Understanding Faculty Productivity

Standards and Benchmarks for Colleges and Universities

Michael F. Middaugh

Preface

This book is about what faculty in U.S. colleges and universities do--and what they don't do. And let me say at the outset that faculty do far more teaching and research and perform far more public and institutional service than the American public perceives--all of which they do very well.

Unfortunately, colleges and universities have done a horrible job of communicating to external publics, particularly parents and legislators, what faculty are expected to do, what they actually do, and how well they do it. And postsecondary institutions have done little to communicate--even among themselves--that what faculty do has any day-to-day impact on students, let alone on people outside the academy.

In the hope of helping institutions correct some of these deficiencies and respond to increasing public criticism, I address the following questions in this book: How productive, in fact, are America's faculty? How do we know about their productivity? How can we measure faculty performance in ways that can be commonly understood and--most important--believed?

This book is not, however, an apologia for American faculty. It is a representation of my observations and reflections, as an administrator, from nearly a decade of research and study in the area of faculty activity. Although I have a joint faculty appointment at the University of Delaware, I am primarily an administrator and have been for all of my professional life in higher education. In my role as policy analyst, I bring the content and methodology of institutional research to an area--measuring faculty productivity--that has long been in need of those resources. Although some might view the notion of an administrator writing on the subject of faculty productivity as kin to the fox writing on optimizing poultry production, the simple fact is that clear, objective institutional research on faculty activity can provide a rich and textured picture of what faculty do--a picture that is long overdue.

Purpose of the Book

Why write a volume on the topic of faculty productivity? In part it is a response to criticism. For the past several years, higher education has been criticized severely for failing to provide information that speaks to issues such as productivity and accountability. Groups external to institutions of higher education are demanding clear, unambiguous descriptions of the ways colleges and universities conduct their business.

The U.S. Congress clearly perceives that a college or university education costs far too much for the value received. For that reason, in 1998 Congress appointed a National Commission on Higher Education Costs to study the issue and to make recommendations, which will be described in this volume. Suffice it to say here that the focus of congressional discussion has been solely on the issue of cost, with no linkage to
In my view, however, any sensible discussion of costs must address the issue of return on investment. What value is received in return for expenditures? Or put another way, what are the tangible products of higher education in the core mission areas of instruction, research, and public service?

A number of state legislatures, most notably in South Carolina, have developed performance measures that are tied to ill-conceived data constructs intended to address institutional and faculty productivity but are, in fact, misleading, erroneous, and damaging to colleges and universities. These efforts by the states will also be described in this volume.

Finally, if they are to be responsible stewards of fiscal and human resources, higher education institutions themselves need consistent and reliable quantitative and qualitative information on institutional and faculty productivity and accountability.

So the basic question I address here is, How can colleges and universities effectively communicate credible information about productivity and accountability? Institutions of higher education, particularly in the public sector, are multipurpose entities. Their focus on undergraduate education is frequently augmented by graduate education, externally sponsored pure and applied research, and public service. And although most colleges and universities have platitudinous mission statements that embrace these diverse institutional functions, the order of priority and the reward system that underpins them are not always clear. The consensus outside higher education is that faculties frequently shape their activity to meet their own professional needs, as opposed to the needs and priorities of the institution that employs them.

**Criticism of Faculties**

Henry Rosovsky (1992), former dean of the faculty of arts and science at Harvard University, characterized American faculties, when viewed as social organisms, as operating “without a written constitution, and with very little common law. That is a poor combination, especially when there is no strong consensus concerning duties and standards of behavior. This situation has been made infinitely worse by the lack of information in the hands of [academic] deans concerning [the workload of] individual professors” (p. 3A).

Rosovsky goes on to say that he does not blame faculty for current behavior patterns and that they are indeed quite rational and understandable, given the absence of constraints. He continues:

A wise senior colleague with whom I recently discussed our predicament strongly argued that the administration should assume most of the blame precisely because of our manifest unwillingness to set clear tasks and clear limits. The university setting and competition with other institutions make these assignments unusually difficult, but I am willing to agree that deans . . . have not displayed the required degree of leadership. [p. 2B]

I do not intend to lay blame on any constituency within higher education. That administrators lack the appropriate information to manage resources and ensure accountability is, however, a fair characterization of the state of affairs in many colleges and universities. Dean Rosovsky himself underscores this point:

From the point of view of a dean, two observations are in order. First, the dean has only the vaguest notion concerning what individuals teach. Second, the changes that have occurred [in faculty workloads, over time] were never authorized at the decanal level. At least that is what I believe, and that is my main point. No chairman or group of
science professors ever came to the dean to request a standard load of one-half course per year. No one ever requested a ruling concerning, for example, workload credit for shared courses. Change occurred through the use of fait accompli, i.e., creating facts. [p. 18]

I have found Rosovsky's observations repeatedly reinforced during the past decade, as I have worked with academic administrators and institutional research personnel from hundreds of colleges and universities across the country.

Need for Productivity Data

In order to enhance precision in the development of data concerning faculty productivity, the data elements must be both inherently useful—and used. And there is no better way to ensure that data will be used than to tie information to resource allocation and reallocation decisions. If productivity and costs are inextricably linked and cost containment and efficiency are rewarded, then information that demonstrates productivity becomes incredibly powerful. The relationship between academic productivity and instructional costs is well documented. (Brinkman, 1990; Brinkman, 1992; Hoenack, 1990; Middaugh and Hollowell, 1992; Middaugh, 1995; Middaugh, 1998).

Distilled to its simplest form, the more faculty teach, the lower instructional costs are. But if faculty are to pursue other legitimate academic interests, that is, the research and service that are directly related to the institution's mission, how can a balance be struck between teaching and other ancillary activities that takes cognizance of the issue of cost-efficiency? How can this information be assembled into reporting structures that have utility to deans, department chairs, and others interested in knowing what faculty do and whether faculty resources are being deployed in the most effective and efficient manner to accomplish both institutional and departmental objectives? And how can sufficient clarity and credibility be introduced into this information that it can be understood and used by those outside academe? It is precisely this information that constitutes the foundation for new paradigms in talking about faculty productivity.

But the mere quantitative demonstration of productivity and efficiency is not sufficient. If colleges and universities are to demonstrate that they are productive in the areas of teaching, research, and service, they must be prepared to describe not only how much faculty are teaching or how much research or public service they are doing but how well they are doing those things. How colleges can do so is the sum and substance of what this book is about.

Previous Research on Productivity

It is easiest to see the direction that discussions about faculty productivity must take by first examining the ways productivity has been described over the years. The opening chapter of this volume examines institutional and national efforts to describe faculty activity and clearly delineates the shortcomings in those approaches.

Once inadequacies in current analyses of productivity have been identified, the book then moves into a discussion of new paradigms for thinking about productivity and accountability. The starting point for this discussion is the national reporting effort begun in the mid-1990s under the auspices of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). That effort grew into the Joint Commission on Accountability Reporting (JCAR), which attempted to describe what colleges do—including faculty activity—in terms of
measurable institutional outputs. The JCAR methodology was the first serious attempt to look at both the process and outcomes aspects of higher education functions.

However, the JCAR effort was intended to provide reporting conventions for audiences outside higher education. Although useful, these conventions were never intended to be management tools that would address the concerns that Henry Rosovsky raised. An examination of the JCAR methodology identifies areas in which significant breakthroughs have been made with respect to productivity and accountability reporting, as well as identifying areas where additional work is needed.

The Delaware Study

At about the time JCAR was evolving, the University of Delaware received successive grants from the TIAA-CREF Cooperative Research Program and the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), respectively, to support the development of a national data-sharing consortium, now known as the Delaware Study—a study that focused on instructional costs and faculty productivity at the academic discipline level of analysis. This approach to reporting is a direct response to the concerns of Henry Rosovsky and others, with respect to the need for reliable management data. This book examines the conceptual underpinnings for the Delaware Study and describes how institutions, system administrations, and governing boards are using the data to make better decisions. The book also delineates how the Delaware Study, when used with appropriate JCAR reporting conventions, provides a comprehensive picture of institutional and faculty productivity and accountability.

Although JCAR and the Delaware Study represent significant progress in quantifying productivity and accountability information, the qualitative dimension must also be addressed. A number of institutions across the country have established measures that describe not only how much activity faculty are engaged in but how well faculty perform in those activities. The final section examines these qualitative measures and offers suggestions for effectively combining quantitative and qualitative data into a single reporting package.

Audience for the Book

I wrote this book primarily for provosts, deans, department chairs, and those in state higher education coordinating agencies who have responsibility for accurately describing what faculty do. In fact, people in those positions are the colleagues with whom I have worked over the past ten years to develop new ways of talking about faculty productivity. Officials in federal and state governmental agencies, as well as in higher education associations wishing to take a serious look at the linkages between cost containment, productivity, and quality, will also find the book interesting. And it will have value for graduate students contemplating careers in higher education administration.

As I noted earlier, this volume is the result of a decade of collaborative research with colleagues from over three hundred colleges and universities across the United States. I could never have written it if these colleagues had not been risk takers who were willing to share sensitive data and willing to think in new ways about how to describe what faculty do. For their cooperation—and frequently their inspiration—I am in their debt.

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