

Against Service Shaming

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Discouraging and devaluing faculty participation in service undermine the public impact of universities, Cullen C. Merritt writes.

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Rhianna, an associate professor in the humanities I interviewed, described being bullied by her department chair. The chair criticized her for producing service publications, dismissively saying they were “taking time away from research publications” deemed essential for earning tenure. This encounter left Rhianna, an unapologetic public scholar, with self-described “rage” in addition to “serious health problems, which I’m sure were tied to the stress of all the bullying I was experiencing at work.”

This dynamic Rhianna endured is but one varied experience linked to a widespread yet unexamined phenomenon I’m calling *service shaming*: the act of discouraging or devaluing faculty participation in service work. Through 119 revealing interviews with faculty at three public research universities, I learned that academia’s disregard for faculty service—[especially compared to research and teaching](#), and [most notably during promotion and tenure decisions](#)—creates toxic, counterproductive and unhealthy work environments. Service shaming deepens the disconnect between academia’s ideals and practices, undermining higher education’s potential for greater public impact.

Service is central to the stated missions – and survival – of universities. It encompasses faculty responsibilities that extend beyond, yet complement, research and teaching. Through service, faculty help with curriculum and academic program design, oversight and enhancement of research infrastructure, and other activities critical to the effective functioning of institutions. Service also involves faculty deploying their expertise outside the university to bolster the work of governments and nonprofits, fostering unity across political, racial and socioeconomic divides to address public problems.

Yet service is much more than a duty to be carried out; it enables universities to avoid social isolation and cultivate legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the public.

With escalating public distrust of higher education and the new presidential administration’s promise to dismantle it—and with many critical federal government units responsible for knowledge, research and education under siege—universities must reimagine and reaffirm their commitment to helping the general public. One key, but often overlooked, way they can do this is through valuing faculty service more.

For meaningful cultural change to occur, where academia truly values service, we must first unpack the dire costs of service shaming for faculty, universities and the public.

First, service shaming negatively impacts faculty career growth by hindering their ability to build institutional and community knowledge. Often, faculty are mentored to “just say no” to service due to academic incentive structures that reward research and publications.

For example, Kendra, an assistant professor in a STEM field only a few years into her position, maintained an unwavering love for service, but a colleague advised her to focus exclusively on research to secure tenure. Kendra shared, “If I’m being told over and over, ‘this is the only way to do this job,’ and

I'm not willing to do it that way, then I must conclude I will fail." Early-career faculty members socialized to avoid service until after tenure may never truly embrace it. After obtaining tenure, faculty often view service as a nuisance or distraction rather than a meaningful contribution. Through being conditioned to avoid service, faculty don't access the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to lead change at their institutions and in their communities.

Second, service shaming drives faculty to separate their service from their research and teaching. Seen in this light, service becomes a contaminating influence rather than an opportunity to create meaningful synergies between duties. Higher learning can flourish when service is recognized as a legitimate form of scholarly activity that can enhance research and teaching.

For example, service learning and community-engaged research expose our students to the real-world implications of scholarship and ensure research is anchored in the realities of the people, communities and issues being studied. Ramón, an assistant professor in a STEM field, believed that by not engaging in service, scholars risk becoming out of touch with the world. "[If you're] sitting in your ivory tower, hanging out with people that look and think like you, if you're not engaging with others and expanding," he told me, "then you're just going to be really narrow in not only your thinking [and] your view of the world, but also your research."

Third, service shaming undercuts a public service mindset. While faculty acknowledge the seemingly transactional dynamic of performing institutional service (i.e., universities hire you, so you need to serve them), they also expressed ideas for how their work could benefit society. Whether by collaborating with top experts to apply scientific research in guiding a nonprofit disaster relief organization's humanitarian and public health initiatives; providing ethical consultation in hospital settings, working with physicians, patients and families to navigate challenging end-of-life decisions; or helping K-12 students transition to online and blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the service work my study participants engaged in instilled a sense of public service that emerged from their scholarly expertise.

Finally, service shaming has the power to push public impact-focused scholars out of the academy. It not only relegates vital service work to the margins, but it worsens social inequalities by [disproportionately straining](#) women and [racial and ethnic minorities](#), who take on heavier service loads. Left unchecked, faculty will further disengage from service roles, like those fostering shared governance, disconnecting universities from faculty perspectives on critical issues. Furthermore, students passionate about service and social impact will take their talents to industries outside the academy that value their work.

If the situation doesn't change, faculty morale will [diminish even more](#). And without more community-engaged scholars, the general public's opinion of higher education as a domain for elites will be strengthened.

I do not seek to diminish the value of research or teaching or suggest that service responsibilities should increase to dominate the majority of faculty work. Instead, it is time to question our deep-seated convictions about how universities should operate, how to better value essential work, and the role of faculty members. For example, should we continue to place the burden on faculty to refuse or dread service because universities fail to properly recognize and support it—or should universities innovate their incentive and reward structures to meaningfully account for service work? My research leads me to support the latter approach.

In a time when higher education is under attack, faculty service might continue to rapidly expand to include new forms of engagement, requiring people to courageously apply their expertise to combat discriminatory public policies, the erosion of democratic principles, and the dismantling of higher

education. More than ever, we need scholars who are deeply engaged with their students, local communities and the general public through service—and many already are and want to be. It's time to create an academic culture that better recognizes the importance of service and the people who perform it. Without it, higher education risks irrelevance and an even greater disconnect from the public when society needs its contributions the most.

Cullen C. Merritt, Ph.D., is an associate professor and research director of the Institute for Public Leadership in the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, College Park. His research explores how managers across industries drive performance to achieve public impact.