BOARD #163: Reshaping Academic Evaluations Based on Merit and Worth

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WIP: Reshaping Academic Evaluations Based on Merit and Worth

Abstract

Traditional faculty evaluations often prioritize metrics such as teaching, research, and service but often fail to adequately recognize and reward faculty contributions that directly advance specific institutional priorities. This paper aims at bridging this gap by introducing a new framework that includes the concept of *worth* as an additional measure. The paper explores the implementation of this integrated approach for engineering and science faculty at a private university, utilizing bibliometrics, strategic contributions, and analyses of faculty perceptions across factors like gender, age, rank, and field. The findings underscore the need to balance *merit* and *worth*, offering a more comprehensive reflection of faculty contributions within institutional contexts.

This Work in Progress (WIP) Paper will be presented as a poster.

1 Introduction

Universities are inherently sites of struggle where status, authority, and valued contributions are often contested [1]. Traditionally, academic institutions have relied on evaluation systems to assess faculty performance. Typically, evaluation systems leading to merit pays emphasize measurable and intrinsic indicators of success, such as teaching effectiveness and research productivity, to determine whether a faculty's performance meets established standards.

Merit in education has been a topic of ongoing debate since its introduction in English and Welsh schools during the 19th century. While the literature shows an abundance of evidence suggesting the failure of merit as the best means of increasing motivation [2], critiquing its general principle is challenging. Faculty are required to balance a triad of *teaching*, *research*, and *service* responsibilities, each inherently multifaceted and challenging to measure accurately.

In addition to the above, merit pools are typically small, usually between 1% and 2% of the salary budget, making it nearly impossible to allocate meaningful increases. This often turns efforts to reward performance into a source of frustration. High performers feel undervalued, as their additional effort yields only a slight advantage. Average performers become demoralized, believing their contributions exceed the recognition they receive. Meanwhile, those who struggle see little incentive to improve, as their increases fall below the average.

The evolving role of universities has expanded beyond traditional teaching and research to include priorities shaped by the local context. For instance, a faculty member who dedicates

significant time to developing a new curriculum that addresses a critical workforce need or who engages in community-based research that directly impacts local communities might not receive adequate recognition in a traditional evaluation system. Another example is the prioritization of research productivity through a focus on qualitative metrics, which may overlook other valuable contributions.

Thus, there is a need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to faculty evaluation that goes beyond the traditional triad of teaching, research, and service to explicitly value and incentivize contributions aligned with the institution's specific strategic priorities and account for the broader impact of faculty activities.

This paper presents a novel perspective on academic evaluation by introducing a balanced framework that incorporates a contextual measure, *worth*, as a complementary metric to *merit*, ensuring alignment with institutional goals. It examines faculty perceptions and acceptance of these evaluation measures, focusing on how career-related and belief-based factors influence preferences and attitudes. The study further investigates how these perceptions vary across demographic and professional variables such as *gender*, *age*, *rank*, and *research field*.

2 Worth Measure

The concept of *worth* in evaluations is meant to capture the extrinsic value of an entity within a specific context. This is in contrast to *merit*, which typically emphasizes intrinsic qualities and is generally considered context-free. The *worth*'s context-dependent nature means that what is considered valuable can vary based on the setting. Rather than focusing solely on intrinsic qualities, *worth* is shaped by the interaction between the entity and its environment, emphasizing the importance of situational relevance.

To illustrate the difference between *merit* and *worth*, consider Boolean algebra. Initially, it was admired not for its utility but for its inherent logic and coherence. Today, Boolean algebra is evaluated for its *worth* in its foundational role in logic design and digital systems.

The concept of *worth* in evaluations was first introduced by Lincoln et al. [3] as a quick method for considering or making evaluations and judgments. However, their approach lacked the rich philosophical foundation typically associated with evaluation models. Michael Scriven [4] later expanded and refined this concept, initially framing it as *merit* and *payoff*. He subsequently evolved the idea into *merit* and *worth* (along with significance). Baueri [5] applied the concept of worth in program evaluation, highlighting the necessity of making judgments about the quality of a policy, program, project, or social action as an inherent part of the evaluation process.

3 Proposed Framework

Building on the above, we argue that *worth* can serve as a valuable metric for aligning academic contributions with an institution's strategic objectives. By integrating *worth* and *merit*, universities can develop a more comprehensive evaluation system that recognizes and rewards the diverse ways faculty contribute to the evolving missions of higher education, ensuring that high performers are compensated for their additional efforts.

The proposed framework employs a two-pronged approach that integrates both merit and worth. Merit, which accounts for 65% of the evaluation, encompasses the traditional triad of teaching, research, and service, with specific weight distributions based on faculty type. For tenure-track and practice faculty, research and teaching each contribute 40%, while service accounts for 20%. Teaching faculty, on the other hand, have a greater emphasis on teaching at 65%, with the remaining 35% allocated to service. Worth, constituting 35% of the final evaluation, is awarded in addition to merit and is based on alignment with University and School Strategic Initiatives.

Some of the proposed *worth* measures include active participation in the School's initiatives, the development of novel and strategic programs, and contributions to fulfilling strategic plan objectives. Additionally, worth measures encompass securing significant external grants, serving as a role model for peers and colleagues, and demonstrating leadership, commitment, and excellence in various capacities. This includes chairing School and departmental committees to shape institutional policies, driving initiatives that enhance academic and research environments, mentoring junior faculty by providing guidance and professional development support, and actively contributing to the advancement of academic programs. Furthermore, recognition through awards for innovative research and start-ups underscores this role by highlighting contributions that push the boundaries of knowledge and practical applications. The *worth* criteria also evaluate research performance using bibliometric indicators, such as citation counts, field-weighted citation impact, and other relevant metrics.

4 Evaluation and Results

The proposed framework was implemented for the engineering and science faculty at a private university as part of the annual evaluation process. A survey was administered to 132 faculty members, yielding a response rate of 43.94%. The survey explored faculty perceptions of the integrated evaluation system, with key demographic variables—including gender, age, academic rank, and research field—analyzed to identify patterns in faculty acceptance and career-related beliefs.

Faculty opinions on the evaluation criteria were divided. While 73.80% agreed that the proposed worth measures aligned with their understanding of meaningful contributions to the university, perceptions varied significantly by career stage. Mid-career faculty showed the highest level of acceptance, while junior and senior faculty were more evenly split. Overall, 58.53% of faculty found the worth measures fair and equitable. However, 64.10% disagreed that the combined merit and worth criteria accurately reflected faculty contributions, expressing concerns about the lack of clear, achievable benchmarks.

Regarding bibliometric indicators, 86.11% of faculty were familiar with the citation-based metrics used in evaluations, yet 58.06% questioned their ability to accurately reflect research quality. Some faculty voiced concerns that the heavy reliance on citation counts might disadvantage those engaged in interdisciplinary or regionally focused research.

Several respondents reported that the worth measure encouraged reflection on their research, teaching, and service, while others viewed it as a motivation to refine their teaching strategies, complete research projects, and align their work with institutional goals. However, some noted

challenges in balancing these expectations, particularly junior faculty, who may lack the institutional resources or professional networks needed to excel in all areas.

Demographic factors played a significant role in faculty attitudes toward the evaluation system. Gender differences were particularly pronounced—female faculty were more likely to emphasize institutional alignment and holistic evaluation, whereas male faculty tended to prioritize traditional merit-based metrics. Variations were also observed across disciplines, with faculty in engineering and applied sciences expressing stronger support for worth-based evaluation than those in theoretical fields. These discrepancies suggest that different academic cultures and expectations influence faculty perceptions of evaluation fairness. In fact, it was noted that certain aspects of the worth measure may inadvertently disadvantage female faculty. The heavy emphasis on publication and citation metrics poses challenges, as research shows that women are historically cited less frequently than their male counterparts, even when producing similar work. Additionally, female faculty often take on greater service and mentoring responsibilities, which may not be adequately recognized under current evaluation metrics.

5 Conclusion

The integration of *merit* and *worth* in academic evaluation offers a structured approach to aligning faculty activities with institutional priorities. However, its success depends on transparent, equitable, and consistent implementation to build faculty trust. The framework has encouraged faculty to reflect on their contributions, with some reporting positive shifts in teaching and research priorities. However, gender and rank disparities remain evident—female faculty emphasized institutional alignment, while male faculty prioritized traditional merit metrics. Disciplinary differences also emerged, with engineering and applied sciences showing stronger support for the worth-based evaluation compared to theoretical disciplines. Addressing these concerns requires continuous refinement of the framework, incorporating blind reviews, diverse evaluation committees, and expanded assessment metrics to ensure a more holistic evaluation. Future work will focus on assessing the long-term impact of this evaluation system on faculty development, institutional performance, and academic culture. A commitment to equity-focused revisions, faculty support mechanisms, and ongoing assessment will be essential to ensuring that all faculty—regardless of rank, gender, or discipline—can thrive within the system.

References

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