

From: Elvin Wyly <ewyly@interchange.ubc.ca>
Subject: **Re: Annual reviews and merit process**
Date: May 1, 2007 5:08:33 PM PDT
To: Graeme Wynn <wynn@geog.ubc.ca>

Graeme,

Thanks very much for your long note, and for your leadership and patience with the many constituencies of a complex institution in turbulent times. But, then again, all times are perhaps turbulent, just in different ways.

Let me first say that I don't know how guilty I am personally of sloppiness in the preparation of my annual report -- to be entirely honest, I have always been very tempted to fill out annual reports of any kind by putting an entry down saying that my main accomplishment during a particular reporting period was learning how to fill out the form attesting to the accomplishments of that reporting period. In other words: we seem to spend so much time providing information on what we do that we do not actually have very much time to do what we are supposed to do in the first place. In any event, I do apologize if there were problems in my annual report. Or let me correct that -- I know there were some problems, because I listed some things as "forthcoming" and now realize those should not have been on there.

But my more fundamental point is this: your long note is simply the most recent and compelling evidence that we have fundamentally lost the spirit of the academy, or at least the spirit of the academy that inspired me when I first tasted it. Your note describes all the time you had to invest to do the annual reviews, all the time you had to invest to digest annual reports of a diverse group of people doing different things, and all of the many problems of trying to sort out whether people are sloppy, intentionally trying to pad their credentials, or doing something else entirely. This is all a lot of time, because it's multiplied by all the individuals who had to prepare these documents, as well. Now another wave of time investments is taking place in the Dean's office. Let's add up all of these hours. Now let's multiply by the salaries of everyone involved.

And for what purpose are all of these resources spent? For "merit." And PSA, an acronym describing something that completely slips my mind at the moment. Ah, another wonderful feature of the lean and mean content provider machine that our university has become: more acronyms, please.

I understand that some degree of sorting and sifting has to happen. But the fact that it happens so often, and takes up so much of our time, is for me an important benchmark of the neoliberal university (which is to say the university destroyed by neoliberal pay-to-play market incentives and the like). The university is a place and a culture of learning and scholarship, and a commitment to service. It is about research excellence and first-rate teaching, and it is about honoring commitments to society and community. It is not about 'efficiency' or market models of who gets paid what. We need compensation sufficient to preserve the collective mission of the institution -- to 'attract people of means' in the 1940 statement of principles of academic freedom and tenure -- but we should not be wasting our time every year trying to divvy up dollar signs in ways that now, I fear from the possible reaction to your long memorandum, will simply exacerbate tensions and feelings of "who amongst us has committed fraud?" This is dangerous, and it gives me great fear. I have always felt overpaid, and privileged to be part of the academy. But I have also felt saddened by the destruction of the culture of the academy that attracted me to it in the first place. And I have tried to resist, in vain. I lost most of my respect for this particular institution when it stonewalled my attempt to avoid a salary increase of

\$10,000 per year, which I had requested be devoted to student support. I have tried to make up at least part of this through donations, but here again another group of bureaucrats has caused more than a few problems, and so I am seriously re-considering plans to increase certain types of gifts.

I apologize if any of this note seems testy -- if so, it's not directed towards you at all, but towards the systems and processes that you must implement. But I have been playing around with a new language to use when bureaucrats around this institution try to waste my time with silly forms and other forms of harassment: I am (over)paid by the taxpayers of British Columbia, my response goes: how does your request for yet another form help me to do the job that I am supposed to do to further the missions of the University, and to make the best use of the very precious asset that is highly-paid faculty time?

I highly recommend this line of argument. When more of us start doing this, we might have a chance fighting back against the further neoliberalization of the academy.

best,
Elvin

Elvin K. Wily, Ph.D
Co-Editor, Urban Geography
<http://www.bellpub.com/ug/dauthor.htm>
Associate Professor, Chair of Urban Studies Program
Department of Geography, University of British Columbia
1984 West Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z2 Canada
778 899 7906
<http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewily>
<http://www.arts.ubc.ca/urban>

On 1-May-07, at 4:11 PM, Graeme Wynn wrote:

Dear colleagues: I have just completed the annual review process and the associated long report and set of recommendations regarding merit and PSA awards. These have been lodged in the Dean's Office on deadline.

I would like to thank everyone for participating in this process. The annual reports and meetings are of considerable value to me in keeping me abreast of the many things that busy colleagues are doing and providing me with your ideas about the state of the department and about "things" that I might consider addressing or changing.

However, I have to confess that I found the process very time consuming and more than a little dispiriting this year. Time consuming because I spent more time than I ought (and have) in "verifying" entries in this year's annual reports, mostly by comparing them with last year's, and sometimes by resort to online bibliographies and publishers' sites on the web. This was also dispiriting, because I found a disconcerting degree of let-me-call-it inaccuracy in the statements submitted as annual reports of achievement.

You will recall that a couple of memos early in the process (and the Word template that Lorna circulated) were explicit in reminding everyone that the exercise related to work completed during the review period (1 April to 31

March). The exception to this is in the teaching evaluations which we have long had to treat on a "slip year" basis (previous Spring and current Fall rather than the Fall and Spring of the review period because the timing makes it impossible to process spring teaching data soon enough to include in the April process). You will also recall, I hope that I asked that so far as research was concerned, entries in the Publications section of the Review documents be limited to work actually appearing in print during this period.

Among other things I found that several reports continue to list "forthcoming" items as Publications in the review period, with varying levels of acknowledgment that these items are not yet "out". Some reports were explicit in stating a particular item was "in press" or "forthcoming," others simply listed the item without remark. Why does this matter? In my estimation, feedback from colleagues identifying those among us whom they consider worthy of consideration for merit are often influenced by the number of entries in the Publications section of the report, whether these items are published or in process. This, I think you can see, easily leads to unfairness, produced by double counting (or triple counting) of the same work year upon year as it moves from "submitted" to "under revision" to "accepted" to "in print" to "published". Those who play by the rules and "declare" only those items published during the year stand to be disadvantaged by this sort of behavior on the part of others unless there is careful scrutiny. Even if this scrutiny is exercised by the Head, and shapes his/her recommendations, the Dean's office allocates additional merit awards and may be misled by the sort of stacking behaviour I am asking all of us to avoid.

Further, the Annual Reports reveal some significant instances of misrepresentation (or a certain sloppiness, about which I feel no better). In the last two years there have been a number of items that appear in both 2005-06 and 2006-07 reports as published during the current period. Items appearing outside of the review period are often difficult to identify without close comparison of reports (if they bear a 2006 imprint and appear in issue 2 of a journal, say, they might be out by mid March in one year, and then be claimed, even with pretty full citation information, as the product of the next review period). By the same token, some items are evidently claimed "in advance" -- in the last two years articles and books that are/were technically forthcoming on 31 March have been listed without qualification as published in the review period.

In addition, I have documented instances in which items listed as work published in the review period have never appeared as indicated, although they do appear under more or less amended titles in a subsequent report. For reasons such as these it seems especially important, to me, that we limit our assessments to work actually published each year.

I know that some will attribute lapses to the cumbersome MYCV template (which we no longer have to use), and I am prepared to acknowledge the difficulties here, but it remains the case that even with MYCV there were different levels of assiduousness in the precise specification of information

I am dispirited by all of this because it seems to me to reflect either a degree of casualness about the process in which we are involved, or a form of behaviour encouraged by the intense competition for merit and advancement (or maybe both) that left unchecked will undermine the value and defendability of our process as well as the respect that we should display for one another .

In making my merit recommendations I have endeavoured, as ever, to ensure fairness, and the evaluation of teaching and service contributions as well as of research productivity actually attributable as "product" (ie in the case of publications, "in print") to the year under consideration.

By adhering, on a continuing basis, to the strict construction of "publication" that I asked colleagues to utilize this year, I trust that the annual round of performance reviews and merit recommendations will be placed on more secure and equitable foundations than those that I found myself, in some sense, "shoring up" this year.

Might I recommend that we each keep a copy of the reporting template circulated twice by Lorna (and attached herewith, with a couple of small typos fixed and an additional reminder about limiting the report to activities in the review period) as a separate folder on our computers and that we develop the habit of entering "activities" and publications therein as they occur/appear. It should then be a relatively simple matter to clean up the presentation of the material and write a paragraph or so characterizing work undertaken/ in progress in the year of record come March 2008. The following year, this should also be available as an accessible record of what was submitted previously)

With thanks for persisting with this long and somewhat admonitory message.

Graeme

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