Authentic Improvement: A Case for Flexible Faculty Evaluation Policies

Alexander M. Sidorkin

Dean of Graduate School of Education,
National Research University
Higher School of Economics,
Russian Federation
asidorkin@hse.ru

For those who belong to the exclusive club of world-class universities, the need to publish is a non-issue. It is something you either do — or perish, as the catchphrase goes. However, for universities with strong teaching traditions, both liberal arts colleges and regional universities, the rationale is not always obvious. "We are not going to become the next Harvard anyway. And there are too many pointless publications already in the world. Why should I take time away from my students?" This is how the questioning usually goes. The short answer is that without an active scholarship agenda, one can only be successful as an undergraduate instructor, and only in foundational survey courses. Anything above that requires a clearly established scholarly agenda and a reputation. I am sure there is a negative correlation between one's publication record and the mean age of required readings in one's syllabi. To be able to read new research, one has to do one's own new research. As graduate education continues to expand, it behooves universities to strengthen their scholarship output.

It is easy to make the case why we all need scholarship but much more difficult to explain how it could be done. The barriers are many. In many teaching-oriented schools, it is actually very difficult for faculty to produce good quality scholarship, and this is only partially due to high teaching loads. In social sciences, research is impossible without access to data or an opportunity to obtain one's own qualitative or quantitative data. Both need time and money. The lack of high quality publications makes faculty less competitive in grant seeking. They just don't have the right pedigree to be competitive, which creates a vicious cycle: lack of funds to do good research leads to no research record to get funding.

For many universities with aspirations to enter the world-class club issues are very similar. Sometimes in some countries, a windfall from government-funded excellence initiatives may temporarily relieve the pressure of funding. In addition, those in non-English speaking countries experience language barriers that perhaps only Nordic and Dutch universities have been able to penetrate. Yet, the rest of the mix is the same for English and non-English worlds: lack of skills, connections, access to data and equipment, large teaching loads. Russian higher education represents an interesting case of distorted labor practices. As instructors are paid mostly for face-to-face encounters, faculty are very reluctant to redistribute hours within academic plans in favor of more independent work. Who is going to grade all those assignments for free? On the other hand, university leadership is often suspicious that more independent work for students will just tempt professors to work less and seek additional part-time work in other universities. The confluence of such interests produces inefficient lecture-centered teaching practices, with poorly paid and overworked faculty, who have no time for real research. Despite all the peculiarities, I think that first-rate universities in emerging economies have a lot in common with second- and third-tier state schools in the developed world. Both want to move up the ratings, and both have barriers to overcome in engaging in quality research.

In this context, I would like to invite us to think about exceptions — about faculty who seem to be able to break through the institutional and cultural barriers and establish themselves as leading scholars in their respective fields while working at a second-tier university. Perhaps by understanding how they do it university leaders will better understand what kinds of institutional reforms are needed to move their entire institutions on to the next level.

The characters below are entirely fictional… And if you recognize yourself, just saying hi, and thanks. All the cases originate from colleges of education because that is what I know best.

Susan is a super-engaged early childhood educator: with her professional community, with her many students, friends, family, her own biological and adopted children, their schools and friends, books, the news, and about anyone she meets for the first time. That incredible inflow of encounters and relations gives her a kind of dense phenomenological data that make her an engaging author. One of the leading publishers recognized her talent, and over the years she has built a relationship with an editor that trusts her instincts and lets her work on anything she likes. The editor knows well that her books will be engaging regardless of the topic and that people will buy them. But the books are not just popular; they have a serious scholarship dimension and have gained recognition in the scholarly community as well. Susan does not care much about grants, nor does she demand release time; she has just learned to get by without those.

Michael's strategy is somewhat similar. He writes books on literacy and has built a strong relation with another leading publishing house. But his emphasis is on graduate students, who are his research laboratory. He spends an enormous amount of time coaching, teaching, observing. That gives him enough materials for drawing generalizations about what works in literacy instruction and what does not. The publishing connection also gives him access to book tours and an opportunity to engage with hundreds of teachers across the country, to hear their stories, and receive their feedback. I don't believe he collects much data from them formally but for the kind of practice-oriented research it is not necessary. And of course, Michael probably has the highest Hirsh index on campus.

Tony's success is connected to an opportunity his predecessor saw and snatched. Back in the 1960s, the US Federal Government sought to establish centers on Excellence in Developmental Disabilities in every state. The Feds supported them with small grants and intentionally tried to place them not in flagship or Ivy League schools but those second-tier teaching universities. Tony was able to use the really small advantage by positioning his group as the center of expertise within the entire state and gain national recognition. Success breeds success, and later he was able to bring in very significant, highly competitive federal grants, as well as state training grants. One of the secret of his success is that his unit is somewhat independent of the university's bureaucracies, and thus can behave as a true entrepreneurial organization, with its own small staff, its own budget, and schedule. Yet he is also very helpful to colleagues within the university's Special Education department, and involves them in grant-writing and projects.

What's the moral of these stories?

1. It is highly unlikely that faculty will all have the same strategies in building their scholarly identities. So, be prepared for a variety of scholarly engagements, and keep tweaking your faculty evaluation and promotion policies until they are flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of academic careers. Those systems can be both flexible and rigorous. Moreover, faculty need to be made aware of different paths to excellence and explicitly informed about their existence.
2. It is also unlikely that the entire faculty of any university will achieve scholarship excellence all at once. Perhaps it is wise to focus on a few break-throughs areas or individuals first and make sure they gradually enlarge the orbit of influence to give opportunity to others. Or, more likely, your university has such champions already; it is only a matter of allowing/expecting them to include others. Scholarship is, as we all know, a network of ideas, practices, and individuals. One person can provide access to many but that requires strong institutional support and encouragement, otherwise islands of excellence will remain isolated.
3. It is important to recognize that none of my three heroes would be doing well at a top research-intensive university. Their scholarship does not fit well, and some of them were actually late bloomers. They would have been denied tenure at a highly competitive place, and would not have the freedom to pursue their interests. Second-tier and international universities must recognize their unique niche in the talent market, and try to specifically attract the kind of passionate, talented, self-directed people by promises of freedom and independence unobtainable at research-intensive schools. It was easy to make tenure at the places where Susan, Mike and Tony started their careers, and that is the point. Some people flourish in a highly competitive rigorous place; others do better in a more relaxed atmosphere.
4. All three learned to capitalize on a specific resource. Without resources, there is no development. But those do not have to be monetary or even tangible resources. Connections, reputations, unique experiences — all of these can be used. People need help in recognizing such resources and latching onto them.

Here is a story illustrating the last point. Many years ago, our dean was talking to a group of young faculty about a new program we proposed. He looked at us and said, "Together you probably speak 7 or 8 languages, and come from four different countries. Why don't you build your new program using your strength?" It just did not occur to us but an experienced administrator should be good at spotting a resource when he sees it.

Who are these lessons for? I am thinking here about both second-tier universities in the US and other rich countries and top universities in emerging economies, such as Russia. All of them are trying to change their organizational structures to increase their scholarly output. Both groups are playing in very crowded and competitive fields. In my opinion, one of the mistakes of the Russian excellence initiative, for example, is its attempt to directly emulate the world's leading universities. I argue for a more flexible, more realistic approach to change. We cannot expect all faculty overnight becoming top scholars in their fields. Unlike highly selective universities in countries with huge pools of talent, we cannot recruit the best only. But we can allow for more diversity in academic careers and use our strengths. We need to look for unique and idiosyncratic people like Susan, Michael, and Tony, and let them grow as scholars in their peculiar ways. Let us call this the authentic improvement theory.

Essential Information about Predatory Publishers and Journals

Jeffrey Beall

Associate Professor / Scholarly Communications Librarian,
University of Colorado Denver, USA
jeffrey.beall@ucdenver.edu

Predatory publishers threaten the integrity of research and victimize honest researchers.

My first experience with predatory publishers was in 2008, when I began to receive strange emails — mostly from South Asia — inviting me to submit research manuscripts to journals I had never heard of before. The spam emails had headlines like "Call for Paper," which is incorrect English (it should be "Call for Papers"). What surprised