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Valuing Governance

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Abstract

Book Summary: As has been abundantly documented in the popular and academic press, the humanities are facing challenging times marked by national debate regarding the importance of the humanities in higher education, program and budget cuts, and an ever-decreasing number of tenure-track jobs. In addition, the humanities face quite literally a quantification of their value as the Academy adopts a more corporate mindset.

This volume provides advice to professionals in the humanities on how to forge a useful, compelling, and productive career. The book's 13 chapters address professional approaches to developing and maintaining an active research agenda, fomenting the ideals of the teacher-scholar model, managing the service demands within and outside the college or university, and navigating institutional politics. The collection offers practical and theoretical approaches to higher education, personal anecdotes, intelligent advice, and interviews with colleagues in the humanities.

Specific themes addressed include the transition from graduate student to humanities professional, diverging from prescribed paths, the humanities professor as creative writer, moving from secondary to post-secondary education, humanities in an international, market-based context, and participation in governance structures. [*From the publisher*]

Chapter Summary: This essay focuses on providing insight and practical advice on how committed participation in the governance process offers many positives at any stage of the academic ladder. Drawing upon a practical, theoretical, and anecdotal approach, this article reflects on four areas that are enhanced by participation in governance: 1) visibility; 2) knowledge of the institution and its culture; 3) establishing meaningful friendships campus-wide; and 4) governance as a resource of invaluable advice.

Keywords
government, government participation, academia, public office

Disciplines
Political Science | Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature

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10. VALUING GOVERNANCE

In the MLA *Profession* issue of 2010, Hogan and Massé wrote an insightful and succinct piece titled "Tips for Service." Among all their relevant advice there is one line that, although brief, has resonated with me since I first read it: "Being mindful of your time and how you spend it indicates respect for yourself and your work" (221). What I like about this quote is that it puts the faculty member in the driver's seat of an area that, at times, seem difficult to control: service.[1] The spirit of this line has been a guiding principle in my view of service.

Given the demanding schedules of faculty members, it comes as no surprise that governance falls to the bottom of priorities on most hypothetical to-do lists. As many of our peers have noted, a good service sheet on its own will not grant tenure (Filetti, 2009; Fogg, 2003; Furman, 2004; Hogan & Massé, 2010; Leitch, 2011; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008; Schnaubelt & Statham, 2007), quite the contrary, in some cases it may very well act as a hindrance to scholarly and publishing endeavors. This is not helped by the way tenure and promotion are evaluated. Normally, there exist more or less clear guidelines for research and teaching, but service—and a faculty member's level of involvement—falls into a no-man's land when it comes to assessment purposes, and we are all patently aware of departmental inequality in service commitments. Even though there have been well-intentioned efforts to allocate more weight to service in the tenure process— mostly with regard to minority or women faculty overburdened by service commitments—in practical terms, little has been accomplished to advance the issue (Fogg, 2003; Filetti, 2009; Leitch, 2011; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008).[2] Therefore, in the vein of Hogan and Massé's (2010) line, 1 advocate a personal proactive approach that makes the most of one's engagement with campus governance. As an indispensable element for a professional in academia, governance ought to be viewed as an integral part of a scholar's life that can in many ways enrich a professor's career. This essay, consequently, focuses on providing insight and practical advice on how committed participation in the governance process offers many positives at any stage of the academic ladder.

Employing a practical and anecdotal approach, this article reflects upon four areas enhanced by participation in governance: 1) visibility; 2) knowledge of the institution and its culture; 3) establishing meaningful friendships campus-wide; and 4) governance as a resource for invaluable advice.

VISIBILITY

When we arrive to a new campus as a freshly minted Ph.D., or as a seasoned professor who has just moved to a new institution, the first entity we become

acquainted with is the home department, or as may be the case with joint appointments, a couple of them. We tend to be insular in departments, to the point that exposure to other disciplines and other colleagues oftentimes becomes quite limited. Some institutions do an excellent job engaging the whole campus in weekly community events that foster interdepartmental communication, but we know this is not the case in most places. As a consequence, we are invariably encountering new members of the "I live in my office faculty club" who, after years of working at the same institution, are barely visible on campus, either because they have a long commute home that prevents them from attending many of the events offered by their institution, or simply because they confess to having an aversion to socializing. Like it or not, being a visible member of the college community is crucial to many aspects of an academic's life. Why is visibility important? On the one hand, getting to know people and being known by people opens doors to new opportunities and new perspectives both professionally and socially; on the other, it fosters a sense of belonging within the institution, a sentiment that has very positive effects on everything we do, whether it be teaching, or research, or simply meaningful interactions on campus. For the faculty member not comfortable hobnobbing at social situations, (let's face it, this is more the norm than the exception), being engaged in service offers the benefits of added visibility on campus without "really trying." Working as part of a committee, a task force or any other collaborative endeavor allows the faculty member to get to know important constituencies on campus—and through shared governance, faculty from other disciplines and members of the staff—as well as to learn about new topics and issues that may eventually lead to the development of new interests in one's own academic career.

Frequently, we cannot really choose how or where we serve. Sometimes we are elected by our peers to serve on standing committees, or appointed to *ad hoc* committees, advisory councils, and task forces. But here is where visibility helps. If our interests are generally known by the appropriate people, we stand a better chance of being appointed to committees of interest, the ones that sometimes overlap with potential scholarship and community outreach, in what is known as professional service. Ernst Lynton (1995), basing his definition on a previous work by Elman-Smock, explains that, "professional service is work based on the faculty member's professional expertise that contributes to the mission of the institution" (17). Thus, professional service differs from other service activities such as committee work, student advising, involvement in professional associations, and philanthropic endeavors (Lynton, 1995, 18). In this modality of service a faculty member serves in a capacity that is related to his or her field of interest or research, thus the word "professional." Despite the fact that some specializations are more prone than others to this modality of service, it can be said that, to some extent, all members of the faculty can serve in this capacity. In my case, for instance, I have been very involved in the digital scholarship field, this is not my main field or research, but it is an area about which I'm passionate. Throughout my career, not only have I been serving on committees pertaining to technology, but I have integrated digital scholarship into my courses, and as a result, I have participated in

many workshops, both as an attendee and an invited presenter. This engagement with a field so far from my main area of research opened up a whole new avenue for me. Of course, I believe that sooner or later I would have explored the connections between and among texts, computational microanalysis and the digital field in general, but my engagement in professional service has accelerated this process, allowing me access to major figures in the area, enabling me to learn more about institutional context and key reports, networking with colleagues and, moreover, creating for me a new visibility on campus. As a member of a group of scholars "conversant" with the topic of digital scholarship, I have become empowered to be a productive member of the campus community, and provide support to my colleagues. All the theoretical knowledge gathered in committee work (reading documents, exchanging ideas, etc.), as well as practical knowledge gathered along the way (implementing ideas in the classroom, attending and presenting in workshops), has allowed me to develop a new field of interest and research that would not have been possible without an initial committed involvement in service. Professional service can take place at several levels, and the outcomes of such service can be bidirectional, with benefits flowing from the institution to the department and vice versa. Professional service that starts at the departmental micro level can benefit the wider institution, and ultimately the community outside the institution. As a case in point, we may consider how language departments across the country are offering special language classes designed to fit heritage speaker populations who are already fluent in the target language, and for whom traditional language classes are not the ideal vehicle for the type of language acquisition they require. A professor engaged in professional service in this area can help the department and the college ascertain the needs for these courses, and develop the curriculum, the methodology, and the acquisition of special training. The implications of a professional service project of this kind increase the offerings in our department and enhance the service provided by the institution to the community, further supporting diversity and inclusion. Consequently, being involved in professional service not only heightens on campus visibility, but it allows the faculty member to be engaged in a project that is truly meaningful. Furthermore, professional service when tied to our expertise can overlap easily with current research or, alternatively, offer new avenues for publication, sometimes in uniquely innovative ways.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE INSTITUTION AND ITS CULTURE

It takes years to really get to know well the ins and outs of an institution and its culture. When we examine similarly ranked campuses, say liberal arts colleges or research universities, we see that each institution has its own unique mission and idiosyncratic structures and day-to-day interactions. Something so mundane as the use of titles—some institutions prefer "Dr.," others "Prof."—underscores the extant mores between one institution and another. These nuances take time to learn. It pays to know your institution well.

When one is at the tenure-track stage of the professorial career, presenting well one's case in the pre-tenure and tenure cases is of paramount importance. For tenured professors, knowing well the institution is key in terms of job satisfaction, future promotion, well-being and personal growth. Most times, service offers the only avenue to in-depth institutional knowledge. Participation on committees that deal with grants, for instance, allows for a greater understanding of how other fields function. Increasingly, differences in funding or grants that seemed arbitrary at the beginning are invested with a new rationale that allows greater understanding of a diverse *modus operandi*. Most importantly, an in-depth understanding of an institution's inner workings allows the development of a key issue with governance and/or service: the implementation of meaningful change. Committed members of an institution can implement changes that have positive repercussions in the community, and in faculty and students' lives. As Jones (2011) points out: "[I]t's useful to remind people that by serving on the committee they are empowered to take action—that is, to shape university policy to make it a better place to work, and more supportive of student success" (2). If service is going to demand so much of our professional lives, we must make it count towards something that will have a direct and positive impact in the workplace.

ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL FRIENDSHIPS CAMPUS-WIDE

Engagement with service implies working side by side with people, sometimes collaborating over very long periods of time. Several studies have pointed out that these relationships are not only important at a personal level, but at an institutional one as well:

> Most of the recent literature on organizations (chaos theory, for instance) highlights that relationships are more important than structures and processes because organizations must be able to alter structures and processes to adapt to circumstances. In other words, structures and processes are not the heart of organizations—people and relationships are (Wheatley, 1996). As Del Favero (2003) notes, organizations thrive only to the extent that participant relationships are central to decision-making processes. (Kezar, 2004, 39)

Close collaboration translates a lot of times into long-standing friendships, which in turn foster trust among members of the faculty, creating well-needed support when we most require it. One of the main benefits of having friendships outside of one's department is acquiring the all too necessary perspective. As suggested before, departmental issues and politics can be at times stifling. Learning and exploring how things are done in other departments or disciplines can be enriching and illuminating. A reliable friendship outside our department can serve as a reality check about what is going on in our own professional lives. From personal conflicts to bureaucratic issues, it is reassuring to have the distance and perspective that someone from the outside can provide. Additionally, new ideas and new strategies come many times through talking with friends from very different areas. These friendships are extremely important at all stages of the academic career, but

they are especially crucial in the early years. Professors on the tenure-track may find that what started as professional relationships in committee work have become *de facto* mentorships. Most times we encounter in a committee assignment a member of the faculty who has served in many different capacities; such a colleague can serve as an invaluable ally who can help you become conversant with best practices.

GOVERNANCE AS A RESOURCE FOR INVALUABLE ADVICE

During my first year as an assistant professor, I received an elegantly written letter that encouraged me to attend a meeting of a group completely new to me at the time: an advisory council for what was then called Women and Gender Studies. This large group meets once a month, and it is inherently interdisciplinary and collegial: all constituencies on campus, from staff to full-time and contingent faculty, are more than encouraged to join and participate fully in the governance process. Since that first semester I have been part of this advisory body—the best decision I ever made. Not only has it provided me with professional opportunities, but it has through the years been a source of invaluable advice on the profession, and—this is the reason I have included this instance last—it encapsulates the four points covered in this essay. This extra-added service was on a volunteer basis. As it relates to my research, and since I also write on issues of gender, it follows the inspiration of Hogan and Massé's (2010) advice: I decided to spend my time doing this because, from the outset, my involvement in this advisory council was a wise use of my time. This is the kind of service that does not feel like service; moreover, it allows me to network with colleagues on campus who are working on these issues through research, activism, and community outreach. It has also benefited me in very practical terms. Reviewing and approving syllabi for such an interdisciplinary program have given me a wealth of tips on how to write a better syllabus, and how to approach different techniques for assessment; talking with more experienced professors has led to ideas on writing and close reading strategies; research ideas have always sprung forth after working closely with my peers, or an invitation as a guest lecturer or as a speaker at different events. But most importantly, I have grown to know and cherish colleagues from all parts of campus, whom I trust, and from whom I do not cease to learn. Knowing all these professionals, listening to them, seeing how things are done in other disciplines, how they approach research, data gathering, teaching, technology and so forth, instills me with a sense of renewal and prevents me from falling into monotony.

Until now, the preceding lines have been focused on all the positive aspects service and governance can convey. But, as we know all too well, not everything is perfect. Even if we enter into governance with a positive attitude and with the best of efforts and intentions, we may find that some committee or service work is just tedious or that, after too much toil and time involved, findings and efforts come to nothing. Not in vain has Kezar (2004) noted that working ineffectively, sluggishness, and bending to political and social pressures are key issues in problems with governance (35). Moreover, we are painfully conscious of how the

hierarchical system inherent in academia prevents junior colleagues or contingent faculty to be at liberty to speak their minds. This perceived lack of autonomy rests on two principal factors: the most important being that until tenure is achieved, we do not feel sufficiently at liberty to express ourselves freely; and secondly, some service is completely based on a comprehensive understanding of the workings of an institution, and this kind of knowledge is only gained with time. A junior or contingent faculty colleague may feel that they cannot contribute meaningfully to the institution, even though sometimes this is just a matter of perception. These two factors tend to coalesce, and are very visible in group work, in what Bowen denominates "dangers in collaboration":

> There are dangers in collaboration. Absent efficient modes of decision-making, it is very hard to get good judgments made when nimbleness and truth telling are required. There can be too much politeness, too much inclination to say, "Oh, let me not force that answer on you, even though it is the right answer." And so too often we end up with lowest-common-denominator outcomes. (2013, 127)

Even though the scenario addressed by Bowen (2013) takes place with increasing frequency, we should strive to navigate this type of situation and engage our peers in the notion that if we are going to dedicate many hours of our time to service, it better be meaningful. Kezar (2004) notes that individuals involved in governance are the ones who ultimately have the key to its effectiveness: "For example, a committee might begin with a specific charge, timeline, and set of procedures, yet through conversations the charge might be modified, new people might be added to the committee, and meeting procedures might be altered" (37). Meaningful committee work benefits ourselves, the students, the institution, and the community at large, and we should be aware that we hold the key to changing what is not done right or effectively.

I started this essay quoting Hogan and Massé (2010), therefore I would like to conclude revisiting their perceptive advice on the value of our own time and the respect we show ourselves for our own work. With that framework in mind I would like to close with three succinct points of advice: First, being positive is key. Even if the service is monotonous, or the committee, task force, or advisory body to which we are appointed, does not match our personal interests, be aware of the benefits it can provide: visibility, long-lasting friendships, acquiring knowledge of the institution, and getting invaluable advice; second, when it is at all feasible, be involved in professional service. This modality of service, aside from being very fulfilling, instills a sense of renewal and purpose, and can be linked to innovative research; and third, the importance of being proactive with regards to service that coalesces with our field, passions or interests. Volunteer for these positions: they fill our busy academic life with a sense of leadership and purpose.

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NOTES

¹ Throughout this essay the words "service" and "governance" are used interchangeably. Even though in some contexts governance is used in a macro sense—such as at an administrative and an institutional level—and service sometimes is employed at a micro level—advising, departmental duties, etc.— for the purposes of this essay I am ascribing to them equal weight, since an academic is generally involved concurrently in both types of activities.

² This state of affairs has been addressed in several ways, from "superservice" (Leitch, 2011, 542) to the widely known "cultural taxation." The latter term coined by Padilla (1994) refers to "the obligation to show good citizenship toward the institution by serving its needs for ethnic representation on committees, or to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to a cultural group, which may even bring accolades to the institution but which is not usually rewarded by the institution on whose behalf the service was performed" (26). Many more scholars have since analyzed the consequences of cultural taxation in academia; see, for example, the article by Hirshfield and Joseph (2012) cited at the end of this essay.

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