2022 PTIE Conference Abstract

Title: Being Innovative
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Abstract:

ASU is consistently identified as the number one university in innovation. But how does that apply to P&T guidelines? I'll discuss some of the issues that arise in considering innovative work in the promotion and tenure process: how it can be incorporated and what the limitations may be.

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ASU is consistently identified as the number one university in innovation. Our charter, establishes that "ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom we exclude, but rather by whom we include and how they succeed; advancing research and discovery of public value; and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities it serves." This is literally written in stone and ensconced on every one of our campuses. Implicit in the commitment to public value and the health of our communities is a commitment not just to equity but also to innovation and entrepreneurship. However, this institutional commitment does not necessarily map directly onto promotion and tenure. I'll discuss some of the issues that arise in considering innovative work in the promotion and tenure process: how it can be incorporated and what the limitations may be.

Despite our commitment to innovation, we still have reasonably traditional P&T guidelines; after all, we're an R1 university and care about rankings as much as all of you do. And I suspect that until the various stakeholders who oversee such metrics are willing to think outside the box, it's going to be tough to change that. First, of course, comes the question: what makes work innovative? What does this even mean? Here at this conference, entrepreneurial work is being identified as either an integral element of innovation or an additional component to be incorporated. ASU's website champions entrepreneurship across the university as a key element of our mission. But supporting entrepreneurial work and counting it towards tenure and/or promotion are two different things, though our college of Engineering embraces it, as noted in their P&T criteria as one of several measures of excellence: "The generation of intellectual property, inventions, and new companies." However, some of the challenges we see

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include the fact that we really have no independent way of assessing entrepreneurship. If we are going to count it, we need to have a clear sense of how to evaluate it. There's also a question of how such work could beneficial to students. After all, there are ethical and legal challenges to engaging students to work with one's private company, as opposed to working in one's lab; we can't exploit them for the financial gain of the faculty member. So while the hours spent on entrepreneurial labor may provide students with intriguing options, it may also reduce the opportunities available to students.

Further, do we risk setting up bars that not only leave some behind but that end up privileging those who already enjoy among the highest salaries and strongest support within most academic institutions, particularly R1s, i.e., those in the STEM fields? Does it widen an already wide gap between the haves and the have-nots? Therein lies our challenge; it's relatively easy to justify entrepreneurial activities in a field that prizes building things and understanding how things function. How might we think about expanding it to other areas, particularly those beyond the sciences, engineering, and business? And, if we do expand, we need to think carefully about how such work made need to be adapted to other fields and other scholars. For example, will entrepreneurial work displace the kind of work pursued by faculty from under-represented backgrounds? If so, are we inadvertently enhancing another structural barrier to equity? Obviously, no one is looking to do that and the hope is that opening up the criteria will benefit everyone. But many of the guidelines and expectations we currently have in place for P&T were established without such considerations and have now become thoroughly entrenched and difficult to walk back. Before we implement more, we need to be mindful of the larger implications. I'm certainly not suggesting that we shouldn't be doing all we can to support and advance our faculty in pursuing entrepreneurial work. I'm bringing up these issues so we can

think about ways to work through them to make sure we have appropriate criteria by which to judge entrepreneurial work as well as thinking more broadly about inclusivity and taking care to create pathways that acknowledge and reward the innovative work being done elsewhere in the institution, particularly by faculty from under-represented communities.

And so I now turn to a broader conception of innovation, one that may capture the kind of engaged work done disproportionately by scholars from under-represented communities. It may be more collaborative and interdisciplinary in nature. It may focus on community issues. It may be use-inspired and it may also try to acknowledge and make visible the often-invisible labor done disproportionately by scholars of color. It may be manifested through modalities other than books, articles, grants, conferences, talks, or performance/exhibits for those in the arts. Just as we need to figure out ways to measure and acknowledge entrepreneurial work, we also need to think about the value of other kinds of work that may not fall under more traditional P&T guidelines. If we fail to make this an equal priority, we're simply reinforcing the current status quo, not expanding it.

Some of the same challenges emerge: how do we evaluate such work? In what ways can it accommodate student learning opportunities? How much impact should such work carry? We then need to figure out how to measure different kinds impacts, particularly impact upon specific communities. There is no one-size-fits-all to evaluate this. We need faculty input; after all, it's very much an issue of shared governance. The units need to be able to spell out the kinds of work they value and what measures may be used: public policy initiatives or changes as a result of community engagement? New facilities developed? New organizations established to deal with particular challenges? What kinds of performances might one expect? What outputs? We need to be able to provide external reviewers with the tools they need to make an informed

evaluation and this needs to come from individual units, not from administration. As administrators, we can dictate that conversations surrounding these questions need to happen, but we cannot determine the outcome of those conversations. I suggest looking to how we deal with those doing interdisciplinary work, an area that I think ASU has navigated well; we know how to contextualize letter-writers who may resist interdisciplinary work or find themselves at a loss to evaluate an appropriate level of productivity for an interdisciplinary program that they may have no experience with at their own institutions. We also know that interdisciplinary work may not always make it into the "top tier" journals, which tend to be journals that have been around for some time, and are likely to be grounded in specific disciplines. We simply need to apply the same principles to entrepreneurial/innovative work.

Obviously, there are challenges to expanding P&T guidelines. Finding appropriate external reviewers is one frequently cited by faculty as a source of anxiety. For example, for people doing entrepreneurial work, are we OK with using venture capitalists as reviewers? How about those engaged in community work? Should we be reaching out to community organizers/activists? How much weight would such letters carry with faculty committees? Those committees themselves are also potential obstacles; not all faculty members are on board with these changes, which can generate concern over "lowering" one's standards. We can't hang our innovative faculty members out to dry, but neither can we silence or dismiss the input of their colleagues. While many faculty members may be more focused on finding the dark clouds rather than the silver linings, we do need to understand that P&T is one of the last bastions of shared governance and it is one that needs to be respected. Where's the sweet spot? How do we get there? Such answers can only come through extended discussion of all those involved:

candidates, colleagues, chairs/directors, deans, provosts, and presidents. The answers will likely vary from institution to institution and maybe even from unit to unit.

Other risks, in addition to the perceptions of one's peers, i.e., rankings, is what happens when the some of the gates come down. Apres sa, le deluge? Will there be no standards to maintain or, as my good friend Charles Dickens so aptly put it, "the floodgates of society are burst open, and waters have – a – obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together!" I look to literature not simply to justify my existence as an English professor, but to assert that here's where some answers may lie. It's all about the narrative, the stories we tell and how we frame them. As Dickens knew very well in writing *Bleak House*, the source of the quotation above, "the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together" can be as oppressive as it is stabilizing. Held together how? Held together for the benefit of whom? These are questions that convince me that, despite what I think are very valid concerns, we need to move forward on all fronts when thinking about promotion and tenure, because those questions open up the underlining failures of higher education, something ASU—as the New American University—is very interested in pursuing.

We need to be prepared to obliterate those landmarks in order to attract multi-talented faculty members. We need to acknowledge that times they are a changing in higher ed, which has led a largely sequestered life. American universities have not necessarily served the general public as well as they should have. Until we can do a better job in that respect—which may be partly accomplished by breaking down the barriers of what constitutes academic work—we risk being swept into the dustbin of history. New generations of academics are bringing new perspectives that may enable us to adapt to 21st century norms and expectations. Tenure may have a limited life span—it certainly seems that way to me—and opening up more interchange

may lead to an academic workforce that enters and leaves at will, rather than dedicating one's entire life to the enterprise. It's inconceivable that those of use who have devoted our lives to research and scholarship should fail to examine these options: exploring the uncertain and the unknown is what we do. So let me close with yet another literary moment, this one from Milton:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
>
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
>
> They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
>
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

Literary critics will tell you that these closing lines of *Paradise Lost* can be interpreted positively as well as negatively, as a fortunate fall; there is great loss, but there is also great potential in the world all before them. I'm certainly not suggesting that academia, as we have known it, has been Edenic and that we're now confronting a paradise lost, but I am hoping that we can look at this next step as a fortunate fall, a fall into a larger more inclusive world, now all before us.