The Public Good, Productivity and Faculty Work: Individual Effort and Social Value

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Executive Summary

Defining and measuring the complete role of an individual faculty member’s contributions to the public good is difficult, if not impossible. In economic models, time devoted to producing the measurable “products” that reflect a return on public investments often becomes the most salient factor in assessing productivity and efficiency. Measures of returns on public investments in higher education are being driven increasingly toward clear, quantitative, but overly-simple rates of retention, graduation, licensure and job placement, leaving little room for accounting for under-reported and partially-counted faculty contributions to quality through their discretionary allocation of time and effort beyond position descriptions and job requirements.

As the academic workforce becomes increasingly part time, contingent, and unbundled, American higher education puts the quality of student experience and education at risk by failing to define, measure, count and recognize voluntary contributions to the public good—a defining characteristics of faculty as self-regulating professionals whose primary responsibility is to the public itself. This oversight persists even as vast new data sources provide more information about how faculty spend their time. Economic models and their measures—if not developed with a full appreciation of the nature of faculty work and the public purposes of education—may accelerate the move toward a fractured academic workforce because what “counts” no longer depends on faculty discretion but, instead, on contracted work for discrete tasks, such as teaching a specific course or attaining a measurable research result.

Yet, the forces currently transforming higher education, disruptive as they are, also contain the potential to design a new, coherent academic workforce and simultaneously advance the public good.

Key Takeaways

■ The intersection of calls for greater productivity of institutions of higher education, to be achieved via economic modeling, and narrowing measures of returns on personal and public investments puts at risk the value-added, discretionary contributions of faculty—as academic professionals—to educational quality and the public good.

■ The data and information that institutions frequently collect and value are only partially congruent with the activities individual faculty engage in and report upon.

■ Inadequately informed and partial views of faculty activities lead policy makers, media, and a skeptical public (paying the increased costs of college attendance) to believe that academic workers and faculty are interchangeable, and that what matters are graduates’ credentials and not the means by which they are attained.

■ The traditional faculty is disintegrating in the aftermath of diminished public investments in a period of increased expectations, with a largely unnoticed and inadvertent loss of educational quality and, likewise, the possible reduced capacity of graduates.

■ In the midst of disruptive innovations changing the American system of education, intentional and comprehensive restructuring of the academic workforce has the potential to enhance the public good of the nation by drawing more deliberately on individual faculty effort and their collective professional responsibility for the social value of higher education.

■ Faculty need to do more to explain their own work as professionals and to create a realistic and compelling narrative of their contribution to the public good—perhaps as a bridge between evolving discussions about the changing academic workforce and economic modeling projects.

To read the full paper go to, www.tiaainstitute.org > Higher Education

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