From Rejection to 'Renuwel' to Renewal: Chairperson, Faculty, and the Research Imperative

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ABSTRACT: Faculty renewal can be better understood and implemented when the resonant meanings of the term "renewal" are more fully appreciated. The essay integrates an etymological history of that word with several concrete programs that a Chair and Department can undertake to increase the production of quality faculty research. The shifting and multiple definitions of this term since the time of Chaucer suggest its dynamic, varied applicability today in any practical attempt to increase our colleagues' productivity. The essay also describes four archetypal examples of faculty in need of research renewal, and each example is related to the development of literary history, to various psychologies of success and failure, and to the unusual workings of a research committee.

"Time is lost, which never will renew,
While we too far the pleasing Path Pursue."

John Dryden, 1697.

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The cornerstone of this essay is that faculty renewal can be better understood and implemented when the resonant meanings of the term "renewal" are more fully appreciated. In essence, my approach integrates an etymological history of that word with several concrete programs that a chair and department can undertake to increase the production of high-quality research by colleagues. The shifting and multiple definitions of this richly-textured word since the time of Chaucer suggest its dynamic applicability today in any practical attempt to increase faculty productivity. I shall demonstrate that the phrase's lexiconic history of intriguing sub-meanings and suggestive connotations provides a useful index for notions about renewal that

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have immediate relevance to the research imperative that necessarily exists in the academy. Thus my wedded concerns are both with theoretical underpinnings of the theme of renewal and with substantive strategies that emerge from correlative discussion of faculty responsibility, cultural fashion, and the meaning of language.

My two working assumptions are also integrated in their awareness of theory and practice: one, there is a legitimate professional need for excellent research from all faculty in the university; two, despite the practical incentives usually offered for its achievement, the momentum for solid scholarship occasionally is stifled by such a familiar range of human maladies as ennui, lethargy, cynicism, depression, anxiety, ignorance, and self-doubt. In the spirit of recognizing those uncomfortable psychic realities that may intermittently bedevil the best of us, I shall employ linguistic analysis as well as a case study outline of representative faculty as a convenient way to offer several suggestions for healthy renewal in the area of research.

It is important, however, first to elaborate briefly on the fundamental notions that inform my emphasis in this essay—and in the department I chair—on published research by faculty. Although there are currently well-publicized differences in the academy on what constitutes legitimate areas of research for a given discipline, there thankfully is not much disagreement on what I consider the multiply "confirming" value of publication for those who teach in the university. I stress confirming in a relevant and always conjoined double-sense here: the resultant confirmation is for the individual faculty in terms of the acceptance and visibility of the work, and for his peers and his evaluators, who variously acknowledge its appearance, judge its contribution to the field, and evaluate it for yearly merit reviews. The ideal results of this continuing process of confirmation is that published research has a positive effect on a scholar's teaching outlook, increases the knowledge available in an area of study, and provides a reasonable arena for consideration of the colleague's expertise.

Publication is that privately undertaken and publicly submitted enterprise of an academic that in a major way further legitimizes his right to teach in front of a university classroom for the period of his tenure. By my qualification of "further," of course, I recognize that the most crucial legitimacy for such a position rests on his effectiveness

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1See especially the recent report by Ernest L. Boyer for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching for an outline of the dimensions of controversy and for the revisions of traditional definitions of research that are under consideration.