

Report from the Academic Front:
The Faculty Senate Helps to Start a Scholarship Report
by
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Provost Foss has just distributed to deans and chairs the material for the University to prepare a Scholarship Report. This, in my view, is an exciting event for UH. It says that UH is serious about being a research university, and it says we are willing to actually measure our progress. I would be surprised if no one is complaining about the energy it will take to provide this information, so I thought it would be worthwhile to discuss why we are doing it, and its implications.

The Scholarship Report is a joint initiative of the Faculty Senate, the Research Council, and the Graduate and Professional Studies Council. This is a good hint as to what faculty input into the governance process will look at for years to come, I hope, because all of the relevant groups are behind this effort. And, the original initiative came from a Task Force with members from all three groups.

If any institution wants to grow, it must be able to document its progress and assess the success of efforts to achieve progress. Achievement, however, is difficult to assess because it comes in so many forms. The Scholarship Report will not be complete by any means, but is an important step to broaden our current efforts to document and tout what we do here at UH. The only current measure of faculty activity is the Research Report, prepared by the Office of Grants and Contracts under Art Vailas. While this is one measure of faculty activity that is crucially important in several fields, it completely misses activities in many other fields. An additional problem is that the measure of grant dollars indicates a key input into the research effort, but does not address what the research dollars actually support.

The Scholarship Report is therefore a second important measure of faculty activity, which will primarily include publications of various sorts. It also takes preliminary steps to measure other activities, such as lectures and presentations. No doubt, the measures will be expanded in the future, as again the Scholarship Report is only a reasonable next step in the process of documenting the myriad activities of faculty.

In the future, I hope UH adds other measures of faculty output. These might include measures of graduate student output, like placements. Similarly, it would be great to be able to quantify the career paths of our undergraduate students (there are many complex issues at attempting to measure student output, and this issue deserves its own article). Further, there are a lot of community activities that to date have not been systematically measured. These activities include contacts with the media in print, radio, and TV. They include activities on campus that attract outside participants, and traveling by faculty to other venues to speak and participate in the production of knowledge. Even something as crass (from an academic perspective) as consulting is an important benefit that is generated by the research community. We don't typically think about measuring consulting, because the individual faculty generally gets renumerated for their effort. On the other hand, however, one of the important reasons to have a serious research university in Houston is because the faculty can serve as a reservoir of expertise. This is a special benefit for smaller businesses and local governments that have only occasional need for special expertise.

My point about consulting is that the current effort to develop a Scholarship report will by necessity be incomplete. This can only be expected when we are trying to put all the activities of 900 tenure and tenure track faculty on a spreadsheet with only two pages of columns. One potentially interesting distinction in the journal dimension is that Provost Foss asks that publications in the highest quality journals be separated from others.

Probably the best use of the Scholarship Report is going to be to compare a unit's accomplishments over time, rather than trying to measure the difference between departments. That is, given the widely disparate ways in which each discipline achieves accomplishment, a publication in one discipline will have very different implications than a publication in another. Further, several disciplines have very different output measures, such as juried art shows. Thus, the Provost is asking for five years of data in this initial effort, which will encourage him to compare output over time.

My view is that faculty output covers a wide ranging set of activities. We, and more importantly, the people that fund us care about all of them. As UH matures as an institution, we will want to do an ever more complete job at measuring our output. Such measurement gives us an objective gauge to judge our progress, and methods for achieving progress. The Scholarship Report is a good next effort to expand the measurement process beyond the existing measure of outside grant dollars, the Research Report. It will be interesting to see how the next step at expanding measurement develops. In any case, however, I believe the Scholarship Report will provide another dimension to document our institutional progress, and I believe our progress in scholarship is even more broadly based, and rapid, than has been our progress as measured in the Research Report. Hopefully by the end of the Spring, we'll see!