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ABSTRACT

Of the responsibilities of a university communications professor--teaching, research, and service--community service usually receives the least amount of professional recognition. One reason is that community service is often unrelated both to academic expertise and to responsibilities within the university system. It is an action undertaken not at the request of a department or university but as a response to requests from outside the campus. However, efforts of professors and students can serve cities, for example, in three capacities: technical expertise and performance skills, information exchange to improve communication processes, and advice in assuming an advocate role in political action and use of publicity. Research can yield other areas relevant to communication study in which the professor can provide service beyond the university. Community service can demonstrate the relevance of the university to the citizens that support it, indicate the importance of communication knowledge, and provide new dimensions to classroom experiences. (RN)

THE TANGLED WEB OF SERVICE

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Question: What should be the unique role of community service or the unique applications of the concept of community service in departments of Speech Communication located in urban environments?

The trio of responsibilities for the university professor included in the phrase--teaching, research, and service--receives little formal attention within the university, other than at the time of consideration of merit salary increases and promotion. Universities have not been notable in subjecting their own institution to the rigor of scholarly inquiry.[1] I choose deliberately to discuss the specific role of the professor for I look upon departments as only necessary administrative groupingsof individual scholars to enhance their capacity to teach and develop knowledge, hopefully benefitting from collegial exchange with others similarly devoted to study of common phenomena. To an extent, then, these remarks are not discipline-bound, but reflect a general evaluation of the role of universities in modern society.

Some scholarly professional associations have standing committees addressed for the trio. Research and teaching have been the subject of extensive discussion. But community service as a concept is the subject of the scholar's mind primarily as an after thought. It is true that letters of appointment for faculty mention the trio, but the criteria for promotion to tenure barely discuss the last of the trio. One recent faculty statement described service as consisting of both university and community service--the latter as structured as in extension (really off-campus teaching) and unstructured and episodic including consultant work (paid or unpaid) or the activity of a "good citizen."[2] Interestingly, this document attempting to establish standardized work loads did not address any community service, only on-campus activities. The Regent of the University of Wisconsin have provided a more precise statement:

> Public service involves those activities whereby the faculty member puts his professional competence to work in the public arena. Professional consulting activities will be given consideration if they increase his knowledge and give evidence of competence. Service within the academic community which goes beyond the normal requirements of departmental, school, or college duties shall be considered an important form of public service.[3]

For the sake of later discussion, it seems preferable to speak of community service as service to the public, external to the institution, requiring and using the specific professional competence of the scholarly discipline. Too many activities are purely self-serving of the institution and many are not unlike the extra-curricular pursuits of any good citizen--participation in civic groups, scouting, church, or hobby. These activities tend to provide a commonality of interaction between professors and the non-academic citizen. They keep professors human.

But a primary fact is clear--in the trio of responsibilities, service takes last place in priority of effort--measured by merit increase, tenure, or faculty commitment. The academic institution expects that its clientele will initiate the approach--students attend class; research is the outgrowth of theory and gaps in knowledge stemming from the instructional and other demands. Service implies a necessity; it combines connotatively two characteristics foreign to the academic values--that one's talents may be hired for commercial gain or that they may be donated. Both commerce and charity subvert the concept of intellectual purity and establish a dependency relationship--either with the academic as superior or subordinate, but nonetheless introducing an alien character to the relationship of the professor and his clientele.

The professor must admit the schizoid traits of being both mercenary and philanthropic. An example of the strangeness of community service is the fact that a departmental committee charged with the responsibility of identifying community service after one year dissolved itself, unable to determine any constructive program for the department.

It is instructive to note that the university regularly provides released time for research or unusual instructional requirements which may demand the professor's time, but service reductions are rare. Two reasons for this rarity are that service is often discipline-free, unrelated to academic expertise, and context-free, unrelated to responsibilities within the university. Occasionally, a faculty member seeks an elective public office or accepts an appointment to a public body. If such positions intrude on the regular academic responsibilities, the professor is expected to obtain a leave of absence or request reduction in his appointment. Clearly, by such pattern, the university has relegated service to the nice-to-do but unessential category in faculty performance.

The current performance of the service role is thus hampered by low prestige, low priority, and counter-productive attitudes of the faculty. A further handicap, perhaps more important than the others, is that service is an action undertaken in response to requests by others--as such it is a passive undertaking. I have yet to see a research proposal to determine community needs for university service. The urban university is uncertain of its mission and what peculiar requirements accrue to it by virtue of its location in a city.[4] The fact of this Action Caucus is confirmatory evidence that the mission of the urban university remains elusive. Awareness is the first stage to remedy--but inquiry for determining community needs is a researchable topic. Service, ideally should not precede research. (Ed. note: May service include research, however?)

Consequently, lacking research studies of urban service needs, my approach is rather to attempt to deduce what the pattern of service has been. Such examination immediately convinces me that the public and scholarly expectations are of a minimal sort, reflecting a belief by the public that communication is restricted to the traditional skills of public speaking, rhetoric, and debate though teaching and research have long since charted new boundaries of the field. The lag of public awareness behind reality is a commentary on faculty willingness to await the requests of the uninformed or erroneously informed citizen.

The immediate requirement then is to determine by research what are the unique problems or requirements of the city to which the field of communication has relevance. Put another way, if a city is essentially a communication phenomenon[5]--differing from the other portions of the society in the frequency, magnitude, and complexity of the communication behavior of its residents, all urban problems

must have a communication componant in their description and solution. The requirement, in brief, for the city is to maintain and enhance the efficiency of communication to permit resources, human and technological, to sustain their vitality.

The academic talent can serve in several capacities--the technical role--directed to skill development and labor related to traditional performance of communicative acts; the linkage role--concentrated at the points of interface between man and media--the man-machine link, and the necessity of integration of communication systems for total informational, educational, entertainment, or consumer needs; and the advocate role--problem-oriented where specific solution to critical social crises demands expertise beyond that of the layman.

These three principal types of service are best illustrated by actual faculty endeavors. Before enumerating some examples, however, it is desirable to identify what roles the professor and his students may perform in the service capacity. The professor role is that of expert, planner, evaluator, and strategist; the role of student is that of mini-expert, technician, field agent, and doer. The following recitation is a personal catalog of service activities, either in which I have been directly involved or to which my colleagues or students have made major contribution.

The first category of skill development or labor includes: preparation and conduct of political activities--design, conduct, and analysis of political polls; preparation and critique of political speeches and messages; reacting to political platforms--acting as a sounding board for contemplated political decision; advisor for curriculum planning for minority programs; operation of minority college placement, and scholarship and job referral services; planning committee for ecumenical campus programs including problem pregnancy and draft counselling services; and providing expertise of the committee-parliamentary process to lay groups including conflict resolution throughnegotiation. Specific technical expertise and performance skills characterize this role.

The second category expedites the information exchange between individuals, groups, or organizational bodies, essentially an apolitical activity attempting to improve the communication process. Public service as a linkage demands a similar degree of professional knowledge but as well knowledge of other societal elements--not restricted solely to the operation of the communication process. Typical of the service rendered in this category may be the socialization of new citizens to city life, the expediting of information exchange between alienated segments and established elements of the society, interpreting student concerns to the general public, easing communication between the older citizens and the institutions designed for their care, operation of informational referral services to direct needy individuals to the proper point of concern within the city, evaluation of rumor control centers and emergency information services, operation and evaluation of covert advisory programs such as abortion and drug information. Characteristic of these services is the fact that the institutionalized communication channels are clogged, closed, or in some manner incapable of functioning without special assistance. The service is not one of advocacy, however; it is catalytic, attempting to change the communication situation to permit efficient transmission of messages but without attempt to change the content of those messages. Nonetheless, in cortrast to the first category of service--the technical role--the linkage role is more demanding in knowledge and more susceptible to criticism within and outside the university. The role attempts to help those in distress

in one fashion or another--those beset by trouble in the city--by communicating that distress to a responsible and responsive party.

The third category of service, the advocate role, is necessarily political. The clear requirement in problem solving is the willingness to place professional reputation in jeopardy as well as to exercise judgment upon solutions to urban problems. Inevitably, such role will lead to dispute.[6] Both publicity and political skills are required in this endeavor as well as sufficient study of a given problem to ascertain appropriate solution and permit commitment to a line of action to pursue conviction to fulfillment or abandonment. Some activities of this sort have been noteworthy by their headlines--pursuit of an end to the Viet Nam war--while others have engaged careful and quiet study--some eventually leading to challenges of radio or television license renewals by the Federal Communication Commission. The Public Interest Research Groups, the campus-based affiliates of Ralph Nader, have undertaken some state and city investigations which greatly depend for success upon the correct mix of communication technique and theory. Cities and the state of Wisconsin as well as other states are in the process of making critical decisions on the telecommunications policy for the future, a situation unique where both the process of communication and the substantive content are elementary to the decision. Advice to legislators, study of investigative bodies, and transmittal of information on matters under public consideration to special interest groups and the general public provide full challenge to communication experts. The ultimate step is organization of a lobby group for the cause. Considerable dangers can be tallied against this third role but it does provide the most direct and immediate reward that knowledge can be the basis of reality decisions. The role demands both procedural and substantive contribution of knowledge.

The title I gave to these remarks alludes to the words of Walter Scott.[7] Truly--"oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to" serve cities. The values and dangers must be balanced. In each case, involvement may not be easily controlled. The path of action in service may lead beyond the horizon of our vision.

The values of service are in the opportunity for field application of theory and field research--testing the adaptability of theory to practice and hopefully leading to the identification of new mediating variables and eventually a re-formulation of theory. Service can be a direct demonstration of the relevance of the university to the community and indicate the specific importance of knowledge of communication to the social process. The reality of service provides a new ingredient to the classroom experience for student and professor alike.

Simultaneously, service can be a monstrous consumer of time and energy. Distinction between the expert and advocacy roles is a fine line. Commitment may require separation of the person from the institution; institutional commitment is more difficult to obtain and requires bureaucratic decision--inevitably too time consuming for practicality in many urban situations. Hence, the professor is institutionally isolated--out on the limb. The professor may become too closely identified with a particular cause; hence, multiple involvements, service to both parties of a controversy, and careful delineation of substantive and procedural contributions must become the role of behavior. These considerations force the academician to function in a situation more sensitive and confined than the usual classroom. All the difficulties attendant to the role of the participant-observer are inherent to the service function.[8]

There is a new recognition also for the scholar; not all of the information gained can be freely transmitted within the university, the profession, or to society at large. The confidentiality of relationships acquired in services must be respected or the relationship may not long endure. This last fact is perhaps the major handicap of service from the academic viewpoint; service cannot always lead to formal publication of the knowledge acquired. Admitted, such service may eventually lead to broader recognition within the discipline and the community; still not many professors aspire for the life of Saul Alinsky. (Ed. note: Alinsky was denounced by his alma mater and by many of his academic colleagues.)

The list of dangers exceeds that of the values ascribed to the service function. But evidence is not measured by number of arguments alone. There is about public service an excitement, a high of experience, which is addictive. Not many academicians are hooked. The price of involvement is high. Formal leadership may be thrust upon the performer who excells; advertisement of service by word-of-mouth may be unfair to others outside the chain. But be warned, solicitation of service opportunities can lead quickly to more than a single person can do. In that press of service, an unbalance of the trio and failure to respect the demands of all responsibilities would be a disservice to all, as severe as that now done to the third element by its present essential neglect.

FOOTNOTES

1. Clyde J. Wingfield (ed.) The American University: A Public Administrative Perspective (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1970).

2. The University Committee, "Towards Standardizing Faculty Work Loads," Faculty Forum, Document #3-72, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Feb. 17, 1972.

3. Committee on Tenure. Report. The Regents of the University of Wisconsin, 1972.

4. William M. Birenbaum, "Cities and Universities: Collision of Crises," in Alvin C. Eurich (ed.) Campus 1980: The Shape of the Future in American Higher Education (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968).

5. Eugene F. Shaw, "Urbanism as a Communication Variable," Paper presented at annual convention of Association for Education in Journalism, Berkeley, California, August, 1969.

6. L. W. Lichty and W. B. Blankenburg, "BTM vs WISC-TV: A Case of Adversary Research", Paper presented at Association for Education in Journalism convention, August 21, 1971. The story of a station challenge is labelled "adversary research" in preference to my term of "advocacy service." In itself this comments on the superior acceptance of the research label.

7. Walter Scott ended the phrase with "deceive" in Marmion, VI in 1808.

8. C. Sellitz, M. Johoda, M. Deutsch and S.W. Cook, Research Methods in Social Relations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967.)