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Views

Research Competition and the MLA

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The Modern Language Association's recent report from its [Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion](#) offers an opportunity to review some of our commonly accepted notions about the role of research in the definition of faculty productivity. The report is worth the considerable effort required to read through its 100 pages of survey data, evaluations, prescriptions and recommendations. Most of us will find its conclusion about tenure reassuring: The rate of tenure acquisition for tenure-track faculty is high and stable. We may be less sure about the significance of its findings about the growing number of non-tenure track faculty (part and full-time) in our institutions.

More interesting, however, is the extensive discussion of the nature of scholarly productivity. The MLA task force clearly struggled with this issue, and it is this struggle that makes the report so interesting. The report explicitly addresses what it calls the gold standard of the research monograph, which means a book length, usually single author publication that presents original research to an expert public, frequently through the medium of a university press. The report worries that this method places too restrictive a burden on young faculty, devalues the research-based article, and may result in overlong articles being presented as books. University tenure committees, the report indicates, may be off-loading the responsibility for evaluating research onto the editors and reviewers of university presses. At the same time, the report's surveys do not yet support a conclusion that the current method of evaluating research has disadvantaged young scholars in the tenure process.

One of the great strengths of the MLA task force report is its effort to distinguish among different types of institutions, recognizing that the importance of research publication for tenure varies significantly by type of institution and that the patterns of evaluation that characterize the top research universities tend to propagate to other institutions with different missions. The report endorses the well-known case for redefining scholarship to include activities in addition to original research -- editorial work, translations, bibliographies, textbooks, essays, pedagogical writings and even exceptional classroom teaching. Although this is not a topic easily resolved, the common expectations that drive this research focused behavior warrant a closer look.

Departments in colleges and universities, where most of the critical decisions about tenure and promotion are made, reflect the goals and expectations of their scholarly guilds (in the case of the modern language departments, these scholarly guilds are represented by the MLA). These guilds, while they speak expansively about broadening the definition of research to include other forms of scholarship, tend to focus their attention on the rarest of academic talents. Original research appearing in scholarly monographs published by university presses is valued because it is difficult to produce and therefore rare.

College and university prestige (whether established by ranking organizations or popular culture) rest on the acquisition of the individuals capable of producing these rare and difficult works on a constant and consistent basis. The best universities in the world have the highest number of faculty capable of producing works of original research. This is not restricted to the guilds associated with the MLA, although the MLA report is a wonderful testimony to the process. Even as the report argues for the expansion of the definition of scholarship to include many other activities not precisely defined by original published research, it reinforces our understanding of the high prestige associated with the original research publication.

Many commentators worry about the increased competitiveness of colleges and universities, each institution seeking to purchase for

higher and higher prices a greater share of the limited supply of high quality students and research capable faculty. Yet the marketplaces that support universities -- parents, students, faculty, legislators, donors, funding agencies, corporations -- all express a strong preference for the presence of these rare talents in academic settings. The issue for academics is not really whether faculty members should develop a broad portfolio of accomplishments in teaching, scholarship of all kinds, public service and civic engagement. Rather, the issue is whether universities can avoid concentrating on identifying and acquiring faculty whose skills will make their university or college campus most competitive. This perspective, ruthlessly businesslike though it is, provides a clear explanation of the behavior of colleges and universities and their academic guilds, and it highlights some characteristics of the academic environment that we might prefer were different.

Colleges and universities have few ways of defining and demonstrating their excellence other than presenting various measures of scarcity. The market assumes that if a campus attracts a large share of scarce, high SAT and high GPA students, its overall quality is better than another campus with lower SAT and lower GPA students. The market also assumes that a campus with a large share of the scarce faculty who consistently publish original research is a high quality campus. These indicators of scarcity are highly reliable measures, even if we can debate at great length whether what they measure is of greater intrinsic value than something else we do not measure as reliably.

Longtime observers of the academic scene know that original research talent is much more fragile than teaching or scholarship or civic engagement talent. Over a 25- to 30-year career, more faculty will sustain consistently good performance as teachers than will sustain consistently productive careers publishing original research. At the beginning, we do not know which of the recently tenured, research productive faculty will sustain that productivity for the next 25 or 30 years. The institution, understanding the importance of these research-productive faculty in validating their external competitive reputations, places extraordinary emphasis on improving the results of the tenure process by focusing intensively on the quantity and quality of published original research. The result is what the MLA observes: increased standards for published research productivity for tenure.

To some extent the excellent recommendations in the MLA Task Force report lose some of their persuasiveness absent a recognition of the powerful marketplace forces that drive all colleges and universities to emulate the competitive standards of the most prestigious research institutions. Whether we view the marketplace influence on college and university values as pernicious or not, we still must recognize that the primary participants in this marketplace are our faculty, students, alumni, trustees, donors, and other friends. Their preferences, expressed through their marketplace choices, reinforce the academy's intense focus on original published research.

We would like to see the next MLA task force review the language of academic quality as represented in college promotion materials, in the endlessly popular commercial ranking systems, and in the references to quality visible in the popular culture of news magazines, movies, television, and Internet chatter. As is often the case, we are likely to find that the enemy of the good practices we recommend is us.