

Misplaced marketing Endowed faculty chairs are a waste of money (except mine)

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Abstract

Increasing amounts of funds are given to universities each year that are to be invested and endow special salary supplements and spending allowances for named faculty. Donors' motives are varied, but for the schools, the special use is a way to attract and retain faculty with national research reputations. From a marketing point of view, the school administrators believe that having the funds to attract these faculty to their department rolls has a positive impact on the school's reputation. Yet there are serious questions as to what schools actually are getting for the spending competition to attract over-priced academic superstars while the lower paid faculty remain the main contact with students. At worst, the holders of the positions are disconnected from the broader campus community.

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I do not hold an endowed chair, nor am I honored with a named professorship. I would like to have one. But it must be admitted that such use of university gift money often is a product of misplaced marketing by the academic administrators, and often, money that should be redirected to better uses.

With increasing frequency, donations to universities are earmarked to endow long-term salary increases and private spending allowances for designated faculty. In some instances, this encourages a large group of small donors to contribute to a special fund for a special professorship or chair that honors a beloved teacher that has recently retired or died. In more crass situations, corporations give money with the condition that the faculty holder of the position spend time each year giving speeches at special business events or provide other work on the company's behalf, such as setting up job training programs. And for a majority of private people who give large sums of money to their Alma Mater, they do it for the personal pride that might be gained in that any mention of the faculty member also includes listing the donor's name as part of the distinguished professor's title. (Increasing numbers of US universities have unofficial price lists that state how much money must be donated for a named professorship or for other honors, such as having the donor's family name on a building.)

Schools administrators believe that the prestige of attracting and retaining research active faculty improves the school image. Prestige for many top schools arguably appears to be tied to the publication records of faculty (Armstrong and Sperry, 1994), such that the resulting impact on various ratings might, in turn, attract more top students and other donations, or so their logic claims. Since schools also retain significant parts of research grant income as part of ubiquitous "overhead" charges, even traditional teaching schools have been increasing their research expectations on faculty in all disciplines with a directive that they seek research grants to help offset other campus costs (Woolston, 2003). As research leaders, holders of endowed positions could also be expected to generate more funds.

It might be easy to criticize holders of these special faculty positions as an extension of the



more common student (or non-faculty) lament that research “gets in the way” of teaching (Sykes, 1988). Yet for individual faculty, everything in life can intrude on teaching, including golf, child-care and a new motorcycle – the time value comes down to how faculty want to spend it (e.g. Rotfeld, 2000). On the positive side, faculty research activity itself, any activity, makes certain that the faculty keep current in their fields and do not endlessly repeat the same textbook materials to their classes while their dendrites deteriorate to the thinking capacity of bricks. Universities generally have been reducing teaching loads on business faculty as research publication requirements have increased (though some schools just increase the research requirements without any offset in decreasing other obligations).

But at a more basic level, it is important to ask just what most schools get from the proliferation of these specially-endowed high-salary faculty positions.

In the usual practice, people moving to a new school for these special high-salary positions are enticed by extra low teaching loads, limits of classes to minimal days of the week or a single academic term, as well as immediate grants of tenure. If the position goes to an existing department member, they receive a pay increase, a private spending fund and sometimes additional release time from teaching. Too often, the new hire immediately abuses the privileges of the office in cases of *de facto* featherbedding. Across the country, faculty report colleagues who draw large annual salaries but fly in from another part of the country to teach classes only in the Spring. Others meet with colleagues and students on campus one day a week while the rest of the time is spent on other pursuits, which might include academic research, consulting or even holding another job.

Aside from the abuses, there is a more basic problem of these endowed positions as they become fuel for an ongoing and increasing university competition to hire high-profile and high-price faculty members away from other universities. As one state university dean publicly defended himself to legislatures for the practice, he asserted that there was only limited overall impact of reduced teaching for the

limited number of new hires. Besides, he said, the students benefit from having their classes taught by faculty who are creating new knowledge (Fish, 2003; Armstrong, 1995). While the actual connection between faculty research accomplishments and classroom effectiveness only rarely has been found as a weak phenomenon at best (Feldman, 1987), as noted above publication activity does have a positive impact on some university’s reputations.

With such logic, a department could attempt to raise its national standing by the mass hiring of leading scholars in various areas. It becomes the sports model of academic rosters, as each department tries to improve its reputation by hiring its own version of the basketball superstar that would dominate the field.

This has actually been attempted on a large scale at a few schools with disastrous results, as the superstars have their own version of the star athlete egos and often do not become integrated into the local campus community (Aronowitz, 2000). Ever the “free agent”, they are often looking for their next job and could just as readily leave.

But the sports metaphor is also misleading when it is realized the different role individual faculty should play on campus versus the members of an athletic team. As he rejoined the Chicago Bulls, Michael Jordan clearly was a strong factor in their winning seasons. Just by announcing that he was coming out of retirement, Michael Jordan gave a huge boost to ticket sales and the value of television contracts for his new team. At an athletic event, everyone sees the star. With their reduced teaching loads and limited contacts, academic superstars are seen by few students on any campus.

In the end, the value of the special endowed chair goes to the faculty member, not to the students or the school. Since the source and quantity of donations are finite, funds that go to the uses of a faculty line do not go to assist student scholarships or other special needs of the schools general endowment.

As I said at the outset, I do not hold any special chair or professorship. I wish I had one, but I would have to admit that the added pay boost would do little to alter how I work.

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