

The Chronicle of Higher Education

# Chronicle Careers

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Friday, June 2, 2006

## Praising You As We Should

By GARY A. OLSON

**HEADS UP**Advice for  
academic  
administrators

Every year at my university's annual celebration of distinguished alumni, inevitably it becomes clear that one or more of the handful of honorees has studied under the same senior scholar: a now retired professor of biological sciences. His students have been remarkably successful, carving out impressive careers in scientific research, medicine, and teaching.

At this year's celebration, I playfully asked him, "Is there any former student of yours who hasn't gone on to win some major award?" Immediately, his face darkened and he replied solemnly, "You know, I'm afraid that I'll pass away before all the truly worthy ones receive the recognition they deserve."

It strikes me that this emeritus professor understands a fundamental dynamic of academic life that many of us have yet to learn: The true cultural capital on any campus is proper recognition of good work.

Ours is an economy of scarcity. Even well-endowed institutions find themselves in a constant struggle to find enough money to do everything they want to do. That economy of scarcity extends to salaries: most academics and administrators are not compensated at the level that their education, skills, and experience would garner in business or industry.

In the absence of sufficient real capital, the cultural capital of the academic world -- recognition -- is especially important. We live for -- and thrive on (whether we admit it to ourselves or not) -- the recognition of our colleagues, peers, disciplines, and institutions. Strangely enough, however, institutions can be stingy when it comes to handing out praise. At times, it seems scarcer than dollars.

That is especially unfortunate because the longer someone's outstanding efforts go unacknowledged, the more that person is likely to become alienated.

A department secretary once told me that staff members in her unit were "banned" from attending department meetings, as if they were children not yet mature enough to join their parents at the dinner table. "Do they actually think that we're not part of this department, too?" she asked me in frustration. "I've been in this department longer than just about every single professor."

Although the staff professionals in her department work tirelessly to keep the unit running smoothly -- including taking on such high-level responsibilities as managing the budget and the course schedule -- they receive very little recognition of that "invisible" labor. So, they are understandably resentful.

A senior professor at a large public university told me a similar story. She felt ignored, even disrespected, by her colleagues despite making every effort to become a more integral part of her department. Eventually she abandoned all attempts to "join" her department and, for 26 long years, hunkered down and concentrated on her research, producing groundbreaking scholarship. Despite her fame, her departmental

colleagues continued to dismiss her accomplishments. It was only when her university conferred on her the status of "university distinguished professor" that she felt part of the institution -- a full quarter of a century after she began her career there.

Such stories are all too common in academe, and illustrate a systemic problem. Researchers revealed last month one reason for the behavior of a significant number of university scientists (33 percent) who had admitted in a survey to knowingly engaging in research misconduct, such as falsifying data. The scientists perceived themselves to be victims of injustice, usually involving how their universities recognized and rewarded faculty work (*The Chronicle*, April 7).

Like the long-ignored professor and the staff members banned from their own department's meetings, those scientists felt that the institution -- their colleagues and administration -- had slighted them by not acknowledging their worth and by not adequately rewarding their efforts. The survey results underscore just how deeply job disaffection can be felt by faculty and staff members, as well as the serious consequences that can arise from such discontent.

The good news is that an alienated labor force is not an intractable problem. Sure, it is unlikely that higher education will ever receive enough money to raise salaries to the point that faculty and staff members will feel adequately compensated, but an institution can do much to ameliorate the alienation that many experience daily.

The beginning of a solution lies with those of us who serve as administrators. The key, I believe, is to create a culture of recognition and reward.

Such a culture can take many forms. It involves recognizing, thanking, congratulating, and rewarding both faculty and staff members for their many accomplishments. It can be as simple as adopting the routine of sending an e-mail message or a personal note to individuals acknowledging their new publication, grant, award, or other achievement. It means notifying departmental and institutional newsletters and other publications of those accomplishments -- and making sure that no one worthy of such attention is inadvertently excluded. It means announcing those accomplishments at appropriate public venues -- department meetings, college addresses, convocations.

A culture of recognition means creating awards for all constituents: awards for outstanding teaching, research, and service; for notable staff and administrative service; for significant student achievements; for distinguished alumni; even for extraordinary departmental or collegial efforts (the department or college conducting the most successful fund-raising campaign, for example).

When possible, it also means memorializing that recognition by providing some tangible record of it: a plaque, a framed notice, a printed certificate, or some other commemorative inscription. It means sponsoring annual ceremonies where such awards can be presented and the winners publicly lauded and thanked.

It also means recognizing the efforts of those who labor behind the scenes: the secretary who works overtime to make sure the department's newsletter comes out on time, the staff member who organizes an event -- even a ceremony honoring the accomplishments of others.

In short, a culture of recognition means being ever vigilant to people's accomplishments and taking every opportunity to acknowledge their efforts.

Of course, recognition is one thing; reward is another. The next step is to find ways to make the rewards as meaningful as possible.

A friend of mine at a midsized university is understandably proud that he created the institution's first "Provost's Award for Outstanding Teaching." That was clearly a positive initiative, but what he didn't see was that by attaching a measly \$250 prize to the award he was unintentionally insulting his faculty members. He was, in effect, saying, "The university values good teaching, but only enough to give you a small token." And in so doing, he was demonstrating that the university didn't really value good teaching at all, or, more importantly, the efforts of those teachers it was supposedly lauding.

It would have been better to have offered no monetary prize than to have offered one so paltry.

Certainly, the number of awards that carry monetary prizes and the amount of those prizes will be a function of a given unit's fiscal health, but if creating a culture of recognition is a priority -- as I believe it should be -- then we ought to make every effort to make our awards as meaningful as possible.

What's more, academic leaders committed to fostering a culture of recognition will go beyond waiting passively to learn of the accomplishments of others so as to congratulate them. They will nominate worthy faculty and staff members for awards, citations, grants, fellowships, and other forms of support and recognition. They will stay abreast of their faculty members' work and what awards and other forms of recognition are available to honor that work, both within the institution and externally. They will ensure that the appropriate individuals receive information about those opportunities.

In short, they will make sure that their professors, staff members, and students apply for, and receive, the support and recognition they deserve. Such measures will not eliminate job alienation in academe; that would entail massive structural change. But creating a culture of recognition would do much to improve the climate and working conditions in higher education.

In an institution that had successfully created such a culture, no one would ever fear passing away before "all the truly worthy ones" had been recognized, because in a culture of recognition, no good deed goes unrecognized.

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