

[RSCWTF Report: Questions and Comments](#)

Published by [Dean Saitta](#) March 18th, 2007 in [Home](#), [Prez's Pulpit](#) and [RSCW Task Force Report](#).

RSCWTF Report: Questions and Comments

By Dean Saitta

Like Paul Sutton, I respect the efforts of the Research, Scholarship, and Creative Work Task Force. And, like Paul, the following is offered in the interest of provoking discussion and achieving greater clarity about what's being proposed, and how we might get there.

- The report suggests that DU faculty are underachieving and that only small pockets of faculty with “strong records” of RSCW are to be found. What are the features of these “strong records”? Can we generalize about them? Might they be summarized in a way that applies across the units? Would they be exemplified by the CVs of task force members?
- The report makes reference to “high” and “positive” impact RSCW. “High” and “positive” meaning what? Impact on whom, and to what end? The report also urges the setting of “challenging goals”. What are some examples that different academic units might set for themselves? It's clear that the task force sees these questions as ones that the units themselves have to answer, but it would be helpful to have some suggestions from those sitting in the catbird's seat.
- The report envisions a “true” scholar-teacher model. How does a “true” model differ from the presumably cheaper imitations that apparently exist on campus today?
- As I read it, the report implicitly privileges a particular set of what might be called “normal science” values and commitments. Quality RSCW seems to be perceived as discipline or field-based, individual expert-led, externally-funded, and peer-reviewed. What of research that is interdisciplinary, collaborative, demand-driven, and problem-focused? That is, research that some might describe as *civically-engaged*? What of science that is explicitly *critical* or “abnormal”, and less agreeable to the editors of peer-reviewed journals and the program heads of funding agencies? What of work that is synthetic rather than original; work that might take the form, say, of textbooks and popular articles, books, and performances (perhaps of the sort that got Cornel West in trouble at Harvard)? For a nation that ranks embarrassingly low among industrialized nations in terms of scientific (and other) literacies, it seems that such synthetic and applied work should be legitimized as much as (if not more than) traditional work. Is the task force, along with deans and promotion and tenure committees, prepared to go there?

- The report appeals to “market” realities as much as institutional “mission”. It seems to be more concerned with what peer and aspirant universities are doing than with what DU might be capable of doing given our public good vision and the intellectual capital that’s available on campus. The report seems to relativize this vision to the extent that units are invited to embrace it if they want, or ignore it if they want. It seems that such relativist indifference risks disenfranchising significant numbers of faculty who—like many candidates in our recent Provost search—are intrigued by the distinctiveness of our configuration and the originality of our vision. Why not put vision and mission before market? Why not challenge the terms by which universities are compared? Why not establish *other* evaluative standards? If we’re careful and thoughtful, why couldn’t we make a break with traditional ways of doing, and increasingly suspect ways of ranking, that would distinguish us in the academic marketplace? As Carl Raschke points out elsewhere in the *Forum* [see his “Public Good and Global Engagement”], we haven’t yet had the serious discussion about what the public good commitment means for teaching. Can the same be said for RSCW? And “service”?
- Although it calls for a “true” scholar-teacher model, in places the report identifies teaching and, especially, service as potential drags on the RSCW enterprise. Teaching is viewed as an inferior contributor to reputation building, and service (which some might reasonably see as an “applied scholarship”) looms as an “interference” with the business of real scholarship. This strikes me as a significant, and undesirable, tension. A more compelling vision might bring these aspects of faculty work together in a coherent, holistic way. Back in the early 1990s Ernest Boyer invited us to go down this road with his notion of multiple scholarships (discovery, teaching, application, integration) and many others have since echoed his call. For whatever reason, we’ve been reluctant to do so as part of an institution-wide commitment.
- The report seems to be insensitive to the fact that the lives and interests of individual professors change, and that we invest in different Boyerian scholarships at different times in our careers. This strikes me as unfortunate, and at odds with our professed commitment to be “daring” in our search for, and dissemination of, knowledge. What of the professor who is weary of the status quo-perpetuating quality of much normal science, the banality of many NSF grant applications, and the mind-numbing dullness of even the most acclaimed peer-reviewed journals? We should make accommodations for scholars who are interested in traveling different paths at different times. We should have a RSCW mission that not only respects individual life-cycle changes, but also reflects a nuanced, critical understanding of the wider knowledge industry and its political economy.

I was recently asked by Human Resources to provide a testimonial about what it’s like to be part of the DU faculty for inclusion in a recruitment brochure. I was told that HR’s research suggests that prospective faculty are particularly interested in tenure policies,

support for research, the teaching-research balance, and the collegiality of the community. I was asked what I would say to a candidate to urge them to consider a position at DU. I was stumped. I told HR that I wasn't sure what I could say that wouldn't risk giving prospective candidates a bum steer. This is because tenure policies, teaching-research-service expectations, and collegiality vary so much by department and division, with the effect that some faculty are very happy, and others much less so. Not wanting to be a complete downer, I said that I think DU is the place for faculty who want to help build something on an institutional level. That we are an institution "on the make", with leaders who value input from the rank-and-file and a good bunch of Trustees. I said that structurally we are a very interesting place with lots of possibilities for connecting undergraduate and professional school education in interesting ways (if we can get over certain other structural impediments). I said that we're a place where an individual faculty member has room to stretch and grow in a multiplicity of teaching and research directions, and the freedom to push the boundaries of their discipline and to explore borderland, interdisciplinary spaces.

I'm not sure if this is an accurate and/or appealing description or not, but it captures my personal experience within anthropology (and is thus a testament to the supportiveness of my fine department colleagues...although I'm not sure if we qualify as a "pocket of RSCW excellence"). If this description works for others then we should validate the public good vision and mission in *all* units, as well as the other commitments that we hold in common. We should formulate the teaching-research-service obligation in a way that avoids diminishing any of them as a vital aspect of faculty work. We might strive for a true scholar-teacher-*citizen* model. We might think about a paradigm for developing and evaluating faculty RSCW that is always vigilant about what peers and aspirants are doing, but that takes its lead and inspiration from the institutional vision and the lovely idea that scholarships are multiple and varied.

I think that one useful step in this direction would be to integrate or harmonize the RSCW task force report with last year's Teaching Task Force (TTF) report. Such integration might await a still-to-be-convened-and-written "Service Task Force" report that specifically considers this aspect of faculty work against the public good vision (along with many other issues, including establishing with greater clarity, for the purposes of annual merit review, what "applied scholarship" warrants a bonus, what warrants a stipend, what warrants a base salary increase). The TTF report contained many good ideas that would benefit the scholarship of teaching. The subsequent savaging of the report by faculty seemed to be motivated by worries about added expectations and fears of post-tenure review, if not the abolition of tenure altogether. The deans apparently construed the report as an assault on their autonomy and power. The RSCW task force process sought to avoid many of the problems associated with the TTF process. The RSCW report might be cleaner and more clinical, but in my view it is no less problematic than the TTF report. If we're serious about building a "true" scholar-teacher model and achieving mission statement synergies between the various dualities and trialities that have traditionally defined academic life, then subjecting these two reports to a bit of integrative scholarship would seem like a good first step.