Reflections on Governance Service

A Statement by the Faculty Consultative Committee to the Faculty

Both in recent discussions and from time to time over many years, the question of recognition (financial or other) for service by faculty members to their department, college, and at the University level has arisen. The members of the Faculty Consultative Committee (who self-evidently value service to the institution) offer reflections to their colleagues about service.

The idea of "service" in an institution such as ours arises from the ancient conception of the university as a self-governing community of scholars. While modern law recognizes only a corporate structure and vests plenary authority in governing boards, the prevailing ethos and the actual practice of a major research university is that of a democracy where scholars make the important decisions about carrying out the mission. But the university cannot strive to reach the ideal of the self-governing community of scholars unless some of us participate in decision-making processes at all levels of the university.

It would be possible to leave all major decisions in the hands of deans and vice presidents and the president and provost. It is perhaps even likely that many of their decisions would have positive effects for the faculty, the university, and the state. But it would not be all of them, and even when administrative officers could be seen as moving in the right direction, there are often—usually—nuances of decisions and policy that those in governance can inform them about in order to significantly improve the decisions. Moreover, the members of the community of scholars have a responsibility to seek changes and decisions that they believe important to the well-being of the university; it is not primarily, or even mostly, the responsibility of the institutional administrators to do so.

Some have urged that there be a financial reward or incentive for participation in service in intra-institutional governance service. While we are sympathetic to that proposition, we believe there are good reasons why an explicit provision of financial incentive for service is most often counter-intuitive to the idea of shared governance.

First, as we pointed out, one of the obligations of a faculty member in an institution like ours is to participate in its governance. It is part of the definition of a faculty member that he or she has a role in governance. There are intrinsic rewards to participation beyond the financial, including having a voice in determining actions taken and, outside the department, the almost-invariably rewarding experience of meeting colleagues from other departments and colleges.

Second, as far as we can tell, virtually every department 7.12 statement, required by the Regents' tenure policy, has language that recognizes service. When decisions about merit and promotion are being made, a department that pays no attention to institutional as well as departmental, collegiate, and disciplinary service does so at the cost of understanding and recognizing how we conduct the university's business.

We are also concerned that the practice of sheltering probationary faculty members from almost all service responsibilities can be a mistake. Doing so can give them a distorted view of what it means to be a full-fledged member of the community of scholars, with its attendant obligations. While we concur that probationary faculty members should not be expected to perform significant levels of service, we believe they should be involved at a level that will not harm their prospects of achieving tenure but that will provide them an understanding of what it means to be a citizen of a major research university.

Faculty Consultative Committee
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