

Encouraging Academic Creativity In Research

Stuart Nagel

Encouraging Academic Creativity In Research

Stuart Nagel

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how to raise the creativity and research productivity of academics in colleges or universities. The ideas on how to encourage such creativity are based on the author's almost 40 years of experience in teaching in various American universities such as Arizona, Illinois, Michigan, North-western, Pennsylvania State, Stanford, and Yale. The ideas are also based on extensive reading of the relevant literature, and interacting with academics from all over the world including universities in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America.

Suggestions for New Incentive Systems

In order to raise the creativity and productivity of the academic research community, colleges and universities in developed countries may consider the following suggestions:

1. Require all faculty members to submit an annual report indicating
2.
 - a. articles written or book chapters written for edited books
 - b. books authored
 - c. books edited
 - d. consulting activities for governments, corporations, or other entities that use academic knowledge
 - e. papers presented or speeches made
 - f. mentoring of Ph.D. or M.A. theses
 - g. favorable book reviews or other reviews
 - h. awards received
 - i. grants received
 - j. software developed
 - k. academic leadership roles.
3. Ensure that merit bears some correlation to the data that is included in those annual reports. Each department head should be required to show a kind of regression, correlation, or simple graphic analysis showing the relations.
4. Have good facilities on campus in terms of libraries, ICT and secretarial support. Make them all available without charge.
5. Grant money for business travel and for hiring research assistants.
6. Encourage the hiring of colleagues that work well together and stimulate each other. Show a preference for those who do co-authoring or co-editing.
7. Encourage good graduate students to work with faculty members on joining projects. Require seminar papers to be publishable either jointly or separately.
8. Submit articles on creative achievements to the departmental newsletters, the faculty newspaper, and professional newsletters.

9. Have weekly seminars in which faculty members present their ongoing research for about 1/2 an hour and the second 1/2 hour is spent in questions and discussion. This should include both junior and senior faculty. Both attendance and participation should be expected.
10. Hold regular meetings on how to make the department more productive and more creative. Creativity refers to innovative usefulness or useful innovation. It is a qualitative concept. Productivity is an important quantitative concept referring to how many books and articles are generated.
11. Creative teaching should also be encouraged. Reports should ask about new courses or new ways of teaching old courses.
12. Encourage faculty members to present their creative ideas in the classroom when appropriate and encourage obtaining feedback from both undergraduate and graduate students.

Tenure as an Important Framework Condition

Universities and the general public need to accept that a lot of professors will waste their time striking out on as many as one hundred projects for every one project that turns out to be highly creative and useful. It is said that even at major universities, only five percent of the faculty write 95% of the books, but the overwhelming majority has tenure.

Tenure is important for encouraging creativity. Without it, faculty members might tend to be much more cautious and conservative. That does not mean being conservative ideologically. Universities tend a bit toward the left, especially in social sciences and humanities. The people who teach at universities, though, tend to be on a lifetime ego trip. They were fawned over as children, as students, and now by the students they teach. The 95% who are not heavy book producers may consciously or subconsciously resent the five percent who are. As a result, in times of scarce resources the majority might seek to lessen the resources that go to the more creative faculty. The justification might be an equalitarian one. It could be based on subjective criteria that relate to teaching or the quality of what is published. The important thing is that creative non-tenured faculty may not get tenure under such circumstances, and tenured faculty may find themselves pushed out by unpleasantness. This may especially occur now that there is no compulsory retirement, and some of the most creative, productive faculty do not want to retire. Having tenure enables one to withstand that kind lose-lose jealousy especially if one is untenured or past the age for being bribed or threatened into early retirement.

Applying the Creativity Proposals

The above points can cover any field of knowledge including natural science, social science, and humanities. Chemists may need chemistry laboratories to facilitate creativity, whereas sculptors may need garages where they can make noise chiseling. Those separate ideas are sub-parts of the above ideas such as the idea to provide good facilities.

Virtually all of these points are highly applicable at the departmental level, the college level, and the all-university level of universities. Sometimes individual departments seek to encourage creativity but get little encouragement from the administration. Other times, departments emphasize crony awards rather than merit-treatment awards. In such cases the

administration may provide no discouragement possibly because cronyism may be heavily part of the reward system at the college level and the all-university level.

These creativity ideas are applicable to both large universities and small colleges. All institutions of higher learning try to encourage creativity on the part of faculty and students. At least they should try to encourage creativity. That may be the most important skill or characteristic that students can acquire to enable them to be successful in life.

Creativity should be encouraged on the part of faculty, partly so they can be good role models, for their students but also because their creativity can lead to improving the general quality of life. Bigger universities may have more money for facilities, but all universities and colleges should ask professors and departments to prepare annual reports that are distributed among the faculty within each department and in summary form across the department. Those reports should include publishing, teaching, and service activities, many of which may involve creativity as mentioned or implied in the first point above. Doing such reports costs very little and can send an important message that creativity and productivity are desired. They thus have a high benefit/cost ratio in all universities and colleges that rightfully seek to encourage creativity and productivity rather than administrative cronyism.

About the Author

Stuart Nagel is a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois. He is also the coordinator of the Policy Studies Organization, the Dirksen-Stevenson Policy Institute, and the Miriam Mills Research Center. He is the author of such relevant books as *Creativity and Public Policy: Generating Super-Optimum Solutions* (Ashgate, 2000) and *Creativity: Being Usefully Innovative in Solving Diverse Problems* (Nova Science, 2000). He is also the editor of the quarterly journal called *Creativity Plus* and the coordinator of the *Creativity Plus* Association. His email address is s-nagel@uiuc.edu.