in their decision making. I repeated the project approach in subsequent years, with different agencies and topics, and almost always found that the agency, my students, and my own career as a scholar benefited. For faculty to become engaged in public service and outreach, I believe at least two, if not all three of those beneficiaries must potentially exist.

For the last seven years, I have served as a senior administrator in academic affairs, first at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, and now at Fontbonne College, a small Catholic college in St. Louis,

Missouri. From that perspective, I more clearly understand why faculty involvement in public service and outreach is beneficial to an institution of higher education.

For both UConn and Fontbonne, such activities clearly increase the visibility of the institution among its constituents—the citizens of the state for UConn and residents of the St. Louis metropolitan region for Fontbonne College. Such visibility can positively impact efforts to recruit students, as well as attract financial support. That financial support differs, of course, for the two types of institutions. For the public college or university, taxpayers and legislators value public service. For a private institution as well as a public one, potential individual, corporate, and foundation donors recognize and reward visible service activities.

In addition, service is a core aspect of the mission of both types of institutions. Land-grant universities developed out of the national concern that “farmers and mechanics” should benefit from the intellectual activities of institutions of higher education. For many years, the Cooperative Extension Service was the primary arm for such outreach, but in the last decade most institutions of public higher education have reaffirmed that mission, and developed mechanisms to reach more widely into the communities they serve. Private institutions, particularly those affiliated with faith communities, often incorporate service as one of the values they espouse. In the past, that often played out in the mix of academic programs offered by an institution, and through occasional service projects. Many more possibilities exist for public service and outreach, of course, and the professional academic programs of these private institutions often provide leadership as their institutions consider expanding their emphasis on service.

Five challenges exist for institutions that wish to encourage faculty involvement in public service and outreach.

- Focus on areas of strength within the institution
- Respond to high-priority needs in the region of concern
- Ensure that the activities are assessed for impact
- Develop reward structures for faculty beyond the intrinsic rewards
- Manage the logistics of public service and outreach

Because both large public institutions and small private ones have limited resources, undertaking major outreach initiatives in areas where institutional strength does not already exist can be

foolhardy. At UConn during the 1990s, the first major university-wide initiatives built on expertise in engineering and the sciences. They were described as the Critical Technologies initiative and responded to the state's slow emergence from economic recession. Proposals to establish a similar university-wide effort that would draw on expertise in the social, behavioral, and health sciences to respond to social challenges in Connecticut emerged from the faculty during a Pew Roundtable on Faculty Roles and Rewards in 1997. In each case, the goal was to ensure high-quality outreach because of the excellence of the programs and individuals involved, and at the same time, to generate additional financial support for those excellent academic programs and individuals. The initiatives also built on existing relationships between academic programs and agencies and businesses in the state.

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Fontbonne College, on a much smaller scale, is following the same model. Building on strengths in special education and computer education, faculty are working with the city schools to train new teachers and better equip current teachers for the changing challenges in the classroom. Similarly, in the dietetics program, a faculty member and her students work with an organization that provides nutritional support to persons with HIV, designing menus and recipes that are nutritionally excellent and use food supplies donated to the organization. On the other hand, the College declined an opportunity to develop a science education outreach effort because of current limitations in that academic area.

Although almost any form of public service or outreach can have benefits for the institution and individual faculty, restricting the investment of *institutional* resources to high-priority needs in the service area is prudent, because the demands for such programming can be unremitting. UConn invested in critical technology development to help the state attract and retain industries, and it created the UConn/Hartford Schools Partnership when the state took over that very troubled school system. Similarly, nutritional scientists, anticipating unmet nutritional needs among the growing but ignored Latino population of the state, invested federal and state dollars in a cooperative effort with nonprofit agencies to survey, analyze, and then develop media campaigns to address nutritional deficiencies.

As a small, private, tuition-dependent institution, a school like Fontbonne College must be particularly careful that its institutional resources of funds and time are focused on community priorities that will generate significant positive benefits to the institution. The college's continued expansion into special education programming, including the recent agreement to serve as a site for a young adult school-to-career transition program, typify that prioritization. The St. Louis region has identified special education as a primary need, and a recent week-long series in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* led off with a front-page feature about special education.

Colleges and universities now recognize the importance of assessing the outcomes of their initiatives, in part to ensure that resources invested are yielding reasonable dividends in terms of actual change, positive attention, and other measures of importance to the institution. At UConn, annual reports about Critical Technologies routinely reported new company starts, added employees in firms in Connecticut, new dollars invested in research, and patents sought—all designed to assure the state that continued investment in this outreach effort was worthwhile. When the UConn/Hartford Schools partnership was designed, the entire faculty agreed that any initiatives that emerged would have assessment built into the design. In fact, assessment efforts became part of the initiative for the Hartford Schools, since many of the initiatives under way

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with private-sector partners or even in individual schools had not incorporated careful assessment into their design, and school administrators were uncertain which to pursue for the future.

One of my responsibilities as Vice President and Dean at Fontbonne

College will be to help our faculty incorporate assessment into their designs for outreach efforts. Measurable objectives, usually addressing multiple dimensions, help faculty, students, and community partners be certain that the outreach effort was a wise use of resources. Thoughtful assessment can also address the concerns of faculty relative to rewards and recognition of their effort in this dimension of an institution's tripartite mission of teaching, scholarship, and service.

Reward structures must take two forms in institutions of higher education—short-term and long-term. Short-term rewards can include

public recognition of a job well done. Modest amounts of support can also help get new initiatives started and are usually perceived as rewards for developing important proposals. At UConn, additional university match was offered to units seeking outside funding to support priority programming, and support for assessment efforts and transportation were offered to help regularize a tutoring program with the Hartford Schools. Faculty perceive grants to support these efforts as rewards, particularly if such grants are competitive and also provide faculty salary support and support students, either graduate or undergraduate students.

Long-term reward structures for this type of effort can be more problematic, unless the activities fall within the normal expectations of faculty responsibilities. In most institutions, scholarship and teaching have received primary attention in the reward structure.

Thus, in research university programs like psychology, where applied psychology research is growing in importance and prestige, in applied sciences like engineering and nutritional science, and in education, participating faculty can expect to be rewarded by their peers and administrators for excellence in collaborative research. In academic areas where applied scholarship is less valued by the disciplines, faculty are less confident of long-term rewards from participating in outreach and public service, even if they are fully using their scholarly competence in such efforts. And for faculty whose participation in outreach efforts is focused on enhancing teaching and learning, whether through changing their own courses or working with agencies to enhance programming, the likelihood of long-term rewards through the existing reward structure is limited; such faculty will be more responsive to short-term support for collaboration.

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The final challenge faced in establishing effective public service and outreach efforts involves simple logistics. The need for a clearinghouse function is quite apparent, since even small institutions are sufficiently complex and community enterprises are unlikely to know whom to contact at an institution to explore possibilities of partnership. At UConn, faculty who normally relish the autonomy of decision making in scholarly efforts supported the involvement

of an administrator, both to open doors in complex bureaucracies and industries, and to keep information flowing within the institution. They also valued the opportunity to interact with colleagues within the university with whose work they were unfamiliar.

In both public and private institutions, someone must also coordinate the decisions concerning allocation of institutional resources in support of such efforts, to ensure that quality programs will be further strengthened by public service and outreach activities and that the institution's reputation will be well served. Someone must also have the resources to provide the short-term rewards that demonstrate the utility of engaging in public service and outreach, even when long-term rewards are less certain. Given measurable outcomes from such efforts, such a lead administrator can also argue more effectively for building long-term rewards for public service and outreach into the system. Rewarding outreach, like rewarding teaching, is often perceived by faculty as arbitrary because simple measures of quality are less widely accepted than is the case for scholarship.

For at least two types of institutions of higher education, public research land-grant universities and small Catholic colleges, public service and outreach are a natural part of their missions. Ironically, although faculty in both types of institutions have engaged in such activities because of the nature of their own interests and commitment, little organized effort has been made to further this part of the institutional mission, except through the formal mechanism of the Cooperative Extension Service at land-grant institutions. Because faculty continue to see professional risks in investing too heavily in such efforts, academic administrators at such institutions must take the lead and encourage, with both words and tangible support, faculty engagement in outreach that benefits the communities served by their institutions.

About the Author

Judith W. Meyer is Vice President and Dean for Academic Affairs at Fontbonne College, St. Louis, MO. She came to that position in 1999 from the University of Connecticut where, in addition to serving as a professor of geography for 23 years, she was Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Director of the UConn/Hartford Schools Partnership. As a geographer, she directed the Connecticut Geographic Alliance, an organization supported by the National Geographic Society to partner with K-12 teachers in efforts to increase the quality of geography instruction in schools. Her research focused on the geography of the elderly, with papers on migration and residential change.