

Assessing faculty and schools by summarizing useful findings

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Perhaps the best reason for discarding my recommendation that researchers should describe their findings is that it may be upsetting to some faculty members. I had a discussion with a Vice-Provost of Research at a University (not Penn) who said that each year he got reports from departments and requests for funding based on research that is being done or being planned. "But they never reported finding anything as a result of these efforts," he said, "so I asked them to report their findings and that created quite an uproar." Another colleague posed the following exercise: "Write down the names of famous researchers in their field and what they work on." That turns out to be easy. But then he said, "Describe what they found." Not so easy.

Another negative is that useful findings seldom occur. This happens primarily because of poor design, but also because the results may not turn out to be useful. Thus, years may go by with nothing for the faculty to report on this issue. For example, I have been a professor at the Wharton School for 34 years and my cumulative list of findings now stands at about 40, or only 1.2 per year. They came in bunches, so there were years with no findings. (My list is at <http://jscottarmstrong.com>.)

What to do to make it a reality?

In light of the anticipated resistance, I offer a three-step plan:

1. Announce that a test program is being considered that would allow faculty to describe their findings. Invite comments from the faculty, giving them an opportunity to state what would constitute success or failure in the test.
2. Assuming that people do not act to prevent the test, include a question on faculty members' annual reports. (I am assuming that, like ours, other departments ask their faculty to prepare annual reports. If not, I highly recommend it.)

"You are invited to provide a description of findings that you have obtained over the past year, and to explain why the findings might be useful. In addition, please provide a cumulative list of findings made over your career. This question is optional."

3. Publicize the findings to deans, students, donors, news media, and others who might be interested. Include the findings on department websites and on promotional materials.

My expectation is that this process of explicitly measuring useful findings will affect the types of research that faculty undertake. It should lead to a significant increase in the number of useful findings.

Wouldn't it be interesting if a major mass-media publication ranked business schools based on scientific findings?