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Our University – Expected and Meritorious Behavior

Merit is a concept that is uncomfortable to many on university campuses. Years of service are seen as the golden coin, but longevity and excellence are not always cousins.

Confusion between meritorious performance and meeting performance expectations kills the recognition of, and quest for, excellence.

Excellence should be the goal for any faculty member, when he or she walks into a laboratory, a studio, a classroom, or a seminar room. Just doing the job is not enough. It is possible to attain excellence when not seeking it but the probability of attainment is dramatically increased when expectations must be met before excellence is recognized.

I have worked in a meritocracy ...excellence was rewarded and expectations were assumed to be met...and it was a difficult culture. The assumption of meeting job expectations was neglected. Union contracts and university policies frequently fragment and confuse real excellence and just doing the job.

A simple axiom fell out of experiencing this environment - before performance can be considered meritorious, overarching expectations must be identified and met.

This truism holds for those celebrated in the English nursery rhyme, Rub-A-Dub-Dub... "*butchers, bakers, candlestick makers*" as well as university presidents, postal workers, custodians', university faculty, carpenters, and all occupations where compensation for service is rendered.

For faculty, some expected behaviors might include: teaching a reasonable number of classes, attending class every day, regularly assessing student progress, participating at graduation once a year, publishing an article or the equivalent thereof annually, serving on a few committees, holding office hours, advising students, being part of the intellectual community of the department, school or college, and serving the university. None of these actions, unless performed in an exemplary manner, are meritorious. These behaviors are the job and allow the monthly check to be cut.

All would agree these behaviors constitute a legitimate expectation for faculty, but many do not pursue or attain them and are still awarded merit.

Meeting expected behaviors merely allows someone to be considered for merit recognition. Merit is neither guaranteed nor a property right.

The confusion of expected and meritorious behavior complicates the critical and essential process of performance review.

The forces that lead to the identification of behaviors similar to those listed above are annual review systems that count nearly anything a faculty member does as meritorious, whether or not it advances university goals. Lists with over a hundred possibilities prove the point.

Merit consideration becomes another form of across-the-board compensation.

Seniority, not quality, rules. Excellence and perseverance are confused, and the confusion is stoked by a fire built of complex sets of canon and code, that give the appearance of objectivity and fairness.

This is a burning house.

A labyrinth of rules drives how departmental policies or operating papers define excellence. Excellence is configured and stretched to allow everyone under the tent.

Public universities are becoming government sponsored versions of that figment of Gary Edward "Garrison" Keillor's imagination, Lake Wobegone.

When the Lake Wobegone effect takes over everyone is excellent. Not unlike grade inflation, performance inflation has created the expectation that anyone who shows up is both doing the job, and is meritorious.

How tragic.

Our university and others need to set higher standards for excellence than ever before: competition from numerous sources, including overseas universities for the first time in 150 years since U.S. higher education surpassed the German polytechnics as the places of academic excellence and scholarship. If not assiduously attended to we will be sedated by the fog surrounding Lake Wobegone and begin to believe that "*all the children are above average.*"

Excellent administrators and faculty members set standards that challenge upward towards quality rather than indulge the status quo towards mediocrity.