

Faculty of Color and Traditional Notions of Service

by Benjamin Baez

Colleges and universities expect service of all faculty members, but such service is rarely valued highly. At most institutions, service is the least important criterion for evaluating faculty.¹ And many promotion and tenure processes actually punish faculty members for doing too much service.²

In this article, I propose that the prevailing discourse about merit as it relates to promotion and tenure is inadequate because this discourse doesn't give enough weight to service—especially service work by faculty of color.

Faculty of color have greater difficulties with service than their white counterparts because they are often expected to do more service due to their high visibility, the belief that these faculty present diverse perspectives, and the need institutions and faculty see for mentoring students of color.³

This type of service, according to many studies, rarely is weighed

favorably in promotion and tenure decisions, and, as a result, faculty of color are vulnerable to the “revolving door” phenomenon.⁴

The research literature often attributes this phenomenon to abuses of institutional authority. For example, Banks argues, that rather than being encouraged to focus on their “academic work,” many Black professors were “sucked into a plethora of activities often unrelated to their competence and interests.”⁵

Similarly, Reyes and Halcon argue that expecting faculty of color to engage in minority-related service is a form of racism (the “typecasting syndrome”).⁶

Such assertions, though they recognize the harmful consequences of service, fail to challenge the bases for these consequences or acknowledge that service may benefit faculty of color by furthering personal and political goals.⁷

By distinguishing “academic work” from other activities, these

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studies unintentionally reinforce the notion that merit is defined only by scholarship and teaching, while other activities, such as service, involve the “misuse of [minority] scholars.”⁸

Furthermore, as Exum notes, although service responsibilities burden faculty of color, institutions need the participation of these faculty members on committees.⁹ This service is important, for both the faculty member and institution, because such participation increases the diversity of perspectives,¹⁰ ensures sensitivity to the needs of people of color,¹¹ and may be personally and politically rewarding to faculty of color.¹²

This paper uses data from interviews with faculty of color to support the argument that traditional notions of merit must be reconsidered.

Specifically, I argue that service, especially service that furthers social justice, is valuable and meritorious and should be rewarded. I disagree with suggestions by many scholars that institutions loosen their demands for service. Such suggestions—if adopted—may provide relief to individual faculty members, but may actually work against better representation of faculty of color.

Service that seeks to improve the status of people of color in acad-

emia is essential. Without it, our faculties will remain predominantly white. The demand by scholars should be, therefore, not for deemphasizing service requirements but for reconceptualizing merit.

The arguments made in this paper are supported by data from interviews with 16 faculty of color, conducted between September 1994 and October 1995 at a large, historically and predominantly white, independent Carnegie Research II university in a moderate-sized city in the Northeast.¹³

Service was a salient issue for the faculty members in this study. They knew they were evaluated on more important criteria—important for the institution, that is. Still, service took on significance in their day-to-day activities. They engaged in institutional service (departmental, college, or university-wide committee work), community service (work dealing with homelessness), and professional service (reviewing manuscripts, organizing conferences).

Performing this service required these faculty to spend a great deal of time in non-scholarship activities. Because the faculty knew that fulfilling these responsibilities took too much time away from research, they felt burdened by service expectations.

As an untenured African American woman in business explained,

'Most faculty of color are pulled in so many directions for service that frequently their research suffers.'

"Service is the downfall of most faculty of color. They are pulled in so many directions for service that frequently their research is not as high a priority."

The burdens of service required that the faculty members become very possessive of their time. They often talked about having to "control" their time or "be selective" when deciding which activities warranted their commitments.

But these faculty members distinguished between "general service" and "race-related work." The faculty perceived general service as any community, institutional, and professional activity— curriculum committee, program development, reviewing journal manuscripts— having little direct connection to race, diversity, or social justice. They attempted to limit the time they spent on such activities.

The faculty members perceived race-related service, on the other hand, as community, institutional, or professional activity benefitting their racial or ethnic communities. They were considerably less likely to withhold their participation in these activities, especially if they felt the activities would benefit their own racial communities.

For example, one Latino full professor in social work, after having explained that he carefully con-

trolled the time spent on service, explained why he often chose to engage in race-related service and research:

Faculty of color's circumstances are quite different from other people's in that if you have any social consciousness and any identification with your respective ethnic or racial group, you are going to want to help in some way, through your discipline or otherwise.

Race-related service, therefore, was perceived by the faculty as providing social benefits to their respective racial or ethnic communities. The faculty members felt they were speaking for those who could not speak for themselves. As a result, they engaged in activities within academia and outside of academia that they saw as furthering social justice.

Race-related activities within academia included work on institutional committees focusing on the retention of students of color, hate speech, affirmative action, ethnic studies departments, and teacher training.

These faculty engaged in race-related work in their disciplines as well: heading up minority caucuses, or, for one faculty member, involvement in a national task force dealing with racism. They saw this work as extremely important,

Race-related work allowed faculty members to be activists on behalf of traditionally-marginalized groups.

despite also perceiving it as time-consuming.

For example, an African American woman in nursing explained that she felt it “essential” to become a member of her college’s promotion and tenure committee, to ensure that she was “able to talk about diversity issues.”

Despite the many hours she spent on this committee, hours that prevented her from focusing on her writing, she felt addressing diversity issues on the committee would not only help her when she went up for tenure, but also help to ensure that minority faculty in the school would survive the promotion and tenure process.

Outside of academia, the faculty members’ activities included community work with low-income people and projects involving police brutality, prisoners’ rights, teenage pregnancy, urban public schools, and hate crimes.

A tenured full professor of law tied her service work to her scholarship: She wrote about the issues—the impact of pay-for-view television on communities of color—that she worked on in the community, so that she could have credibility when she participated in such activities. In return, her involvement in these activities gave her the data she needed to

write about the issues.

Another law professor, an untenured African American woman, directly connected her service work with her teaching:

You know the stuff that’s going on at the jail, which prompted the Justice Department to investigate the county jail [police brutality of Black prisoners]. We thought, myself and another professor here who works in the clinic, that these are important issues. This was a unique opportunity to create a forum to provide some information not only about the conditions at the jail, but to tie that into the larger lessons that we’re doing in the classroom. So we developed that. That kind of thing is important. You know, it’s the way you view the role [as a faculty woman of color], and the kinds of things you do, and whether you try to bring those issues to the Law School.

These faculty perceived service to be inextricable from teaching and scholarship. More important, these comments illustrate how race-related work gave the faculty the opportunity to engage in political activism on behalf of traditionally marginalized groups.¹⁴

It is important to note here that the faculty members were as likely to feel burdened by race-related

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despite its risks, these faculty members
contested the prevailing idea of merit.***

work as by general service demands. The salient point here is not that the faculty members preferred race-related work, but that they perceived it as more important than other type of activities.

This is not to say, of course, that the notion of preference is unsupported; it means only that the assumption of preference should always be examined in these types of studies. Nevertheless, the faculty in this study clearly expressed that race-related work was important to them, so important, in fact, that they often ignored their well-meaning white colleagues' advice to cease such service.

By choosing race-related service despite understanding the risks of doing so, these faculty were contesting predominant notions of merit that define service as less important than other promotion and tenure criteria.

If the academic profession accepts that the greatest obstacle to the successful inclusion of people of color in the academy is racism (or sexism—especially that racism and sexism embedded in the apparently neutral policies, practices, and norms of social institutions—then race-related work must be seen by the profession as breaking down this barrier.

When scholars—well-inten-

tioned, of course—devalue service by demanding that institutions loosen their demands for service, or by indicating that faculty prefer the other more valuable promotion criteria,¹⁵ they devalue the work that some faculty members, at least, see as furthering social justice.

But, more than this, faculty scholars, in particular, should see that by conceding service as less valuable than scholarship or teaching, they might be giving institutions the authority to decide what work gets rewarded and which faculty are permitted to remain. Though institutions, and their officers, certainly may make wise decisions, this concession limits faculty autonomy and academic freedom.

This issue of service also presents an ethical dilemma for academia. Because of the social benefits of race-related work by some faculty of color, and the problems service presents for promotion and tenure, some faculty members might have to choose between their jobs and social justice.

Institutions that benefit from the race-related service provided by their faculty members and then deny tenure to these faculty members for choosing to concentrate on service rather than the other promotion criteria certainly seem to face an ethical contradiction.

To what extent are academic

It is difficult to reconcile, ethically, the institutional demands for service and the faculty reward system.

institutions ethically required to reward their faculty members for service that ensures that institutional action on diversity issues matches institutional rhetoric?

It can be argued, of course, that institutional reputation is often tied to traditional notions of merit—faculty research productivity, perhaps teaching effectiveness—so there is little incentive for institutions to value service as they would scholarship, or even teaching.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to reconcile, ethically, the institutional demands for service, the benefits derived from it, and the outcomes of the faculty reward system.

Service does present problems for the retention of faculty, but rather than penalize the faculty member who emphasizes service, we might instead attribute those problems to the unethical, perhaps, but certainly unfair, promotion and tenure practices of our academic institutions.

Scholars must expose the contradictions underlying these practices and challenge the traditional, but restrictive, notions of merit that provide the justification for those tenure and promotion practices in the first place.

Rather than encouraging institutions to loosen their demands for service, scholars might instead promote the more inclusive strategy of

redefining merit in the faculty rewards system.

Too many higher education institutions emphasize scholarship—often defined in ways that benefit white men—to the detriment of the other promotion and tenure criteria.

Service, especially when it helps to eliminate barriers preventing some groups from fully participating in society, must be considered by institutions to be meritorious. The discourse of service, as has been recently the case with teaching, needs to point out its positive and important benefits.

As Tierney and Bensimon (1996) note about the promotion and tenure process, merit is a social construction, one that can be redefined by the academic profession.

The argument here, however, is not to substitute one view of merit for another. This paper does not argue that academia should ignore scholarship or teaching. Scholarship and teaching provide significant benefits to institutions and society.

What this paper intends is to advocate an expanded view of merit that recognizes important social work under the rubric of service and that rewards those faculty members—regardless of race or ethnic background—who engage in this work. An expanded view of merit benefits everyone. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ See Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Centra, 1993; Jarvis, 1991; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996.
- ² See Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995; Jarvis, 1991.
- ³ Menges & Exum, 1983. See also, Exum, et al., 1984; Garza, 1987; Johnsrud & Des Jarlais, 1994; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1997.
- ⁴ See Blackwell, 1988.
- ⁵ Banks, 1984, p.327.
- ⁶ Reyes and Halcon, 1988.
- ⁷ There is some evidence in the research literature that faculty of color might prefer service to the other criteria because it provides political or social benefits (See e.g., Cuadraz, 1997; Johnsrud, 1993; Padilla & Chavez, 1995; Pollard, 1990).
- ⁸ See, e.g., Banks (1984).
- ⁹ Exum, 1983.
- ¹⁰ Menges & Exum, 1983.
- ¹¹ Tack & Patitu, 1992.
- ¹² Johnsrud, 1993.
- ¹³ The university had more than 10,000 undergraduate students, 3,000 graduate students, and 900 full time faculty, including full-time tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure-track faculty, but not part-time or adjunct faculty.
- The faculty, staff, and students at the university were predominantly white, accounting for approximately 87 percent of full-time students and 87 percent of full-time faculty. Men made up 68 percent and women 32 percent of the 1995 faculty. Faculty of color made up 13 percent of the faculty (these figures include full-time non-tenure-track positions).
- Men of color made up 9 percent of the faculty, 13 percent of the male faculty, and 70 percent of the faculty of color population. Women of color made up 4 percent of the faculty, 12 percent of the female faculty, and 30 percent of faculty of color.
- Of the faculty members in this study, four were full professors with tenure; four were associate professors without tenure. The racial and gender make-up of the sample was: eight African American women; three African American

men; two Asian American women; one Asian American man; and two Latino men.

- ¹⁴ This study, therefore, corroborated what a few scholars have implied about service: it may provide evidence of political or social activism. See, e.g., Cuadraz, 1997; Johnsrud, 1993.

- ¹⁵ See, e.g., Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Centra, 1993; Jarvis, 1991.

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