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## How We Value Faculty Work



*By Gary A. Olson*

I attended a recent gathering for department chairs, and listened as the subject turned to how some faculty members misreport their accomplishments on their vitas and annual evaluation forms. "I have one professor who lists short pieces he writes for our departmental newsletter under his 'Publications,'" said one chair, "and another who counts coaching Little League as 'Service.'"

Do the faculty members mean to be misleading? Maybe, or maybe not. But the end result, the department heads agreed, was that some faculty members miscategorize their achievements or blur the lines between categories of work. That discussion led to a related subject: how universities value the various types of faculty work.

"Some of our colleagues," said one of the chairs, "are not clear on the usual hierarchy of academic values, especially when it comes to service and research."

Another chair added, "I'm sometimes amazed at the items that appear on a curriculum vitae and where they get listed." A third commented that some professors seem to believe that all activities have equal value. "We've got to do a much better job of mentoring our faculty," she concluded.

Most problematic, the group agreed, was how some academics conceptualize "service."

Of the three typical kinds of service—community service, institutional service, and service to the profession—the first one is the least valued in a university setting, and the last one is the most

valued. Often, however, *vitas* and tenure cases do not clearly distinguish between those very different types of work.

Institutional service—chairing or serving on departmental, college, or university committees and councils—is the most easily understood. After all, it is a standard work assignment, the sort of task expected of every academic.

The confusion over service usually arises from a conflation of community and professional service.

The highest value lies in service to the discipline. Whether you are an editor of a scholarly journal, officer of your national professional organization, coordinator of a scholarly conference, manuscript reviewer for a press or journal, external reviewer for tenure and promotion, or contributor to the discipline in some other capacity, those activities typically receive the most credit in deliberations over tenure, promotion, and performance review.

Volunteering as a Boy Scout leader, serving as a museum docent, or working in a soup kitchen are all admirable and important contributions to society, but not the kind of service that universities give much credit for.

Giving a public talk at the local library on your area of expertise is an excellent way to enhance town-gown relations, but it is not equivalent to giving a talk to your peers at a major professional convention, where your talk (or at least your proposal) is likely to have undergone rigorous peer review. The two talks may even be on identical subjects, but one carries much more weight.

Similarly, giving a talk at your own institution is not the same as being invited to give a presentation at another university—unless, of course, the invitation at your home institution arose from some formal vetting process, as in a distinguished lecture series.

It's not that community service is insignificant. Certainly, civic engagement has become an important theme in higher education lately, and a positive one. The question is not whether we should pursue such projects in our courses or individually, it's how we report them to our supervisors.

Engaging in community-service projects might well say something about your character and your willingness to contribute to society, but it says little about your contributions to your students or your discipline—the two principal responsibilities of our profession, and our *raison d'être*.

Civic engagement can become a more valued activity if your project is specifically linked to the theme and content of a course you are teaching or research you are conducting. A good example: when a

professor of social work organizes a class project around assisting residents of a local homeless center in order to demonstrate to the students how to apply concepts learned in class. Another example: when an adult-literacy specialist volunteers to tutor people in a local learning center while simultaneously gathering data for a research study on the efficacy for adult learners of certain pedagogical techniques.

Years ago I served as a volunteer in a private hospital for abused women, and while I employed techniques related to my work as a university English professor—teaching the patients how to keep journals, for example, that could later be used in group and individual therapy sessions—my work there had nothing to do with my teaching or scholarship. It played no role in deliberations over my tenure, promotion, annual evaluations, or merit pay rankings, nor should it have.

In fact, some institutions actively discourage faculty members from undertaking too much community service. A provost told me that when he was a dean at a fairly prestigious private college, the administration made it clear that community service would not count in faculty evaluations. "We wanted our faculty to focus on their research and, most importantly, on our students," he said. "We emphasized that their community work was their own business and that the college would not reward it."

Some professors also blur the lines in reporting on their research. A dean once told me that one of her faculty members actually listed editing his church's newsletter on his CV under the heading "Professional/Scholarly Activities."

"He contends that this work should count because he is an English professor and editing is something English professors do," she said, with amusement.

Another common blurring of lines occurs when professors lump all of their publications in one section of their CV without making any distinctions between those that were peer-reviewed and those that were not. I have seen faculty members list book reviews and opinion pieces published in the local newspaper under their "Publications" section, as if they were equivalent to peer-reviewed articles.

The chairs at the meeting I attended mentioned several similar bad practices:

- Listing items under "Books" that were not really books, such as pamphlets, study guides, and instructors' manuals;

- Not making clear whether a book or article you list on your CV is in print, in press, or under review; and

- Listing nonscholarly presentations (a talk before the Rotary club) along with scholarly presentations.

Other faculty members fail to make a distinction between contracted research and scholarly research.

A civil engineer who accepts a contract from the local city government to conduct research about improving traffic flow through a busy intersection might be employing her research skills, but such a project is a service to the community (and one for which she is compensated). It's not a contribution to the knowledge of civil engineering as a discipline.

While both activities have value, contributing to the knowledge base of one's field is substantially more important in the academic value system than helping the city solve a traffic problem.

Some professors may well pad their vitas intentionally. But most of the mistakes that professors make in reporting their work are probably the result of misunderstanding the hierarchy of academic values. You need only ask yourself one question: "To what extent does the activity or accomplishment contribute to the knowledge and progress of the discipline?"

Using that rubric, we can easily see that editing a scholarly journal trumps editing the neighborhood newsletter, organizing a scholarly conference beats organizing a school event, publishing a peer-reviewed scholarly monograph surpasses publishing an instructors' manual for a textbook, and publishing a peer-reviewed article reporting on scholarly research tops being paid to conduct research for a local company.

The key to reporting your accomplishments accurately is to remember academe's hierarchy of values.

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