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UNDERSTANDING FACULTY ADVANCEMENT :

AN ACADEMIC ACCOMPLISHMENT INDEX

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Abstract

This paper outlines a quantitative procedure developed for assessing the scholarly, teaching and service accomplishments of faculty members being reviewed for promotion and tenure. This Academic Assessment Index (AAI) is based on the responses of 109 university and college administrators (chairpersons, department heads and deans) in a national survey. Based on the Law of Comparative Judgment, the AAI was developed from a statistical analysis of these responses. The results may provide an important perspective on the difficult issue of how faculty career advancement portfolios including teaching, scholarly works and service activities are judged by senior colleagues and administrators.

Background

There is perhaps no task more difficult, or likely to produce controversy, than that of assessing the performance and accomplishments of members of a faculty. A need for such assessment is clear due to the amount of effort and the seriousness of decisions in the recruitment of new faculty, in annual reviews of performance for salary increases, in judging merits for promotion and in making decisions concerning tenure. If things go wrong in these procedures then hopes can be frustrated, the wrong people can be hired, fired, promoted or given tenure. In some cases, lawsuits result.

Most institutions make an effort to clarify the basis on which performance will be judged. Typically, these are set forth in a "Faculty Handbook." Passages in such publications usually try to explain the criteria on which a member of the faculty will be judged for academic rewards. Some may refer to definitions of "merit," which is used in many institutions for adjustments in salary. Most contain general explanations of relevant criteria to be used for making decisions when the person becomes a candidate for promotion and for deciding on the award of tenure.

Historically, then, faculty evaluation traditionally relies on assessing three areas that represent professional achievement---quality of *teaching*, the quantity and quality of *research* (or other scholarly products), and the nature and significance of *service*. Although these three areas are generally used to create an overall assessment of faculty performance, academic institutions may value these three areas differently. Although the various expected activities within each of these three areas are fairly universal, the degree to which certain aspects of professional and academic activity are recognized in the promotion and tenure process are less clear. That is, some institutions may view a successful teaching record as the most important consideration in promotion and tenure decisions. Here, student evaluations, syllabi or other evidence of student assessment [1, 2] are recognized according to some sort of continuum or hierarchy of performance. In other cases, publications that might indicate research or scholarly productivity may be the

most important determinate of whether a professor's career advances [3]. Interestingly, faculty members tend to perceive their own productivity in terms of scholarly research and grants and place less importance on other factors [4].

Such variations in which of these areas are regarded as more important are generally related to how a particular college or university is classified. For example, in "research 1" institutions, the expectation may be skewed more heavily towards a distinguished publishing record. In such cases, an outstanding evaluation may result even though minimally acceptable teaching evaluations and service may be indicated in an evaluation. In some four-year colleges research may not be viewed as all that important. Exceptional teaching and service might be of greater importance as criteria for a promotion and tenure review [5]. Thus, differences are to be expected between categories of institutions, while a variety of evaluation methods and weights are used to assess various aspects of professional activities even within homogeneous categories of universities [6].

In most large institutional organizations, evaluation policies take two forms; *espoused rules* in the form of written guidelines, and *expectations.* Explicit, written rules vary greatly in procedure, criteria and standards. However, of greater importance to junior faculty is the history of how tenure and promotion decisions are made [7]. In several books published to help guide junior faculty through the evaluation process, readers are advised not only to read tenure guidelines but also to review carefully a successful portfolio and ask senior faculty to relate variations in the written guidelines [8].

In recent years, determining how to evaluate the use of technology in teaching and in publication has become an important topic of discussion in many universities. According to a survey conducted in 2001 by the Campus Computing Project, 84% of public and 54% of private universities have some form of online courses [9]. In an earlier study conducted by the Campus Computing Project, information technology development programs exist in 74% of universities

and 66% have campus support centers while only 13% have a formal institutional program to recognize and reward the use of information technology as part of the faculty review process [10].

In the past several years, the number of online journals appears to be growing, perhaps to more efficiently process the growing number of conference and journal submissions. In spite of the acceptance of these technologies as teaching and research tools, it has been noted that review committees may not take this work seriously [11, 12]. Given the increasing role technology plays in both teaching courses and publishing research a baseline of how these technologies are viewed has become increasingly important to our understanding of their importance in faculty evaluation.

Objectives

The general objective of this study was to determine if there is a level of standardization or uniformity in the ways in which administrators tend to regard various criteria of accomplishment in their assessments of faculty for academic rewards. Posing the issue in a different way, a major objective was to try and identify "what counts"---the features of the academic culture that constitute the *norms of advancement*. What is it that a faculty member must do in order to be judged worthy of such rewards as salary increases, promotion in rank or gaining tenure? There are, of course other types of rewards that are familiar to academics — teaching what one prefers, reductions in the number of hours taught, scheduling of classes on preferred days and hours and so on. A decision was made not to explore the ways in which these features of the work environment are allocated. Thus, the focus is on the more formal question as to what constitutes meritorious performance within the three general areas of teaching, research and service.

In attempting to find answers to this question, three issues appear to be important: First, what are the major and specific forms of accomplishment within those broad categories that are

widely considered as evidence of a faculty member's high or low level of performance. Second, within that list is there some hierarchy among the criteria indicating that some of those categories of performance are more important than others? And third, if such a hierarchy is commonly used, what differential degree of weight, merit or value do administrators attach to each?

Method

The first task, then, was to identify "what counts." That is, in assessing teaching, research or scholarly activity or service, what specific indicators of performance are commonly reviewed by an administrator making judgments when examining a portfolio submitted by a candidate for reward? A review of the literature suggested that there were a number of commonly used criteria that are considered in making such performance assessments [13, 14, 15]. Of those that were identified from these sources, a list was prepared of the nine criteria that seemed to be most common across institutions. These are listed in Table 1:

[Table 1 about here]

That list of nine criteria was then circulated to six deans and chairpersons who offered to assist in designing the project. As it turned out, these judges suggested adding two additional criteria. The reason was that the use of *technology* has assumed greater importance in higher education over the last few years. The two activities added, then, were "developing and managing an online course in his or her discipline," and "has a refereed article in online media." The six judges were unsure of how these two activities were being, or should be, evaluated compared to the more traditional accomplishments as listed in Table 1. One of the additional objectives of this research, therefore, was to determine where these technological activities fit into the hierarchy of criteria that administrators are using in evaluating faculty performance.

The resulting 11 criteria of performance were then arranged in a questionnaire to be sent to administrators in research, doctoral and comprehensive universities. A total of 148 such institutions were cataloged and in each case, the name of the dean, director or chairperson was identified. It may be noted that getting these questionnaires completed and returned was a difficult task. The questionnaire was complex and time-consuming. Such administrators are busy people, and in many cases follow-up requests had to be made to motivate compliance. In the end, however, from these 148 institutions, a total of 109 completed questionnaires were received [16].

The questionnaire was designed using Thurstone paired-comparison procedure, a questionnaire method that requires the person responding to the questionnaire consider every possible pair (whatever is being examined), one-by-one and make a "comparative judgment." The result of this technique shows which of the two in the pair is *greater* regarding some aspect or feature under consideration [17.] In the present case, each administrator responding to the questionnaire was asked to select which statement in each possible pair of performance criteria was likely to be seen as most meritorious for awarding an academic reward. An example was the following:

☐ *Publishing a refereed article in print media* ☐ *Publishing a refereed article in online media*.

In this particular case, almost all respondents indicated that the refereed article in print media was a more significant accomplishment than publishing a refereed article online.

The complexity and length of the questionnaire is due to the necessity for respondents to make a comparative judgment against each of the other nine shown in Table 1 (and the two additional technology-related criteria). By using this list of eleven statements, a total of 55 judgment pairs were presented to respondents (n * n –1 / 2). The resulting judgments were parsed into a matrix listing the proportion of times that each criterion was judged to have greater weight than the one with which it was compared.

The underlying statistical model is that *if only chance provided the basis of the outcome of these judgments, then a random (normal) distribution would prevail among them.* Obviously, however, chance was not at work here. The judgments made by the administrators caused some of the criteria in the pairs to be very frequently viewed as of high value, and some as low, with others arrayed in between. The resulting matrix columns can then be rearranged to show a scale of greater importance ranging from large proportions and those of smaller of lesser significance.

From the matrix of proportions, a second matrix may be obtained by looking up the *z-scores* associated with each proportion. Those with very or very low proportions will be at the extremes of the normal distribution, indicating high or low importance or weight in terms of the judgments of the administrators. Those *z-scores* were averaged for each of the 11 criteria. Those averages were used to obtain a weight for each. These weights, then, indicate the relative position of those criteria on a continuum of high to low importance (as a measure of faculty performance). Thus, this standard psychometric procedure was used to develop a quantitative continuum along which the eleven criteria of academic performance could be arranged.

Results

Given the quantitative information derived from the paired comparisons judgments, the 11 criteria could be *ranked.* This yielded an ordinal scale of what administrators seemed to feel as the most important indicator of faculty performance, next most importance and so on. These rankings are shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

While such rankings are useful and they show a hierarchy of importance among the various performance criteria. However, rank-order scaling provides only *relative* positions. A

limitation here is that a particular criterion may, in the minds of administrators, have much greater merit that its' nearest neighbor below in the list. And, that one may actually be viewed subjectively as having only a very small degree of importance compared to its next neighbor down. Thus, the intervals between criteria are not quantified and cannot be determined in a ranking array.

To gain a more precise determination of quantitative intervals between the criteria, another step can be taken. Going back to the average *z-score* for each criterion, using a simple transformation (that does not change their relative positions on the continuum) the lowest in the array can be assigned a zero and the highest a score of 100. The result is a set of *weights* that correspond to each of the criteria in the array. The weights obtained in this manner for the 11 criteria judged by the 109 administrators are shown in Table 3:

[Table 3 about here]

Using this *interval* continuum vs. the *ordinal* one shown in Table 2 shows that there are major differences between the weights attributed by the administrators to some of the criteria. For example, while in their judgment there was a difference of only 1 point in performance value between presenting a paper at a convention and publishing it online, there were 16 points to be gained by getting favorable teaching evaluations compared to a convention paper.

Overall, then, the paired comparisons procedure, used with the transformation from an ordinal to an interval continuum, provides a numerical continuum along which the common criteria for assessing the academic performance of faculty can be assessed. Table 3 shows the relative weights that 109 administrators assigned to each of the eleven items that they considered.

In many ways, there were no surprises here. Experienced administrators who reviewed what was found by the procedure used have indicated that they were basically in agreement with the ranking shown in Table 2. Some were not as sure concerning the weights of relative importance of the eleven criteria as indicated in Table 3. Nevertheless, the overall results suggest that there is a set of common norms in the academic culture as to "what counts." While there be less agreement as to "how much" each type of performance counts, the 109 administrators who assisted with the project provided indicated by their judgments that there were some of the criteria that definitely were much more important than others.

Discussion

While rank ordering promotion criteria is not a new approach to understanding what counts, and the ordinal results from this study (Table 3.) may not represent any great surprises, however the weighted scale offers greater interest. What was not expected was the relatively low level of developing and offering a course online. Its value was roughly in the range of serving on committees, or giving a speech to the local Rotary Club (as service).

Indeed, this finding seems to support recent research that tells us managing an online course is an expensive and time-intensive proposition [18] and yet it does was not viewed as an important aspect of job performance when being reviewed for tenure and promotion [19]. This finding may show continuing support for the notion that teaching an online course may be viewed, as Guernsey [20] suggests, as posing a "serious risk" to the advancement of faculty careers.

These findings seem to suggest that junior faculty carefully consider investing time in the development of online courses, rather than engaging in traditional research. In universities where junior faculty are required to manage and teach an online course, their time may be better spent pursuing publications, grants and superior teaching evaluations. Additionally, where online teaching is an option, junior faculty may not wish to be swayed by the appeal of new technology.

Doing so may present particularly difficult situations where teaching evaluations from online instruction are not included as part of overall teaching evaluations [21]. When all of this information is taken in consideration of the costs of developing, maintaining and teaching these courses, one has to question whether favorable teaching evaluations from online courses should be viewed differently than traditional course evaluations. Because there has been some report of these activities being discounted or ignored in evaluation summaries [22], the results of this study might suggest that institutions more carefully review procedures for accepting such student evaluations.

Somewhat the same comment can be made about publishing one's work in online media. Apparently, it has the about same level of importance as giving a paper at a convention. When compared directly to traditional print media publications, the administrators chose refereed articles in print nine times out of ten as being more meritorious than online publications and their scale value was more than twice that of their print counterpart. This seems to support the notion that the review standards may be perceived to be less rigorous, or perhaps that online publications allow junior faculty to boost the quantity of publications in favor of quality of the work (and the difficulty of the topic being investigated). In spite of this finding, online publications are a new venue and so it may be too early to dismiss them altogether.

Clearly, a challenge still exists in the academy when it comes to defining the criteria and the standards used to measure teaching with technology or using new media as a vehicle for publishing. At the same time, it is unlikely that the development of the Academic Accomplishment Index will transform the process by which academic administrators make judgments about their colleagues' work and contributions. It is probably unrealistic to assume that the evaluation process can be reduced to a set of numbers, whatever their source. What may be important here, however, is that these results send a signal to members of faculties where the

criteria that were included in the Thurstone procedure in this project are used as a basis for academic rewards in one way or another.

One important consideration when viewing the Academic Accomplishment Index is that of quantity and quality. Even though publishing in print media earned a higher score in the Academic Accomplishment Index, not all refereed journals are regarded as equal. More widely read journals are generally considered more prestigious than regional publications, and some are much more challenging to pass a given journal's standards for publication.

The same issues are true when considering books as evidence of scholarly work. A single authored book that offers significant advancement in a particular field is generally regarded as a greater achievement than being cited as the editor of anthologies. Again, subjective judgments must be made concerning not only "what counts" but also "how much."

Thus, the Academic Accomplishment Index is by no means a definitive guide to performance evaluation, and offers no solution on how to assess the quality of scholarly work within a given category of performance, such as refereed articles in print media. It can serve, however, as a broad map of what performance criteria are taken seriously and which are less likely to impress promotion and tenure committees. As a broad map, the Academic Accomplishment Index might best be viewed as providing guidance on where junior faculty may best invest their time in the pursuit of meritorious awards and advancement

Overall, it can be suggested that a person now beginning a teaching career in an institution of the type from which these data were gathered would be well advised to understand the implications of the Academic Accomplishment Index. Doctoral students in an advanced degree program preparing for a teaching position in a research 1 institution need to understand how the evaluation process works in order to prepare for a successful career path. Additionally, this research appears to support the notion that when working with technology, junior faculty should take care to document those activities [23] for tenure and promotion reviews.

Moreover, it would seem advantageous to learn how to do the type of research and scholarly work that will count in the field one plans to enter. Close attention would also be advantageous to understanding how one gets that work published (in print, rather than online). The procedures and merits of obtaining extramural grants and contracts should also be understood. Teaching is still important and cannot be overlooked. However, trying to get ahead by providing time-consuming services to the community, to developing and managing an online course or serving on a large number of committees does not seem likely to be a good choice that will lead directly to a higher salary, a promotion to the next rank, or earning tenure.

TABLES

Table 1.
Nine statements representing achievement or evidence of faculty performance.

Category	Evidence for advancement
Research	- book that advances knowledge in candidate's field
	- refereed articles or reports in print media
	- extramural grants or contracts
	- presented papers at conventions
Teaching	- teaching awards or nominations
	- favorable written student teaching evaluations
	- favorable evaluations of student advising
Service	- recognition for significant service to community
	- member or has participated in major committees

Table 2.
Rank-order of faculty performance from most favorable to least favorable.

Rank	Evidence for advancement
1	Book that advances knowledge in candidate's field
2	Refereed articles or reports in print media
3	Extramural grants or contracts
4	Teaching awards or nominations
5	Favorable written student teaching evaluations
6	Presented papers at conventions
7	Refereed articles or reports in online media
8	Favorable evaluations of student advising
9	Developed and managed an online course in his or her discipline
10	Member or has participated in major committees
11	Recognition for significant service to community

Table 3.
Academic Accomplishment Index.

Index	Evidence for advancement
100	Book that advances knowledge in candidate's field
97	Published a refereed articles or reports in print media
83	Extramural grants or contracts
76	Teaching awards or nominations
63	Favorable written student teaching evaluations
47	Presented papers at conventions
46	Published a refereed articles or reports in online media
21	Favorable evaluations of student advising
14	Developed and managed an online course in his or her discipline
10	Member or has participated in major committees
0	Recognition for significant service to community

Endnote

1. Meyer, Katrina. "Faculty workload studies: perspectives, needs, and future directions." *Higher Education Reports* v. 26 no. 1 1998, 1-101.

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14, Fairweather, James S. "The mythologies of faculty productivity: Implication for institutional policy and decision making." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Vol. 73 No 1. (January/ February 2002) 15 – 28.

15 Leslie, David W. "Resolving the dispute: Teaching is Academe's core value." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Vol. 73 No. 1. (January/ February 2002) 28 – 44.

16. This number of returns may seem to represent a very high rate. That is not actually realistic. To each of the 148 institutions, a questionnaire was sent to more than one administrator who could be identified from the institution's web site. A total of 364 possible contact names were assembled in this manner, and a questionnaire was sent to each. In some cases, a decision appears to have been made by those in some of these institutions to return only a single questionnaire, rather than one from each person contacted. It is difficult, then, to calculate a simple rate of return. The best assessment of this sample, in the judgment of the investigator, is that the questionnaires that were completed and

returned represent the voices of 109 administrators in universities across the country who are actively engaged in the type of faculty assessment activities under study.

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