Factors and Strategies that Influence Faculty Involvement in Public Service

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F undamental questions about the role of public service as scholarly work persist among many faculty members. Institutional leaders feel challenged in their search for effective strategies to encourage faculty involvement in public service activities. In part, mysteries remain because much of the material on public service is experiential, and has been based on individual cases or individual institutional models.

While individual experiences and campus reports can offer inspiration and good ideas for further experimentation, they often lack the compelling impact of more systematic, broad-scale research studies that may help us see patterns, or suggest answers to persistent questions. Faculty and administrators alike have resonated to recent works that take a broader view of institutional challenges and issues of implementing public service activities by considering the experiences of multiple institutions (Burack 1998; NASULGC 1999).

Since 1995, several national research and evaluation projects involving a total of thirty-two diverse institutions have provided useful evidence about the conduct of public service activities (Holland 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Gelmon, Holland, and Shinnamon 1998). Each project has in common an examination of attitudes toward the role of public service from the perspective of faculty, students, community, and the institution. Because they look separately and in-depth at the actions and attitudes of each of these constituent groups, these multi-institutional studies are especially helpful in understanding individual and collective motivations, and the factors that inhibit or facilitate a decision to participate in public service activities. Patterns emerged from faculty data, and can best be presented by considering these questions about service activities:

- What motivates faculty involvement in service/outreach?

- What do faculty cite as obstacles to involvement?

- What can institutions do to facilitate faculty involvement?

The Sources of Faculty Motivation

Most faculty who are already involved in public service and outreach report that they are motivated by personal values structures; they see mostly intrinsic rewards. Many answered this question by referring to their initiation into social activism in the 1960s! Others cited family, spiritual, community, or cultural experiences and values that have inspired their commitment to a life of service. As highly-educated individuals, they see themselves as having a responsibility to apply their knowledge toward the betterment of society. These faculty engage in both voluntary and professional service and often were found to be campus leaders in discussions about the role of outreach in the academy. They engage in service because it is the right thing to do and because it allows them to link their personal and professional lives.

Other faculty said that outreach and public service is relevant to the success of their discipline and the quality of their teaching and research agenda. These are faculty in disciplines with logical connections to external issues and audiences: social work; nursing, medicine, and other health professions; public administration; education, and so forth. In some cases, a program's accreditation may require evidence of public engagement for students and/or faculty.

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Finally, motivation among faculty who more recently have become active in outreach programs often arises from their direct observation of respected institutions or colleagues, availability of incentives or rewards for participation, or evidence of the positive impact of outreach activities on organizational factors that they value, such as:

* academic prestige of individual faculty, departments, or of the institution;
* learning outcomes for students;
* public and private funding including new revenues, grants and gifts; and
* improved public image of the institution.

Faculty motivation is, therefore, found to be strongly influenced by personal experiences, individual and collective professional objectives, and evidence of positive outcomes on organizational outcomes they value. Different factors are of greater importance to different faculty and different disciplines.

The Common Obstacles to Faculty Involvement

Obstacles cited by faculty included concern about the time it takes to create new activities, cultivate partnerships, organize the

logistics of service activities, and recruit students or other participants. Resources to support new activities were sometimes a problem, though many faculty learned that some outreach efforts can be resource-generating. Time in the curriculum or in a course was also a frequent obstacle for those specifically seeking to introduce service learning into a syllabus.

Across higher education, we lack a common understanding of the language of public service. A confusing myriad of terms has arisen, and the rhetoric of public service is not clear to everyone. Faculty are often deeply concerned about the lack of clear and comparable definitions of terms such as service, public service, professional service, outreach, public engagement, community service, service learning, internships, practica, and so on. Some terms have different meanings in different campus contexts, and some may be seen locally as pejorative because of unhappy past campus experiments with outreach. Confusion over these terms was found to constrain faculty involvement and to make effective documentation and evaluation difficult.

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A lack of confidence with the skills and techniques of outreach and service was cited by some faculty as an obstacle to participation. The graduate experience teaches faculty to be experts in their field and to be accomplished scholars judged by their peers. Often a discussion among faculty about what is valued by their colleagues or their department is really about faculty feeling confident and competent that they will be seen as successful. They want to pursue outreach with the same clarity of method and process they feel they have in the arena of research. Involvement in community partnerships where reciprocity and mutuality are expected can especially challenge faculty because they must learn to share the role of expert with non-academic partners. In addition, this kind of scholarly work involves collaboration including shared responsibility for outcomes and shared ownership of findings; this too is unfamiliar to many faculty and their disciplinary traditions. A companion concern was a lack of faculty experience with techniques for evaluating and documenting service activities, or a coherent campus policy regarding such documentation.

In addition, institutional mission and leadership matters to many faculty. The perception of the role of public service as a legitimate component of the institution's purposes is critically important to those faculty who do not have personal or disciplinary motivations for engagement. If a commitment to outreach is not articulated by institutional leadership and colleagues, and reflected in strategic

plans and budgetary allocations, an environment of acceptance is unlikely to form for this kind of scholarly work.

Not surprisingly, systems of rewards, as in promotion and tenure guidelines, were cited as obstacles to faculty involvement in outreach by junior faculty much more than senior faculty. This was related to the lack of clear procedures for documentation and evaluation, and with departmental or institutional experience with the scholarly value of public service. Formal rewards were far less important to senior faculty. Overall, faculty expressed less concern about promotion and tenure than the other obstacles mentioned in this essay.

The Relationship of Motivation to Effective Institutional Strategies

These findings regarding motivation and obstacles can be linked to a pattern of effective organizational strategies used at institutions that have made advances in encouraging faculty involvement in public service. The strategies involve various aspects of campus policy, philosophy, budgets, programs, and organizational structure and actions. Not all are present at every institution. Faculty and administrators made it clear that programmatic strategies must reflect each institution's mission, history, capacity, and its academic strengths and objectives. Multiple strategies were employed by most institutions in order to match the diversity of faculty motivations for involvement or their perception of obstacles to participation. The basic idea is that each institution must bring its formal and informal rhetoric about the role of public service into alignment with its policies and practices regarding faculty involvement.

1. Clear Mission — Institutional leaders and respected faculty must articulate strong concurrence on a vision for the role of public service in the institution's mission and its relationship to individual and institutional prestige and academic excellence.

2. Infrastructure Support — Public service is time and labor-intensive and the institution must reflect the value it places on public service in the investment it makes in supportive infrastructure. Infrastructure can take many forms and assume many duties, according to the institution's characteristics. Generally, faculty require and expect assistance with matters of logistics, planning, evaluation, and communications.

3. Faculty Development — Building competence and confidence in the techniques of public service requires an investment in faculty development. Most effective were peer development activities where faculty partnered to learn from each other. A critical component of faculty development requires institutional attention to the development of a common campus language for public service activity, and specific methods of documentation and evaluation (Lynton 1995; Driscoll and Lynton 1999).

4. Incentives and Rewards — Faculty were found to have different motivations and different expectations regarding recognition and rewards, so their interests in incentives and rewards were different as well. Successful institutions or departments use diverse approaches

including, for example, financial incentives; recognition through publicity, awards or special titles; support for dissemination activities; or support in fund raising or grant making to support public service projects. Institutions that began a campus discussion of the role of public service by addressing the formal promotion and tenure system made little progress. It is nearly impossible for faculty to understand the scholarly elements of public service in the abstract.

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Direct observation and experience lead faculty to understand how public service relates to other elements of their scholarship. Few institutions have made specific alterations in their reward systems, though some recognized faculty involvement in public service by linking it to the roles of teaching or research, depending on the nature of the activity. The best current practice is to offer many kinds of rewards, and to build a consistent framework for documenting and evaluating service.

5. Self Selection — Not all faculty need to, are interested in, or are qualified to pursue public service activities. Public service does not suit all faculty or all disciplines. Understanding the diverse forms of faculty motivation helps institutions create the incentives and rewards, and the supportive systems that will attract faculty involvement. The goal is to identify areas of emphasis and importance in public service, articulate the role of public service in the overall institutional mission, and then attract sufficient numbers of the most motivated faculty to become engaged.

6. The Role of Curriculum and Service Learning — For many faculty, involvement in public service is unfamiliar; the relevance to their scholarly agenda is not immediately clear to them. Faculty reported that the curricular environment is an area where they feel comfortable exploring the possibilities of public service. For example, incentives that encourage faculty to create service learning components in courses gives them experience in working with community partners, observing the effects of public service, and understanding the broader relevance of public service to their overall scholarly agenda. In addition, students become advocates for institutional commitment to public service. Service learning in the curriculum is an effective learning experience for faculty as well as students, and a good approach to building faculty confidence and interest in public service (Zlotkowski 1998).

7. Community Involvement and Partnership Themes — The visibility of community issues and the level of community participation in institutional planning for public service signals a

level of commitment and importance for the role of public service to faculty. The degree of involvement of community representatives in advisory boards, project planning, campus-community events, and public service evaluation needs to be an accurate and balanced reflection of the institution's public service objectives. Some campuses have found it helpful to conspicuously focus on a few public service needs or themes that link academic strengths of the institution to external needs and challenges. This helps demonstrate the relevance of public service to other academic priorities and faculty roles as articulated by the institution. For example, my own institution has focused its early efforts in public engagement on urgent issues of our K-16 educational system and on economic/work force development. These priorities are reflected in recent academic program initiatives, grant proposals, and strategic objectives. In addition, we are building on our commitment to serving as an arts and cultural resource for the region by taking more events off-campus, and by partnering with new regional museum initiatives.

8. Budgeting and Planning — As in all organizational initiatives that represent change or new priorities, efforts to promote faculty involvement in public service require that institutional budgets must be demonstrably linked to institutional objectives. This includes making necessary investments in the elements of infrastructure, incentives and rewards, and faculty development at a level that reflects institutional aspirations and expectations. Engaging faculty from across the campus in a collective exploration of the role of public service in the campus mission can lead to strategic objectives for service activities. Administration must do its part by incorporating those objectives into financial choices.

Conclusion

A coherent picture of the elements related to faculty motivations and attitudes toward public service is beginning to emerge as patterns of faculty attitudes and actions across multiple and diverse institutions become clear. Understanding the role of motivation in faculty decisions regarding public service helps point to the selection of effective strategies for creating an institutional environment that promotes and supports faculty involvement.

A good single watchword to guide the efforts of institutions to encourage faculty involvement in public service may be "consistency." Consistency across elements of mission definition, strategic priorities, budget actions, recognition and rewards, definitions of terms, internal and external communications, faculty development objectives, curricular philosophy, and community relationships sends a clear signal of the level of institutional commitment to public service. Such consistency is essential to encouraging many faculty to view service as a legitimate and valued component of their scholarly life and work, whatever their individual source of motivation for participation. ▪

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