The Meta-Profession of Teaching

College teaching is not simply an extension of scholarship.

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A meta-profession requires expertise in a wide variety of complex professional skills beyond that of content expertise.

The past 15 years have seen many efforts to define the professoriate. Ernest Boyer’s redefinition of scholarship, the AAHE Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards led by Gene Rice, and Diamond and Adam’s two books about disciplinary perspectives on faculty work have provided a conceptual basis and real-world data for our thinking about what it means to be a college professor.

But to fully understand the work that the profession demands, we must explore the skills that the work requires. Until we identify the generic and specific skills necessary to succeed in the four basic professorial roles—teaching, scholarly and creative activities, service, and administration—we cannot effectively evaluate faculty work or offer meaningful support for those who do this work.

In an era when outside forces threaten the status of the professoriate, it is critical to demonstrate that being a college professor involves much more than presenting one’s expertise in a classroom for a few hours a week.

The meta-professional skills of college teaching include: designing, constructing, and operating a complex environment that facilitates and supports student learning; working with and leading others; mastering complex technologies; and representing one’s work and institution to a variety of academic colleagues and to the public.

MEET THE AUTHORS

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The Multiple Roles of the College Professor

What is a Meta-Profession?
College teaching is a profession built on top of another profession—a meta-profession. Individuals come to the professoriate with specific—professional—knowledge and skills, including content expertise, practice/clinical skills, and research techniques. These skills constitute what may be called the base profession of college faculty. But college professors are immediately called upon to perform at professional levels in four possible roles: teaching, scholarly or creative activities (including research), service to the institution and community, and administration.

These roles require skills beyond the base profession and are characterized as ‘meta-professional’ skills. The base profession and meta-profession skills and the various faculty roles are arrayed in the matrix below.

Figure 1 summarizes the spectrum of skill sets that may be called upon in the broad faculty roles of teaching, scholarly and creative activities, service, and administration. Additional matrices that provide a further detailed itemization of the skills required by each faculty role may be seen at the Meta-Profession Project Web site at www.cedanet.com/meta.

The summary matrix shown in Figure 1 also indicates the frequency with which faculty skill sets are called into play in the successful performance of each faculty role. The frequency coding was based on evidence in existing literature, our own work in faculty development and evaluation over the past three decades, and in consultation with colleagues. The meta-profession matrix uses the following scale: Almost Always - Frequently - Occasionally - Almost Never.

The Meta-Profession Project Web site contains six interactive matrices: Summary; Teaching; Scholarly & Creative Activities; Service; Administration; and a special Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) matrix. This latter matrix shows how the SOTL may be seen as a subset of base profession and meta-professional skill sets. What is apparent is that graduate school training focuses on the base profession role but rarely provides preparation for the other requirements of the meta-profession.

The Meta-Profession Project
The Meta-Profession Project has four main objectives:
1. Engage college faculty in providing precise information about the frequency with which various identified skills are required in their work;
2. Gather information that will permit the determination as to whether the skill set use patterns vary from institution to institution;
3. Provide a structure (the meta-professional matrices) that can be effectively used in faculty development and evaluation, policy decision-making, research, and in important campus dialogue; (For an example, see the report on nurse education at Florida State University at the Meta-Profession Web site.)
4. Gather information on and provide a central source for resource materials about faculty skill sets that can then be applied to faculty evaluation, faculty development, research, and the development of campus policies and programs.
The goal of the Meta-Profession Project, as for any true program for faculty development and evaluation, is to improve instructional effectiveness and promote the recognition of the professoriate as a truly complex and higher calling.

**Implications for Professional Development**

Using the meta-professional approach, institutions can initiate campus dialogues that will define and clarify faculty roles, work, and expectations, and form the basis for the development of authentic and responsive faculty development programs. Here are two examples of process guides for these activities.

Arreola has proposed an eight-step process for developing a faculty evaluation system. In brief, the steps are:

1. **Determine the faculty role model:** Specify the work that define the roles of teaching, scholarly and creative activities, service to the college, professional growth, and other roles.

2. **Determine the range of weights assigned to the faculty role model:** Establish precisely, the relative weights or values to be assigned to the roles of teaching, scholarly and creative activities, service, and the other activities.

3. **Specify the components of these roles:** Identify subcategories of the faculty roles (such as instructional design, delivery, and assessment in teaching) as well as content expertise.

4. **Determine the component weights:** Decide the weight of each component (for example, instructional delivery may be worth 30 percent of the evaluation of teaching, content expertise 25 percent, course management, 10 percent, and so on).

5. **Determine sources of information:** Decide whether students, peers, administrators, or others will provide information about various components of the teaching role.

6. **Determine source weights:** Determine what percentage of the data each source provides (for example, students provide 75 percent of the data on instructional delivery and peers provide 25 percent, while peers provide all of the data on content expertise).

7. **Determine general data collection tools/process:** Decide whether to use a student ratings instrument, peer observation, a teaching portfolio, or a combination.

8. **Select/design instruments/protocols/reports:** Select, adapt, or create a ratings questionnaire or determine the content and organization of portfolios.

In a parallel approach, Thall has proposed eight steps in the creation of a faculty development system. In brief, these are:

1. **Determine needs and associated development functions:** Use surveys and interviews that inform decisions about users’ needs and institutional directions.

2. **Determine the principal clients of development services:** Decide whom the range of programs will serve (faculty, chairs, the administration, and/or students).

3. **Determine the configuration and location of development programs:** Create a unit or center, decide who should direct it, and to whom that person should report.

4. **Determine the allocation of development resources:** Determine the percentages of time each function allocates to each client group, and then assign resources proportionately.

5. **Determine the intended impact of development programs:** Decide on program goals and activities, as well as the process and criteria to be used to assess performance and determine success.

6. **Determine the connections to other campus programs:** For example, plan joint activities or data sharing to maximize the combined effectiveness of efforts in areas like assessment, evaluation, and institutional research.

7. **Establish leadership in faculty development:** Ensure *a priori* and continued support from faculty and administrators and guarantee necessary resources.

8. **Ensure operational stability:** Use long-range resource allocation; staff with qualified and dedicated people; create a client advisory body; regularly interact with faculty and administration; assess results; and report activities and accomplishments.

For a more detailed description of the Meta-Profession faculty development project, visit: [www.cedanet.com/meta](http://www.cedanet.com/meta).

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**BEST PRACTICES**

First, beware of the fallacy of ‘best practices’ in faculty evaluation and development. Well-designed systems must respond to the unique values, characteristics, history, traditions, and mission of a particular college. What works well at one institution may not work well at another. “Best” must be defined in terms of incorporating and reflecting the unique characteristics of each institution, not simply duplicating all or part of systems that work well elsewhere. With that in mind, here are some brief guidelines for good practice in the meta-profession.

- **Engage in continuous dialogue.** Achieving at consensus among all stakeholders is the most important first step in good practice, and the dialogue must be sustained over time.

- **Build on initial commitments.** It is critical to have strong support from faculty and administrators beyond the first blush of enthusiasm. Evaluation and development systems must serve both groups and provide regular evidence of success and service to those groups.

- **Create useful synergy.** Common wisdom often insists that evaluation and development should be separated, but total separation is a mistake. While it is reasonable to ensure that teaching improvement is a confidential process and that faculty evaluation follows clear and understood policies, these systems must nonetheless be complementary.

- **Monitor the systems and make improvements.** It is a mistake to assume that building systems for faculty development and evaluation is a one-time process. Creating a teaching center or an evaluation process is only the beginning, and these systems benefit from regular assessment, revision, and improvement.
ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Creating a Meta-Professional campus

How do I begin?
The faculty are at the heart of the academy and the meta-profession. Many academic administrators come from the ranks of the faculty and can share in an opening dialogue that asks the question, “What does it mean to be a faculty member at our institution?” Such a dialogue can be initiated by a faculty group (individuals or a senate), by the administration (a group of chairs or the provost), or preferably, by a joint call for campus discussion of important professional issues.

Who should participate?
All stakeholders should participate at some point in the dialogue, but the faculty should be consistently involved and should take the lead in promoting the dialogue and in initiating actions that lead to strengthening the meta-professional stance and in the development of effective programs. This approach is described in detail in a paper entitled Leadership in faculty evaluation and development: some thoughts on why and how the meta-profession can control its own destiny available at www.cedanet.com/meta/meta_leader.pdf

How long will it take?
This is not a process with a pre-determined end point. In fact, the dialogue should be continuous in order to involve new people and new ideas, and to address new challenges.

Yes, for example, is your institution reacting to new demands for accountability, or to pressure to use new technologies, or to competition from other institutions and for-profit educational organizations, or to new student populations with new expectations, or to the greater use of part-time faculty? All these issues impact on the ways in which higher education operates and they cannot be ignored. Ongoing, meta-professional dialogue can address these issues when they arise rather than in a “too little, too late” post hoc manner.

What can I hope to accomplish?
What is needed in higher education is a renaissance rather than a retrenchment. This renaissance has two components. First, higher education needs a “rebirth” in terms of values, image, status, and quality. Facing unprecedented challenges, higher education must initiate meaningful changes (those determined from within and proactive in promoting quality) rather than responses to demands from outside the academy (like calls for ‘national testing’ that are determined by political expediency and rhetoric). A second emphasis of a renaissance is the recognition that college faculty are expected to be renaissance persons, possessing impressive arrays of skills and knowledge that enable them to be effective. These meta-profession skills should be supported, recognized, and rewarded.

The renaissance can be achieved only by faculty realizing that we belong to a common, complex, profession spanning the full spectrum of human knowledge and realizing as well that the university is not simply a collection of diverse disciplinary experts. Rather, the professoriate must define itself as a coherent, committed, collegial community dedicated to quality and to re-establishing it’s role as critical to the success not only of higher education, but of society.

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Thriving in Academe is a joint project of the National Education Association and the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education. This section is intended to promote more effective teaching and learning in higher education through dialogue among colleagues. The opinions of this feature are solely the authors’ and do not reflect the views of either organization. For more information, contact podnetwork@podweb.org or clehane@nea.org.

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