How to make faculty service demands more equitable (opinion)

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When colleagues and I approached faculty members and chairs to join our research project about making the division of labor more equitable in academic departments, a common response was, “I’m not sure we want to open that can of worms.”

But as I argued in a previous article, the can of worms is already open: some faculty members do more than their fair share of department service, institutional housekeeping and student mentoring, while some do less. And no one talks about it.

That system advantages some faculty members. For others, the current can of worms causes stress, attrition, slower and differential advancement, career dissatisfaction, and withdrawal -- especially for women and faculty members of color.

To be sure, problems of equity are rarely solved quickly, easily or in a one-size-fits-all approach. Departments include faculty members of different career stages, appointment types and concentration areas. Workloads differ depending on discipline, institution and various contributions faculty members with particular talents can make.

At the same time, there are few carrots and sticks beyond tenure in most academic reward systems. How can we get the shirker do more? How might we encourage the colleague who keeps volunteering to do less? How can we make faculty members’ work activities more transparent without embarrassing colleagues or making them angry? How do we credit faculty service when people do different things and contribute at different levels?

Those are exactly the questions posed by the Faculty Workload and Rewards Project, a research project supported by the National Science Foundation and created to help academic departments diagnose equity issues and then design work policies, practices and conditions to address them. As principal investigator, I have worked over the last three years with state leaders and scholars Joya Misra and Audrey Jaeger, co-PI Elizabeth Beise, and research assistant Courtney Lennartz, along with academic departments in four-year institutions in North Carolina, Massachusetts and Maryland.

We have learned that departments can shape better, fairer divisions of labor with and for their faculty members. But both faculty members and chairs (or at least a decent proportion of the faculty within the department) need to want to change. Drawing from “nudge” theory in behavioral economics, it is in many ways about changing the “choice architecture” within which divisions of labor occur within academic departments.

Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein coined the term and concept of choice architecture to observe that it is possible to change the context within which people make decisions. For example, you can alter the order in which options are presented to people, set a default option, frame decisions differently with or without new information, try to eliminate or de-emphasize less desirable options, and put different incentives in front of people. Such reordering of the environment helps us to see the factors that lead to fair and unfair divisions of labor as well as foster systems more likely to distribute work equitably.

For example, in my earlier article, I described how a faculty member was approached by her department chair to chair a fellowship committee. The choice architecture in which she made this decision was one with little concrete information about how much service other people were doing or consensus in the department that workload be shared equally. There was also an implied expectation that she would be helpful and say yes.

In our project, we have worked with academic departments to change the choice architecture of how teaching, mentoring, campus service and administrative roles are structured in a variety of ways. I highlight three here.

First, departments added transparency to make their work activities and processes more equitable. They created dashboards of faculty work activities, tailored to meet department needs yet showing basic information such as department ranges for advising, class sizes, committee work and administrative roles. That allowed departments to talk about equity issues based on actual data rather than perceptions. It helped faculty members doing more to see that they need to pull back and those doing less to see that they need to step up. The dashboards prompted sometimes difficult yet necessary conversations, while also allowing departments to diagnose equity issues when they appeared.

Second, department teams worked to make what was foggy about their processes and crediting of work clear. In higher education, women and underrepresented minority groups are more likely to be disadvantaged when standards for faculty evaluation are foggy. Alternatively, environments with concrete, objective evaluation criteria “mitigate the operation of prejudices” and inequity. Thus, departments with clear benchmarks for performance and accountability for meeting them are likely to see more equitable workloads. Department teams worked together to create minimum requirements in previously unscripted areas like advising and committee work. They revised policies to assign differential credit for low, medium and high time-intensive service roles and for chairing versus serving on committees.

Third, departments began to design opt-out systems, removing the requirement to opt in for time-intensive service and administrative roles. They changed the default position so that they offered a shared rotation of necessary, time-intensive work, as well as more preferred roles. With this approach, faculty members do not volunteer or have to be asked. Rather, they have to opt out -- which is more difficult to do. That avoids asking the same people repeatedly to do the same tasks while never asking others. Planned rotations send the message that everyone has to chip in and help avoid “free riding,” wherein one group member or more fail to do their fair share of the work, while others overcompensate and are perceived as “suckers.” Such practices can change the conversation from “Why would I agree to do that?” to “How can I argue that I alone should not have to do this?”

We are working to disseminate findings from the first phase where we compare departments that made reforms such as these to control departments. Although the project made great strides, many departments felt they had only scratched the surface of what needed to happen. This is definitely long-term work.

But preliminary findings from this 18-month experiment suggest that departments that take steps to undo the can of worms experience greater faculty satisfaction with workloads and have fewer faculty members who intend to leave. By changing the default structures and the choice architecture embedded in how work is taken up, assigned and rewarded, departments can remake divisions of labor to be more equitable with fewer unintended consequences.
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