

# ALLOCATIONS: AN EDUCATIONAL RESULTS FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT FACULTY

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In colleges and universities where central administration is powerful, allocations of positions to academic departments are frequently made according to bureaucratic or rigid criteria; in other colleges, where faculties or faculty departments are perhaps stronger than administration, allocation decisions may be chaotic, inconsistent, and driven entirely by the political strength of various departments competing for those positions. Neither approach is really advantageous to the institution as a whole or to its students. Here I will suggest a framework for guiding allocation decisions in a consistent, strategically productive direction, for creating the greatest educational result.

## I. THE IMPORTANCE OF ALLOCATIONS

*Every allocation represents a major investment.* A single faculty position at an elite liberal arts college represents probably between \$3-\$6 million in direct costs over the lifetime of the professor to be hired. This doesn't count secretarial costs, supplies, office and heating, and all of the other financial expenditures associated; this is a very expensive decision. In addition, an allocation and subsequent hiring represent the commitment of the life work of a highly trained, deeply committed human being. This person's life is almost literally at stake. Finally, this position has the strong probability of directly affecting thousands, or even tens of thousands, of students coming through one's institution. In this sense – a very real sense – single allocation

decision can have as much educational impact on real students as any particular professor's entire individual career. Faculty sitting on allocations committees should remember that. Apart from the hiring of a tenured, or tenurable, faculty member himself or herself, this may be the single most influential decision a faculty member ever makes.

One nice technique for focusing one's thinking about an allocation decision could be this: if our college can only hire one professor in the next ten years, who would it be? And given what we know, which department should be given that power?

## II. THE GOAL

The goal in making allocation decisions should be **the greatest (reasonably anticipated) additional educational benefit**. A simpler way to put it would be to say that the goal is "the greatest educational benefit". This formulation actually contains more detail than may first appear. It implies, that educational benefit – rather than, say prestige, satisfaction for faculty, opportunistic use of incoming funds, or solving political problems should be secondary, if that. "The greatest" means that a comparison must be made among all of the possibilities, and that priority should go to the largest potential net increase in educational benefit. Therefore, for instance, if some departments have reached a "saturation" point in providing educational benefits, doing all that they can possibly do, the net gain of an additional position may be close to zero. Or – at the other end of the spectrum – some departments have such an atrocious record in hiring good professors that the anticipated educational benefit of yet another one may actually

be less than zero; that is, adding a professor to a department may materially harm the educational program of the college. This is not a hypothetical case, but one that may come up fairly often.

### III. COMMON PITFALLS

A host of factors can distract the Allocations Committee or the Dean from hewing to the above stated goal. These may entail active interference by various departments or others, or a host of arguments which, I would suggest, almost all prove irrelevant to the educational mission of the college. There are at least three major categories of such errors or potholes that occur on the road to educational gain.

#### 1. “Squeaky Wheels” Preferences

- **Departments that apply.** In “calling for proposals for a new position,” we actually invite departments to themselves to make the first selection or cut, and it’s often the biggest. That is, departments that want a position are more likely to get one. Why is that? This approach rewards those who complain or “can’t get by” with what they have, while the good citizens are penalized.
- **Departments that “need” more.** Departments can always argue that they need more; accepting this argument rewards inflexibility and narrows specialization within programs. It has been actively promoted by some disciplinary professional associations, which make out detailed lists of courses departments

“must” offer to be accredited in their association. It’s a marvelous technique for forcing positions from deans, especially those not familiar with the technique or with the particular disciplines. A related canard is that “our pedagogy requires small classes,” raising the question of whether more expensive pedagogies deserve extra support.

- **Departments that will complain or get angry.** Essentially, this criterion devolves from an understandable fear of confrontation or criticism. It benefits noisy departments, and punishes the frugal good citizens. It also disadvantages people who are nice. After a few years of this approach, you may well have an entire faculty of antagonistic people, simply because they’ve been rewarded and even reproduced.

2. “Rewarding the Failures” Preferences

- **Departments rewarded with allocated positions because they aren’t good.** In this case, the fact that a department has been a failure for some years or has been having a lot of “trouble”, is taken as a reason to put more resources into the program.

Apparently the logic is that if you’ve been mistakenly driving west, pushing hard on the accelerator will cause you to head east.

- **A department hasn't received any new positions in a while.** In this case, a kind of “equity” principle is invoked in which all departments are considered “equal” in terms of their contribution and value, and therefore should be given distributed positions in a kind of temporal rotation. For instance: over the past ten years<sup>1</sup>, “most new positions have gone to arts and humanities; therefore, all new positions now will go to the sciences and social sciences.” No consideration is made of *why* positions went to those other fields or to which departments within the divisions allocations were made. The simple fact of not having received allocations becomes a reason, from now on, to allocate.
  - **“One would hope” that students will take courses in this discipline.** Here the argument seems to be the old “if you build it, they will come” from *Field of Dreams*. If students are offered what we believe to be “good” or “important” subjects, they will show up – or at least they should show up, and that’s all that counts. (Whether they do or not, of course, seems to be a different matter.)
3. “It’s Free” Preferences.
- **Foundation grants**, perhaps the first offender. Foundations have recently discovered the strategy of dangling a three or four year grant in front of a college to start a position; the colleges, eager for the short-term benefit and happy for the publicity, quietly overlook that after the first three years, they will be paying for the following 30. The foundation receives a tenfold return on its investment, the

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<sup>1</sup> And why ten?

college sinks money into an otherwise status quo area, and the college finds, after a few of these, that its agenda has been determined by outsiders.

- **Endowed professorships in particular programs or departments.** Yes, positions are fungible, so such an endowment may not actually increase a college's attention to a particular area; but in that case, we're misleading the donors, if not ourselves. But sometimes such a position can lock in a college's commitment to an area, which is almost never truly fully funded – there are benefits, secretaries, office space, supplies, not to mention the psychological impact on departments, faculty morale, students' sense of what's important, and the like position.

No position is free – they're all very expensive in many, many ways. The question is, can we make the results so good that the allocation of a position becomes worth the cost?

#### IV. PROCESS

A closing comment on process of making allocations – don't start from political considerations. Politics will intervene soon enough on its own, without your help at all. Other people are going to make other arguments; departments will yell about what they need, what they must have to do their work, how they "deserve" positions, how they "can't function without this," and so on. Promises will have been made (or claimed), huge bags of money will be

available for specific fields, and there are sure to be department chairs who will make nasty comments if you don't give them what they want. All of this is a given. And they will affect the final outcome, no doubt. But begin – at least begin – with a clear vision of what *should* be done without that, there is no hope of ever doing the right thing. And the right thing is to make allocations with the actual education of real students firmly, and foremost, in mind.