The Tension between Scholarship and Service

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The annual conferences of the American Academy of Religion, the Catholic Theological Society of America, and other professional guilds constantly remind me that tension exists between scholarship and service. I used to feel like an impostor walking down aisles of book exhibits profoundly contrite for “what I have failed to do.” I do not have a single-authored work to display. Worse still, a few senior colleagues have recited publicly a litany of admonitions berating my lack of accountability to the academic community: “Tito, you have to publish.” “It’s publish or perish.” “We need a Filipino voice, write!” Not even two successive academic dean appointments—at a free-standing seminary and at a university—can exonerate me from the offense of not having authored a book. In fact, some of my critical friends still adamantly oppose my having accepted administrative jobs perceived to be serious deterrents to scholarship. At some point, I might convince myself that whatever I do or whoever I become will not matter much to the academy—not until I commit to research and writing more intentionally.

Over the years, mentors and colleagues have written letters of recommendation endorsing my application for various faculty positions. Consistently, each recommender—intent at convincing a search committee that I was going to publish—underscored my potential as a scholar. Yet, not a single academic emphasized my capacity to serve a hiring institution generously and effectively. Practical theologians tend to be scholar-practitioners with particular sets of skills needed by academic institutions—skills such as organizing programs and people; relating to diverse constituencies; and designing and setting-in-motion strategic planning toward an institution’s educational mission. Clearly, practical theologians are not the only ones in the academy to have such skills. But for many of us, applying our leadership capacities to serve the greater wellbeing of people and institutions constitutes a vital aspect of an academic vocation that rewards practice. At the same time, however, engaging in such service often works against performing other tasks considered definitive of membership in the academy, such as research and publishing. Thus, I examine in this essay the nature of the tension between scholarship and service perceived through the lens of an immigrant reflective practitioner, an empathic knower who performs between and betwixt the standards of scholar-
ship and the norms of service in the academy. I explore alternative approaches of these embodied and performed practices toward the advancement of service within community-engaged scholarship.

**Academic Service Reconsidered**

Academic institutions in the United States traditionally classify expressions of faculty practice based on the tripartite roles of teaching, scholarship, and service. Over the past twenty years, attempts have been made to expand the meaning of scholarship and reform the practice of teaching; however, service remains the most contested and least regarded role.¹

The term *service* has been defined in various vague and imprecise ways, and expectations regarding what it constitutes are loosely articulated in faculty handbooks in modes challenging to assess.² Consequently, the lack of consensus on the meaning of the term, as well as the academy’s proclivity to privilege research and publishing, impel institutions to value scholarship—followed by teaching effectiveness—over service during tenure, promotion, contract renewal, or annual performance reviews.³ This mode of assessment poses a conundrum particularly to academic professionals for whom service is a constitutive element and fundamental expression of our embodied and performed scholarship. For practical theologians, this tension resides between the vocation to practice service and the institutional obligation to publish.

In general, faculty service includes but is not limited to applying one’s leadership potential to serve others, sharing knowledge, using professional expertise beyond the classroom for reasons other than investigative research, and performing acts that are not specified in a faculty job-description. Involvement with accreditation commissions, regulatory boards, religious congregations, and professional guilds, as well as commitments to community organizing and advocacy are some of the most common examples of service beyond one’s home institution. The term *service* is also widely used to refer to anything faculty offers gratis. Yet, for whom and for what is service?

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¹ Thomas Schnaubelt and Anne Statham, “Faculty Perceptions of Service as a Mode of Scholarship,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (Fall 2007): 29.
² Schnaubelt and Statham, “Faculty Perceptions,” 24.