

On Evaluating Academic Scholarship
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

There is movement afoot to assess the worth of scholarship in higher education by objective, quantitative methods--citation count in publications, Internet traffic, where something was published, that sort of thing--and thus take human judgment out of the equation. This is a position statement on this approach I shared with the faculty at the university where I teach.

Any measurement is only as good as it tells about what we really care about. That is to say, it needs to be valid.

What is it that we care about? What is the measure of scholarship? Is it impact? Popularity? Usage? Traffic? Citation count?

Or is it quality? By quality, I mean, simply, it is really good: informed, wise, true, just, fresh, thought-provoking, heuristic, effective when implemented, pushes out the current limits of understanding, broadens our outlook, enriches it.

I'm on the side of quality, and would argue that acceptance, centrality or frequency in the walk and talk, the dissemination vehicle it appeared in, and impact are not necessarily measures of quality in any human endeavor. None of those things get at the nature, the reality, the essence, of something, and that is what we should be assessing. Too often, they are indicators that whatever it is feels good to people and is more of the same with an appealing twist.

You can't get a bigger impact than the movie "Waiting for Superman." So if impact is your standard, that's a great movie. But if saying something true and right about schooling is your criterion, it's not so certain that film is great.

You can't get more popular than John Grisham. But Nobel Prizes go to other people. National Book Awards often go to authors with few readers.

There is the tendency in our time to try to objectify, quantify, take human judgment out of, matters that, messy as it can be

at times, require people, fallible human beings, making a decision about the quality of something, scholarship in this case. Good scholarship can't be, shouldn't be, equated with Internet traffic, citations, and networks. Scholarship can be meritorious but just not play well at a particular time. It may be out of sync with the current conventional wisdom; outside the current boxes people think and operate within, academic disciplines and fields, organizations, journals; contradict the predominant philosophical or ideological orthodoxies; rub those in power the wrong way; or simply be before its time, and only later will its worth be recognized--Van Gogh sold one painting, to his brother.

Evaluating scholarship is more complicated than adding up numbers or fitting things into typologies; and than placing faith in peer review--peers can be biased, shortsighted, even petty and vindictive. If a committee of his fellow painters back in Van Gogh's day had voted thumbs down on him, which is not beyond the realm of possibility, that didn't make them right. High quality is a Platonic ideal of sorts, something that exists independent of the limited visions of individuals living at any point in history. Indeed, judging the worth of scholarship is a complex concern, at least if the goal is to invite and reward real, not nominal, excellence in scholarship, and true innovation and progress. We need to make calls about the merits of scholarship formally in RTP [Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure] and performance reviews, and we'll do it informally as a matter of course, but we should do it from an expanded perspective and with humility.

I think we have to come back to the fundamental question of what we mean, really, by worthwhile research and scholarship. Part of that will be getting clear on whether in fact we all agree on that, or should all agree on that--in most cases, whatever the concern, reasonable people differ, because everybody doesn't see the world in the same way, doesn't operate out of the same assumptions and values. We work that question through the best we can, and then figure out how we can discern whether something, indeed, is that; which may well have to take into account that there isn't just one acceptable standard but rather multiple standards, or criteria, depending on people's differing outlooks and hopes, including and especially those of the scholar him- or herself.

All to say, just because we are good at getting numbers on something--No Child Left Behind data [NCLB is the federal law that requires schools to provide their students' scores on basic reading and math tests], whatever it is--doesn't mean those numbers tell us what we really want to know, or really ought to know. We shouldn't let technicians and number crunchers become our bosses. They work for us.