



# The Public Good: Faculty Work and Social Value

The TIAA Institute commissioned two papers to address the question of how to demonstrate higher education's contribution to the public good.

Genevieve Shaker, editor of a book on faculty and the public good, and William Plater, an emeritus provost, explore higher education's contribution to the public good through individual faculty members' work. Their [companion piece](#) addresses the issue from the perspective of institutional responsibility to deliver civic value.

American higher education's distinguished history of contributing to the nation's public good is widely acknowledged. The substantial investment of public funds recognizes that higher education is an essential component of social and economic prosperity—what the U.S. Constitution calls the “general welfare” of the country.

But tension between higher education's benefits for individuals compared to the general public is increasing, along with concerns about an adequate return on funds invested for the public good.

## Faculty contributions to the public good

Faculty contributions to the public good are largely a function of the individual choices faculty make about how they integrate paid work with discretionary contributions beyond their formal position descriptions. These contributions are in keeping with the historical view of professorial work as a calling and profession, as reflected in the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) [founding document](#), which noted that “the responsibility of the university teacher is primarily to the public itself.”

But measures of returns on public investments in higher education are being driven toward simple, quantitative rates of retention, graduation, licensure, and job placement. This approach leaves little room to account for under-reported and partially-counted faculty contributions to the public good.

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Thus the discretionary actions of faculty—full and part-time, tenured or not—that contribute to the quality of education and student success tend to be missing from the ledger sheet of productivity. These activities may include:

- working with students beyond the classroom and office
- responding to requests and emails from students on a 24/7 basis
- advising student organizations
- designing just-in-time class experiences that align with current events
- developing trust among neighborhood residents for community-based service learning projects
- providing research opportunities for students
- writing recommendation letters for various purposes
- sharing networks to assist in student job searches
- helping students navigate academic and personal dilemmas
- providing the moral support that students cite as essential for their success

Similarly, faculty contributions to engagement in local, national and international communities tend to be subsumed under reports of teaching or research without noting time and creative effort dedicated to activities such as:

- translating research into plans or actions intended to assist the community
- articulating ideas derived from teaching or research through the media
- developing trust in other countries as preparation for study abroad
- explaining relevant research to legislators for decision and policy making

### Faculty work misunderstood

One study estimates that on average as much as 30% of faculty time is spent on teaching activities that might be considered discretionary and oriented toward the public good.

Partial views of faculty activities lead policymakers, the media, and a skeptical public to undervalue faculty contributions and to think that academic workers and faculty are interchangeable.

Elected officials tend to focus on just two of higher education's public goods: preparing graduates for employment and creating knowledge for economic development. They nearly universally ignore the non-market, qualitative outputs of faculty more typically associated with education for citizenship and community engagement.

The faculty, with active institutional support, need to better explain their own work as professionals and to create a realistic and compelling narrative of their public good contributions, particularly when verifiable quantitative measures are not available.

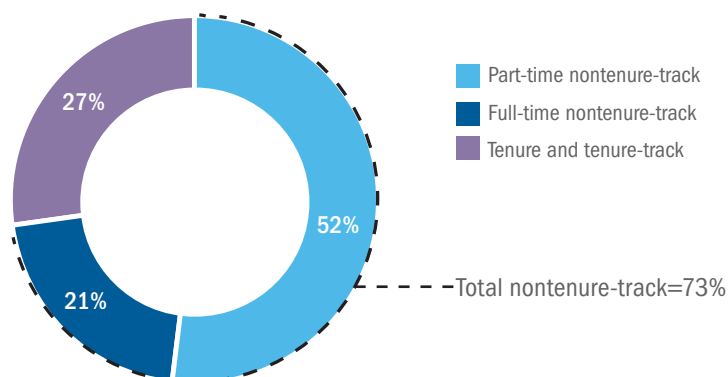
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### The 21st century faculty

As challenging as the issue of appropriately deploying individual faculty time and talent might be, it is now vastly more complicated because “the faculty” is no longer comprised of the full-time tenured professor many policymakers remember or assume. Today, only about a quarter of the academic work force is tenured or tenure-track. The remaining faculty and instructors are either full-time (21%) or part-time (52%) nontenure-track.

#### Composition of the academic workforce

Faculty and instructors in part-time nontenure-track positions in 2016 comprised more than half the U.S. academic workforce.



Unlike their traditional approach to tenure appointments, institutions specify detailed and narrow job requirements in the hiring of part-time faculty. The tenured faculty—whose commitments of time and effort beyond contracted, compensated work create public benefits—may not long endure.

### Demonstrating the faculty’s public good contributions

A sampling of the more prominent agencies addressing public service, public good, and/or productivity in general include the [Delta Cost Project](#), the [Carnegie Community Engagement Classification](#), and the [Faculty Survey of Student Engagement](#). Yet despite all the data collected by these and other entities, much faculty activity that is fundamentally important to student success and institutional quality is not captured. Instead, the focus most often is on activities and results that can be easily quantified and reported.

What is missing from the models are the complex, synergistic activities of faculty that are known to be valuable but are difficult to measure. In response, many institutions are creating new policies focused on valuing and assessing faculty’s public good work. The recently revised Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) [promotion and tenure policy on public scholarship](#), for example, states that “the nature of public scholarship is diverse and the evidence used to support it may differ from traditional forms of scholarship. Non-traditional dissemination outlets and alternative metrics should be acknowledged as acceptable forms of documentation.”

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These new policies, however, are being created internally to assess individual merit against an already accepted paradigm that recognizes public good contributions as valuable despite the absence of metrics. Likewise, even as faculty may feel increasingly confident in evaluating the complex performance of their peers, a gap between what faculty know about each other and what the public knows about faculty work remains.

### Final word

The highest responsibility of individual faculty as academic professionals is to the public good. Analyses of the largest single-cost item of higher education—faculty and staff time—should include both direct and indirect measures of contributions to the public good. Such contributions are made not only via paid fulfillment of job descriptions, but also flow from the discretionary efforts of these professionals as they fulfill the social functions of their calling.

#### Read more:

Shaker, Genevieve G., and William M. Plater (2016). *The Public Good, Productivity and Faculty Work: Individual Effort and Social Value*. New York, NY: TIAA Institute.

Shaker, Genevieve G., and William M. Plater (2016). *The Public Good, Productivity and Purpose: New Economic Models for Higher Education*. New York, NY: TIAA Institute.

Shaker, Genevieve G. (Ed). (2015). *Faculty work and the public good: Philanthropy, engagement, and academic professionalism*. New York: Teachers College Press.

*Please note that the underlined text throughout this piece is hyperlinked in its online version so that you can readily access the resources cited herein.*

#### About the TIAA Institute

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