BEYOND CARROTS AND STICKS
WHAT REALLY MOTIVATES FACULTY

The responsible expression of autonomy, the freedom to grow in ways that contribute to the common good, is what professionalizes faculty work.

RECENTLY I WAS ASKED to give a talk on the following topic: "It's Time to Develop Faculty Rewards That Act as Incentives!" I liked the straightforwardness of the title and so accepted the invitation. It was only when I began putting some thoughts together that it hit me: Whenever we talk about faculty incentives and rewards we insist on using images that keep us stuck on dubious assumptions. The solution implicit in the phrase "develop faculty rewards that act as incentives" suggests that faculty life on campus is like a giant Skinner Box, where faculty are the rats and administrators are the experimenters. The university is not a microcosm of Walden Two and never has been. The futility of the behaviorist approach is reflected in other animal metaphors: leading faculty is like "herding cats," the joke goes, or like "shoveling frogs into a wheelbarrow."

The irony is that we should know better. Institutions can't simply arrange (or rearrange) rewards and expect faculty to fall in line. The question is not, "How should we change the reward system?"; it's "How do we create environments most conducive to productive faculty life?" The answer to this second question is not unknown. More than forty years of research on faculty motivation has resulted in some remarkably consistent findings. Over and over again this research has found that those of us who choose to be faculty are driven by a relatively small number of motives: autonomy, community, recognition, efficacy. Some studies come up with a longer list than this, some a shorter list. But nearly all mention these four. I'd like to describe each of them briefly, then make a few suggestions about what institutions can do to increase their power.

Autonomy. This is the reason most often given when faculty are asked why they chose the academic life. Professional autonomy is the freedom to experiment, to follow one's own leads wherever they may go, and to do so without fear of the consequences. Autonomy undergirds the principles of academic freedom. Freedom, according to John Dewey, is the "power to grow." And thus, academic freedom is not absolute. Most faculty would agree, however, that autonomy is not unrestricted: faculty are not free to do whatever they wish, answerable only to themselves. The 1940 AAUP Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure, still in force today, says this: "Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest either of the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition." The responsible expression of autonomy, the freedom to grow in ways that contribute to the common good, is what professionalizes faculty work.

Community. The second most common reason given for choosing faculty life is the desire to join a "community of scholars," a notion that seems depressingly quaint to new faculty as they face an academic culture of isolation and competitive advantage. The desire to belong, to feel part of a nurturing community, one in which the faculty member has an important role to play, never
goes away, however. Anything that eases the "pain of disconnection," as Parker Palmer (1998) calls it, is a powerful motivator, indeed.

**Recognition.** People everywhere want to feel valued, to know that others see their work as worthwhile. Faculty members are no different. We need evidence that someone's paying attention. That's why so many salary disputes in higher education seem so symbolic: Money, even in minuscule increments, symbolizes recognition. Other symbols of recognition, while simple, are surprisingly powerful: hearing unsolicited compliments from students or colleagues, getting quoted in a paper, fielding requests for assistance in an area of professional expertise (it's remarkable how much time people are able to free up, regardless of how busy they are, when asked for their views on something!).

**Efficacy.** Quite simply, efficacy is a sense of having had a tangible impact on our environment. We feel efficacious when we see our students grasp a difficult concept, when we have made an important discovery, or when we have contributed to the quality of life in our communities. Efficacy is what gives our work meaning.

These motivators are all interdependent, of course. It's hard to imagine a strong community without elements of autonomy, recognition, and efficacy, for example. And so, rather than trying to propose ways institutions might promote each of them, I'll suggest instead a handful of strategies which promote all four.

**Motivational strategies**

**Align institutional mission, roles, and rewards.**

While changing the "reward system" isn't a sufficient condition for faculty motivation, it's certainly a necessary one. Study after study during the past ten years has demonstrated just how far out of whack faculty roles and rewards have become. A series of studies in the mid-90s by Bob Diamond and his colleagues at Syracuse (1993) showed that faculty view teaching as relatively more important than research but see their institutions as having reversed priorities. A now-classic study of faculty compensation by Jim Fairweather (1996) at Michigan State revealed that the more research faculty do, the more they earn, while the more teaching they do, the less they earn (true of liberal arts colleges as well as research universities).

Most recently, a survey by the Associated New American Colleges (2001) showed that while faculty members in these institutions felt an alignment between their work and institutional mission, they perceived a misalignment between their work and institutional rewards. An interesting sidelight of this last study is that while about 70 percent of faculty felt they were in step with institutional mission, only 30 percent felt their colleagues were. (A cynical interpretation of this might be that most faculty feel they are the frogs who stay in the wheelbarrow; their colleagues are the ones who leap out.)

Without alignment, faculty attachment to their institutions will be weak and the motivation strategies suggested below will seem disingenuous, at best.

**Engage faculty meaningfully.**

Faculty like work that is not only vibrant and intellectually interesting (that is, after all, why we're in this business); it also has to take us somewhere. I can't imagine any activity less
motivating than one that everyone knows is purely ritualistic: the task force report that goes nowhere, the self-study that no one reads, the discussion of policies that are already a fait accompli.

About a year ago I finished a study of departmental review practices for The Pew Charitable Trusts (Wergin and Swingen 2000), and the single most important factor leading to useful assessment was what I called a "leadership of engagement": a style of decision making that relies on an open dialogue about the options faced and the likely consequences of options chosen. I think that much of what passes for faculty apathy about shared governance can be traced to a perception that what faculty say won't really matter. We don't like feeling co-opted and thus inconsequential to the life of the campus. We are much more likely to be energized by problems in which both we and the community at large have a stake, where we are presented with real choices, where our voice is recognized, and where we can thus act with consequence.

Identify and uncover "disorienting dilemmas."
A leading thinker in adult learning theory, Jack Mezirow (cf., 1990), has suggested that adults engage in deep learning only when faced with what he calls a "disorienting dilemma," a situation in which our usual perspectives won't work or don't fit. Only then, suggests Mezirow, are we likely to be motivated to learn and Change. For example, experimental findings which don't square with accepted theory motivate us to look at the problem differently; student complaints about the incoherence of their undergraduate major motivate us to reassess our curricular requirements.

The dilemma can't be so disorienting that it only creates anxiety, however. High anxiety leads only to avoidance. Instead, the trick is to link challenge with support. If the goal is to encourage more faculty use of instructional technology, for example, then the appropriate strategy would be not only to show faculty how technology might enrich their teaching, but also to provide opportunities to experiment with such technology in a low-risk, high-support environment. Faculty "resistance to change" doesn't necessarily mean that they have no energy for change. Far from it.

Help faculty develop "niche."
About ten years ago several of my colleagues and I did a study of career satisfaction among senior faculty in five diverse institutions. What proved to be the most important factor separating high- and low-satisfaction groups was what we called a sense of "niche," a perception that individual faculty had a place in their academic community which was theirs and no one else's. Two characteristics define a niche: It's connected (that is, part of a larger organic whole), and it's constantly evolving. What's the difference between a "niche" and a "rut"? List the connotations you have for each term and you'll have the answer. A faculty sense of niche hits all of the Big Four motivators: It communicates autonomy, it requires a community context, it provides tacit recognition of worth, and, because faculty are the architects, it's a mark of efficacy.

Encourage faculty experimentation, assessment, and reflection.
The study I completed for The Pew Charitable Trusts confirmed what many already know intuitively: that organizational change is more likely to occur when academic units are encouraged to experiment and take risks. Instead of being held accountable for particular results, units are held accountable for conducting an assessment, interpreting the results, and making
informed judgments about what to do differently. Shouldn't this also characterize how individual faculty members are evaluated? Imagine the tone of an evaluation policy which focuses on faculty growth and development rather than exclusively on accomplishments, such as student ratings, articles published, and grant dollars generated. How much healthier and more energizing that would be!

**The end of Walden Two**

None of the strategies I've listed above are "motivators" in the usual sense of the term: None of the usual carrots and sticks are on the list. People, most especially faculty members, are not that manipulable in organizations, and if we are to believe the research undertaken by Alfie Kohn and others (cf., 1993), a focus on external incentives may in fact have results opposite to those intended. We are much better off when we focus instead on what makes people want to get up and come to work in the morning: an opportunity to engage in meaningful work that we have helped design, conducted within a nurturing community that recognizes the unique contributions we make to it. The era of Walden Two is over, if in fact it ever existed for college faculty. It's time for Walden Three.

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