

'Faculty contract' would aid teacher, institution

Professors, university could articulate visions for work product, says **Rick Cherwitz**

Recent discussions in higher education tackle the issue of how best to increase the number of faculty at research universities, such as UT, that focus on teaching.

Judith Shapiro, president of the Teagle Foundation and former president of Barnard College, correctly observes: "There have been proposals for a separate track for faculty members who would focus on teaching, as opposed to research. This, however, is a solution that is part of the problem, since it will almost certainly perpetuate a culture of relative disdain for teaching."

Consonant with Shapiro's call to diversify faculty roles, I propose the concept of a "faculty contract," an approach that avoids two inherently unequal classes of faculty citizens stemming from the current hierarchy among the three parts of a university's mission: research, teaching, service.

By faculty contract, I do not mean the sort of legal document used by unionized institutions.

Instead, I am referring to a process by which faculty, in consultation with their departments and colleges, negotiate and then, over the course of time, renegotiate their work product.

The contract would not begin with a discussion of product. It would commence with professors articulating a scholarly vision and agenda, and explaining how that agenda comports with their larger personal and professional commitments. In addition, the burden would be on faculty members to document how their work aligns with the mission of the institution and academic unit to whom they report.

The next step would be negotiation (or renegotiation) between faculty members and the relevant administration (e.g., department chair, departmental personnel committee, college dean, etc.) regarding the products and outcomes naturally occasioned by the stated scholarly vision and agenda. These work products, once agreed upon, would serve as the metrics for evaluating faculty performance.

Put simply, faculty would be treated consistently and, at the same time, differently.

What this approach suggests is that while all professors at public research universities are expected to be scholars, each has a different scholarly program and therefore should be evaluated uniquely depending on the work products most befitting their chosen pursuits.

The contract mechanism also emphasizes that the professional vision and scholarship of professors constantly evolve, change and mature over the course of an academic career, and the needs of an institution also change. Hence, flexibility in defining outcomes is necessary for institutional adaptation and to ensure that faculty members are energized and innovative, and that they remain resilient and productive.

The key is creating regular and formalized opportunities for professors to reflect on their professional vision, subsequently articulating it to their academic units and incorporating it into negotiations about acceptable performance.

The contract method will not create two separate classes of faculty citizens, where separate status becomes tantamount to unequal treatment — and, as some have argued, exploitation.

Moreover, flexibility does not provide a license for faculty members to deviate from the mission of the university and academic unit, to decide arbitrarily and unilaterally about what counts as work product, or to become lazy. Rather, it adds reflection followed by open deliberation to the process, allowing faculty greater ownership of their scholarship and an ability to participate in the definition of appropriate work products.

While not without problems, what I am proposing is a move in the right direction to help escape the categorical distinctions among and hierarchy of the three pillars of universities (research, teaching and service). At the same time, it would maintain faculty accountability as well as rigorous methods of performance evaluation.



Rick Cherwitz is a professor in the Moody College of Communication and

a faculty fellow in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. Reach him at spa737@uts.cc.utexas.edu.