

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Agile Faculty: Practical Strategies for Managing Research, Service, and Teaching

by Rebecca Pope-Ruark

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The work of faculty members in higher education can vary considerably depending on the institution and type of appointment. Typically, professors are responsible for some combination of research, service, and teaching. These components of academic life have long been considered the “three pillars” of a professor’s workload. Effectively balancing these responsibilities can be a challenging juggling act, even for the most conscientious of academic scholars.

In her book, *Agile Faculty: Practical Strategies for Managing Research, Service, and Teaching*, Rebecca Pope-Ruark (2017) suggests that faculty take an “Agile” approach to their work. She explains that the Agile framework is a [computer science] model for productivity that values diverse teams, goal setting, and collaborative accountability measures. Pope-Ruark asserts that adopting this mentality is an efficient way of approaching the complexities of academic work. Specifically, she examines the applicability of Scrum,

an Agile process that has been effective in software development. Scrum is a specific Agile method that Pope-Ruark brilliantly repurposes for faculty work in higher education. She provides several personal examples of how she has utilized Scrum in her work as a professor, and how she has constructed new applications for faculty with hypothetical examples.

Agile Faculty offers advice to professors at all stages in their careers regarding how Agile strategies could be applied to academia. To begin, Pope-Ruark introduces the reader to the Agile ideology and Scrum in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively. These introductory chapters provide the reader with key terminology and visual representations of the Scrum process and Scrum boards, for instance. Once this foundational knowledge is provided, Pope-Ruark suggests that the book be read in an Agile fashion rather than linearly. In the spirit of this suggestion, I will discuss the remaining chapters in the order in which I decided to read them rather than the order in which they appear in the text.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to committee work, an important feature of service. In this chapter, Pope-Ruark provides several practical and Agile strategies for leading committees. She discusses effective ways of formulating committees, bringing members together, and working efficiently toward goals.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Pope-Ruark showcases how the Scrum process can be used to organize a research agenda and enhance research collaborations. In these chapters, she further clarifies how the terminology presented in Chapters 1 and 2 can be applied to research initiatives. For example, she discusses the importance of using a backlog rather than a traditional to-do list, as the former can provide psychological benefits in terms of motivation and creativity. In Chapters 7 and 8, Pope-Ruark focuses on teaching. In doing so, she provides a first-hand account of how she has designed courses and facilitated students' group projects using the Agile framework. Finally, in Chapter 6, Pope-Ruark describes how faculty can mentor students and colleagues using an Agile mindset. This chapter, like Chapter 5, presents a completely new area of faculty work where Agile thinking and the Scrum method could be applied.

Agile Faculty is a book that has a broad applicability, ranging from graduate students considering a life in academia to late-career professors considering the future of their department. This book is an enjoyable read and can easily fit into a professor's busy schedule, whether s/he is a lead researcher at a research-intensive university or a lecturer

at community college. Each chapter provides the reader with practical strategies that faculty can start using right away with a limited learning curve and the potential for a great pay off in efficiency.

In this book, Pope-Ruark suggests a paradigm shift in terms of how faculty view and approach their work. Advocating for an Agile workplace, she discusses the psychological significance of the Scrum method and makes important connections to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Pope-Ruark does not just tell the reader about Agile approaches, she shows them too. For instance, each chapter begins with learning outcomes, further showcasing the importance of goal setting. As discussed above, she encourages professors to be agile in the way in which the book is read, creating an immersive experience for the reader.

The Agile strategies suggested throughout the book are well intended and seem useful at face value. The application of an Agile philosophy to faculty life, however, is an original idea that has not been fully fleshed out in the literature. This limitation is one that Pope-Ruark readily acknowledges, but nevertheless it is essential to note here as well. The empirical evidence is not strong enough yet to conclude that the strategies presented in this book will be better than traditional approaches used in academia. Pope-Ruark relies heavily on her personal experiences and her own writings about Agile approaches to faculty work due to the novelty of the topic. Perhaps this book will entice others to investigate Agile frameworks as applied to faculty in higher education. More research on the topic may result in some of the ideas from this book being tested within rigorous research designs. Professors should carefully monitor the effects of strategies they choose to adopt.

Pope-Ruark discusses different faculty responsibilities separately in each chapter. In reality, however, professors often must balance their research agenda, teaching responsibilities, and service commitments all at the same time. Applying the Scrum process to one area would require considering the backlog and sprints of another. Additionally, it would be interesting to consider how faculty members could apply Agile strategies to their home life to protect against burnout and work-life imbalance.

Overall, *Agile Faculty: Practical Strategies for Managing Research, Service, and Teaching* presents a promising new approach to faculty work. Pope-Ruark's practical strategies break ground of a very old foundation. As she points out in the afterword, it is interesting to consider how higher education institutions could be shaped if

an Agile philosophy were to be adopted on a grander stage (e.g., department-, faculty-, or even institution-wide). In an era of “publish or perish” and concerns about work-life balance, adopting an Agile philosophy for approaching faculty work is certainly worth considering.