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OPINION PIECE

Whisper it softly, professors are really academic developers too

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The university system has expanded worldwide and with it the number of those holding a full professorial title. Around a third of US academics eventually become full professors, and the title is used still more exclusively in an Australasian and UK context, representing around 10–12% of university faculty.

The professoriate undertake a range of leadership and professional support activities connected with research and teaching practice, including acting as mentors, enablers, guardians and ambassadors (Macfarlane, 2012). Aside from research leadership, mentoring less experienced colleagues is regarded by professors as their most important function (Macfarlane, 2011).

However, there is little evidence that universities and colleges make any systematic use of the organisational development skills of the professoriate. While professors perform a wide range of formal and informal leadership roles externally, it is less clear how their skills are utilised (and perhaps recognised) within their own institutional contexts. Indeed, evidence suggests that their expertise is often ignored at a local level (Macfarlane, 2011).

How do academic development units leverage professorial talent? The answer seems to be barely at all. There is little or nothing in key texts or journals, such as the *International Journal for Academic Development*, to indicate that the skills professors possess are exploited in a development context. So, why do academic development units make so little use of them?

The first and most obvious reason is that professors are perceived mainly as researchers rather than teachers. This does not fit the default role of academic development units as concerned with teaching and student development rather than broader aspects of academic practice, such as research or service. Typically, academic developers will seek to broker the skills of individuals with acknowledged expertise in teaching and learning, such as teaching excellence award-winners. But aside from one or two individuals, they will rarely think of professors as a group offering trans-disciplinary skills.

Another possible reason for overlooking the potential of the professoriate is their image as ‘cosmopolitans’ rather than ‘locals’ (Merton, 1947). In other words, they are seen as externally focused professionals (or ‘cosmopolitans’) with strong research skills and networks beyond the institution, rather than as more loyal ‘locals’ with tacit knowledge of the institution’s internal workings, such as committees and validation procedures. It follows that professors can be seen to be

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uninterested in the institutional agenda and are sometimes portrayed in a negative light as unapproachable, 'difficult', and essentially lacking in collegiality. Recent research in the UK has indicated that junior faculty regard professors as poor academic citizens, too rarely prepared to offer mentoring support (Evans, Rayner, & Homer, 2011). This research feeds into the unflattering image of the modern professoriate as a group of self-centred individuals, deaf to the needs of others. Here there is an obvious connection with performative pressures that have rewarded selfish individualism, symbolised by research assessment exercises in contexts such as the UK, Australasia and Hong Kong.

Finally, access to the professoriate may be limited by the location and relative status of academic development units and staff within the university. Where such a unit is located outside the academic structure, the professoriate may be regarded as beyond its reach in terms of organisational status and/or power. Moreover, in most institutions, the professoriate are not seen, or indeed organised, as a group of key strategic leaders or influencers in the same way as, say, heads of department or deans. While some senior manager-academics will hold professorial titles, as cross-boundary workers their sphere of influence is commonly defined as emanating from their managerial position alone.

Part of the problem is that institutions rarely make their expectations in respect of academic duty clear in order to leverage the expertise that professors possess. Institutions need to develop clearer guidance on the role of a professor beyond narrowly performative individual criteria and to include academic citizenship tasks linked to the development of less experienced faculty. In addressing this issue, there are also things that academic development units could do to make more systematic use of the trans-disciplinary skills that professors have to offer.

At the University of Portsmouth (UK) I developed a web-based network ('Profs-Net') which made the trans-disciplinary expertise of professors available to academic faculty. This turns on its head institutions' usual portrayal of professors as outward-facing experts. In the course of collating professors' expertise I realised that it did not just relate to research (such as writing book proposals), but also included substantial areas of teaching and learning expertise (such as course design, giving feedback, and using a range of innovative teaching methods). Although it is increasingly common to define professors purely as researchers, most perceive their own role more broadly and often have much to offer in terms of teaching development.

There are other ways in which professors may be used to support strategic purposes, such as helping to address issues of inequality, particularly among female and ethnic minority faculty. Women are still heavily under-represented in the professoriate across virtually all subjects, and there are examples of schemes whereby women professors have mentored younger or junior female colleagues (Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2007).

The reality is that becoming a professor is about more than just promotion to a higher career grade. Most perceive it as a new role that carries important inter-generational responsibilities for intellectual leadership, regardless of whether they also hold a formal managerial role. Academic development units could do more to tap into this commitment and unlock what the professoriate have to offer but, in so doing, they need to broker their skills with great care. In other words, you had better whisper it softly. Professors might not define themselves primarily as 'developers', but in truth, that is – among other things – what most of the best ones actually are.

Notes on contributor

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