B-School Professor: Most Faculty Research Fails In 1 Important Way

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Gitanjali Poonia August 1, 2021

It may not be the first thing applicants consider in deciding where to apply to business school. But it behooves MBA candidates to know how accomplished a B-school's faculty is. Generally, professor quality is graded in terms of the impact of their work, academically and in the real world — but what is "impact," how is it measured, and who does the measuring?

Having heard the word thrown around in academic circles for years, Usha Haley wanted to get to the bottom of how impact is measured in U.S. business schools. For the last three years, Haley, the W. Frank Barton distinguished chair in international business and professor of management at Wichita State University, and her team have researched the systems used to evaluate academics; the result is her new book, *Impact and the Management Researcher*.

Haley found that in the U.S., academia overwhelmingly relies on the impact factor as a metric of success. Impact factor is a measure of the frequency with which journal articles are cited, on average, in a particular year. Since its founding in 2016, the UK-based data company Clarivate has been the chief arbiter of the journal impact factor. But here's the kicker: Clarivate does not release its data publicly.

'A COLONIZATION OF EDUCATION'

Clarivate's reports originally were used by the likes of librarians and scientists to judge whether to subscribe to a journal; over time, "it evolved, in a bizarre way, into something that we use to judge the value of individual researcher's academic impact," Haley tells *Poets&Quants*, adding that because Clarivate does not release any data, it is hard to ensure reliability, replicability, and the validity of the metrics used.

Usha Haley

What we do know: Around 60% of the research in Clarivate's database relies on research done in the U.S, U.K, and Europe. "Issues that would have relevance for global stakeholders are not in those issues that these journals index, or that they cover," Haley says. "It is a colonization of education, in my opinion."

UK HAS A DIFFERENT SYSTEM

Haley says in the UK, unlike the U.S., the quality of B-school research is generally assessed through the Research Excellence Framework, or REF. On the REF's national exercise score, 25% relies on academic impact that led to external impact. "We have nothing like that in the U.S.," she says.

After working in academia across the world and contributing to government policies in the U.S., Europe, Australia, and India, Haley began her book research with a global perspective.

To start, she wanted to gather clear data instead of moving forward with "hunches and intuition." That meant surveying about 20,000 members, all from the global ranks of management education, through the sponsoring Academy of Management. Respondents were asked how they assessed scholarly impact and how institutions supported them, and in particular their opinion of the journal impact factor.

The sample response rate was 19%. The results were interesting –– and revelatory.

“We rely so heavily on this impact factor for our evaluations in business schools,” Haley says. “Most of the people we surveyed said that they did not think it was a valid measure of impact.”

$400K TO PUBLISH A SINGLE JOURNAL ARTICLE?

In fact, she says, a large number indicated that their institutions did not support their academic pursuits that were designed to have an external impact. The system, many said, is skewed because it provides institutional rewards to those who are published in high-impact journals or highly ranked journals.

The process of publishing with these journals is tedious and expensive. For example, a school such as the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, ranked No. 3 in the U.S. by *Poets&Quants*, has estimated that it costs $400,000 to produce a single article in a major journal. Annual salary, benefits, and overhead for a faculty member totaled $300,000, and the time they spent on research was 50%.

But that is not all. Some schools may offer published authors an additional $10,000 to $20,000 for every published article in a small number of A-star journals, Haley says. Getting published also helps move along tenure and promotions.

Publish or perish? More like publish and prosper.

‘NO ONE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMICS REALLY READS THE JOURNALS’

Haley contextualized this misallocation of resources, noting that the articles produced by faculty are mostly read by people in their respective niche fields. “We see our major audience in management as other management researchers,” she says. “No one outside of academics, indeed very few outside our narrow areas of interest, really read the journals.”

Additionally, the studies are becoming narrower, she says, and more difficult to relate to what she calls “external constituencies” — in other words, the real world. Journals aren’t consistently covered by the media. Their popularity on Google search is 10% of what it was 20 years ago, Haley says. Which begs another important question: Whom does the system benefit?

The need for change has not lacked champions in B-schools or their adjacent communities. Before gathering the survey data, Haley and her team conducted qualitative research for an in-depth analysis, interviewing 10 journal editors, fellows, and former presidents of the academy of management. Haley says she was surprised at how prominent, impactful professors “were arguing for some kind of change, major change, some relevance.”

‘WE’RE PART OF AN ECOSYSTEM’

For students who use business school research to make their picks, Haley’s study could open a new set of possibilities.

“If you want to study with somebody who can probably bring their research from the classroom to the external sector and vice versa,” she explains, then this approach is helpful. Haley believes that considering the benefit of society is crucial to faculty research. “We’re a part of an ecosystem,” she says. “Business schools don’t exist in isolation.

“In the U.S., if you’re a business school professor, you’re getting paid much more for doing the same research you would do if you were a political scientist, sociologist or psychologist,” she adds. The main goal becomes talking to other academics in the very narrow field. “That defeats the purpose,” she says.

Learn more about *Impact and the Management Researcher* here.