

EDITORIAL

Researchers and Productivity Metrics: The Tail That Wags the Dog?

For many of us who work in higher education in nursing, every few years a new list of some kind ranks us, or our department, or our university. And every time there are those who confidently chuckle that the list or ranking merely confirms what everybody already knew and some happy souls who thrill about their change in fortune. Then there are those who fall below some “line” within the ranking and either accept the poor designation or are saddened, believing that the metrics fail to capture the excellence that embodies their program or institution.

The rankings of universities and programs published by news magazines around the world can be critiqued as hopelessly subjective. Ratings with a narrower scope, such as citation indices for articles published by a scholar or group of scholars or counts of funding dollars, can be argued to be grossly oversimplified snapshots of scholarly output. Nonetheless, it is difficult to hold to the idea that these ratings have no real impact on the lives of those who work in and manage academic institutions, not to mention the lives of our students. Furthermore, one cannot discount the very real role of these ratings (and their critics) in discussions about the future of higher education. Metrics, for those of us who live in the real world of accountability to stakeholders — including taxpayers and tuition-paying students — are a fact of life. In nursing, for example, in mere decades we have moved from a handful of people holding graduate degrees and participating in scholarly forums to a branch of academia with impressive programs of research. Nonetheless, because we still struggle to find our place among the disciplines in universities and other institutions, measuring outputs — including those that place some or all of us in a favourable or unfavourable light — has become an inescapable part of the professional landscape in academic nursing.

What is the ideal balance between free-flowing passion for the pursuit of knowledge and the management of researchers based on metrics alone? The favouring of scholarship to the exclusion of any imperative to produce evidence of impacts or potential impacts on other researchers, patients, quality of care, or policy may be appealing at first blush, but it is in fact unworkable, especially in an applied discipline like nursing. While many of us are intrinsically motivated, achieving our best as individuals

and as a collective probably requires some degree of reliance on countable outputs or “indicators.”

However, an exclusive reliance on metrics, particularly on impossibly high standards, without clear pathways, suitable resources, and environments for attaining them, can be equally disastrous. It can produce a winner-takes-all attitude that splits departments into haves and have-nots. It can render life needlessly miserable for the losers (whatever criteria are used to define them). It can even discourage individuals with much to offer the world of scholarship from considering an academic career. At worst, it can encourage research fraud.

I would argue that we are not spending enough time, in nursing and in many other fields, on fostering scholarly craft and passion. Striking the right balance between making short-term gains and aiming for enduring impact in one’s field can be extremely challenging. It requires skills that take years to develop, not to mention dedicated mentoring. It also requires a love for the larger questions and traditions in one’s discipline and a commitment to the profession’s social mission as well as its scholarship. Brave individuals exploring basic questions in new ways are essential to the advancement of any research field.

However, many would argue that high-minded ideas and the desire to make a lasting impact should be the furthest thing from the mind of a novice scholar, that safe bets and careful calculation of the shortest distance to a quick win should predominate, especially in the early years of a research career.

I would never discourage a budding scientist from learning about the business side of research, and learning it well. Nevertheless, emphasizing metrics with no more than a nod to the importance of pursuing well-crafted ideas with integrity will lead, at best, to fleeting success. One can angle for funding and publication by endlessly strategizing and using selective reporting and buzzwords to bulletproof one’s work against criticism. But this approach tends to yield bland, repetitive work rather than solid contributions to the body of knowledge in a particular field. Furthermore, an obsession with metrics can suck researchers into a mindset where competition for time to plan and conduct research, funds to conduct the research, and opportunities to present in high-profile publications overshadows all else.

In mentoring and evaluating researchers, we need to be informed by a range of objective benchmarks of scholarly productivity. This means accepting that not all work will be heavily funded, extensively cited, or covered in the mass media. All scholarship, however, should represent an honest effort to extend dialogue in the field or to build skills and credibility in a given area. And all nursing scholarship should ultimately be aimed at enhancing the lives of patients, families, and communities.

Passion for nursing scholarship and its social mission helps researchers to solve problems creatively, including juggling time and resources to achieve their goals. It helps them develop patience for the slow and steady, often unpredictable, path that research careers tend to take, promotes excitement rather than dread when they learn about the work of others, and leads them to show kindness and generosity towards colleagues and trainees carving out their own career paths.

There is no magic way to evaluate a scholar or a department. Excellence is manifested in a constellation of activities and outputs that feel “right” in relation to the resources allocated to a researcher or department and the missions of their institution and the nursing profession. Researchers, and institutions, at the top of their game do not depend on benchmarks alone, nor do they attempt to engineer passion. The departments, schools, and faculties that are home to productive researchers select and nurture individuals with potential and give them a supportive environment and time to develop.

Reputation, whether or not confirmed in surveys, may rest on where a department’s researchers once stood rather than where its researchers stand today. Citation indices may reflect career longevity (time elapsed since publication of a research article can increase its likelihood of garnering a large number of citations) or may reflect the pursuit of popular research topics that have little long-term impact. At their core, however, these and other types of indices likely represent careful, long-term investment in clear goals, not an attempt to engineer scores on ranking systems — despite what individual researchers and administrators chasing benchmarks might imagine. So, in the end, what we probably should fear more than the rankings themselves is the risk of losing our ability to identify the unique strengths, talents, and contributions of each member of our discipline and its schools and facilities, as well as the risk of promoting conduct that undermines the norms of academia and scholarship.

Regardless of where we fall in a ranking, the best course of action is critical reflection on the true meaning of the metric in question, followed by discussions with colleagues, especially trainees and junior colleagues, about the implications of that metric (and its pursuit) for our own scholarship and that of our discipline, as well as for our students and the public. The moral of my favourite Aesop’s fable (*The Dog and Its Shadow*) is “Beware that you do not lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.” While we cannot avoid turning to measurable outcomes in steering the course of scholarly careers, we must, to paraphrase Aesop, beware of losing deep scholarly inquiry that improves nursing care, and health, by grasping for narrow measures of achievement and impact. To preserve our sanity, as well as our contributions to society as scholars, we must ensure that everyone in the field understands that the single-

Editorial

minded pursuit of metrics or indicators, and the interpretation of such metrics out of context, must never be allowed to overtake the commitment to advancing knowledge as the drivers of nursing scholarship.

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