

BRIEF REPORT

Scholarship Criteria for Promotion in the Age of Diverse Faculty Roles and Digital Media

Margaret R. Helton, MD; Donald E. Pathman, MD, MPH

AUTHOR AFFILIATION:

Department of Family Medicine, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Margaret R. Helton, Department of Family Medicine, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC,
margaret_helton@med.unc.edu

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: In academic medical centers, scholarship is essential to advancing scientific knowledge, clinical care, and teaching and is a requirement for faculty promotion. Traditional evidence of scholarship, such as publications in peer-reviewed academic journals, remains applicable to the promotions of physician and nonphysician researchers. Often, however, the same evidence does not fit the scholarly work and output of clinician-educators, whose scholarship is often disseminated through digital communications and social media. This difference challenges promotion and tenure committees to evaluate the scholarship of all faculty fairly and consistently. This study aimed to generate a list of the features that a faculty product should demonstrate to be considered scholarship, regardless of how it is disseminated.

Methods: The full professors of one academic department of family medicine engaged in a mini-Delphi deliberative process to identify criteria to assess whether a scholarly product put forth by faculty in the promotion process is indeed scholarship.

Results: The full professors identified seven criteria to evaluate a faculty product to assess whether it represents scholarship—specifically its demonstration of faculty expertise, faculty contribution, originality, peer review, quality, relative permanence, and impact.

Conclusions: These criteria may help promotion committees more easily and consistently assess the full scope of a faculty member's scholarly work within today's changing approaches to its dissemination.

BACKGROUND

Scholarship is a core mission of academic departments and a requirement for faculty promotion. The seminal Boyer model recognized four types of scholarship, the most familiar being the work of researchers—the *scholarship of discovery*.^{1,2} Boyer's model encompasses three other types of scholarship often pursued by faculty in clinician-educator positions: the *scholarship of integration*, which interprets and merges ideas from multiple fields and sources; the *scholarship of application*, which proposes ways to use emerging knowledge to solve problems; and the *scholarship of teaching*, which creates new knowledge in education.

To assess the scholarship of faculty, promotion committees appraise the scholarly products faculty have created and disseminated. Papers published in peer-reviewed, professional journals remain appropriate evidence of scholarship for both clinician and nonclinician researchers. Clinician-educators, however, frequently disseminate their scholarship

of integration, application, and teaching through digital and social media, as well as other nontraditional endurable means such as podcasts and online reference materials. These means of dissemination are appropriate to the fundamental shift of the past 30 years in how academics collaborate, access, and share information.^{3,4} Faculty expect this work to merit credit as scholarship when they go up for promotion, but only 8% of allopathic medical schools in the United States accept digital and social media products as evidence of scholarship in promotions.⁵ Promotion committees need guidelines and tools to help assess the quality, impact, breadth, and relevance of academic work offered as evidence in faculty promotion packages, especially when it has been disseminated via nontraditional means.^{6–8}

The University of North Carolina (UNC) Department of Family Medicine has more than 140 faculty members. Most are clinical faculty with fixed-term appointments; about 15% are researchers on the tenure track. Promotion considerations

for all faculty include success in scholarship, teaching, reputation, recognized expertise, citizenship, leadership, service, and advocacy, as well as clinical productivity for clinicians, with higher bars for those further up the promotion ladder and those on the tenure track. All faculty at the assistant and associate professor rank have a promotion subcommittee, chaired by a full professor, to provide mentorship and advice on career development and promotions. Faculty candidates applying for promotion prepare a dossier that includes evidence of their scholarship; the dossier is presented to the department's full professors, who meet and vote on promotions three times per year.

The department's committee of full professors was aware that more faculty were using digital and other new modes to communicate their scholarly work. The committee recognized that clarifying what qualifies as scholarship for purposes of promotion would help junior faculty, promotion subcommittees, and the full professors in their deliberations. This study aimed to generate criteria by which a faculty product demonstrates scholarship, regardless of how it is disseminated.

METHODS

The University of North Carolina Office of Human Research Ethics reviewed this project and determined that it did not constitute human subjects research as defined under federal regulations and did not require IRB approval.

Knowing that consensus of educators in the health professions can establish criteria for scholarship,⁹ the full professors agreed to use the estimate-talk-estimate method, or mini-Delphi approach, which supports group, as opposed to individual, problem-solving in judgmental situations.¹⁰ The full professors met in June 2021 and reviewed new UNC School of Medicine guidelines for faculty promotion, which included a requirement for a minimum of five scholarly products since original appointment or previous promotion (time in rank). This meeting was followed by an emailed, open-ended questionnaire asking committee members to offer criteria for defining scholarship. Initial criteria were identified, and a first round of discussions occurred at a meeting of the full professors 3 months later. Comments were recorded and the themes refined and emailed to the group for further written input. After incorporating that input, a second round of discussions occurred at the next meeting of the full professors 4 months later, at which time no further revisions in the criteria were made. Nineteen of the department's 24 full professors participated in the process. Participants included 11 men and 8 women with an average age of 61 years (range, 50–71 years), and all were non-Hispanic White.

RESULTS

The full professors reached consensus on seven criteria to assess whether a given faculty product would be considered as scholarship and count toward promotion (Table 1). These criteria included the product's demonstration of (1) the faculty member's *expertise*; (2) the faculty member's *meaningful contribution* to the piece; (3) *originality* in its information, insights,

methods and/or syntheses; (4) *peer review* as a measure of quality and validity of the piece; (5) *quality* in its writing, organization, and presentation; (6) *relative permanence* by dissemination in a vehicle that makes it accessible to others for a meaningful period of time; and (7) potential or demonstrated *impact* through evidence it was widely read, cited, or otherwise influenced its field. The committee did not address how many or how convincingly some or all criteria must be met for a faculty product to meet the requirements of scholarship, feeling that this should be learned later through experience when the criteria were applied in deliberations of the actual promotion packets of faculty.

TABLE 1. Seven Criteria to Evaluate Whether a Faculty Work Product Counts as Scholarship Toward Promotion

Criteria	Explanation
Expertise	The piece reflects the faculty member's expertise.
Faculty contribution	The piece demonstrates the faculty member's meaningful engagement. With growing appreciation for team science, the faculty member may be one of numerous authors, but their contribution level should not be incidental or trivial.
Originality	The piece provides new information, insights, methods, and/or syntheses over and above what is well-known in the field and/or already available in the literature.
Peer review (refereed)	The piece has been impartially evaluated by persons with recognized expertise who provide some measure of assurance of validity and quality.
Quality	The piece is carefully prepared, well-organized, well-written, and appropriately engaging.
Relative permanence (enduring)	The piece is published or otherwise disseminated in a vehicle that makes the work accessible to others for a meaningful period of time, perhaps a minimum of 3 years.
Impact	Evidence that the piece has been (a) accessed by others beyond one's home campus [evidence includes being published in a journal with wide circulation, number of web views and downloads, picked up in lay press, and Altmetrics]; and (b) has influenced the field [evidence includes numbers of citations and incorporation in evidence syntheses, as well as demonstrated changes in clinical or education practice or policy].

CONCLUSIONS

These seven criteria on which to assess academic products as scholarship may prove helpful to faculty, promotion subcommittees, and promotion-adjudicating committees; many of the criteria adhere to the Boyer principles. While a given product may not need to meet all seven criteria, the more it meets and the more it excels on each criterion the more likely it would be considered scholarship counting toward promotion.

The intent is that these criteria will help identify faculty work that is evidence of faculty expertise but is not scholarship, such as a clinical quality improvement initiative that, even if

successful, is not original nor disseminated. Similarly, interviews appearing in the lay media could be evidence of expertise and have impact but generally do not meet the scholarship criteria of originality, meaningful faculty contribution, peer review, and relative permanence. Some social media platforms (eg, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, and TikTok) provide opportunities to disseminate ideas and opinions but these generally are not considered scholarship because the work is often not original or peer reviewed and is relatively impermanent.

Limitations of these criteria include the unavoidable subjectivity when applying them in assessing work, especially in the dimensions of quality and originality. Also, these criteria were the product of the senior faculty of a single department, and faculty elsewhere with different experiences and cultures could hold different notions of what appropriately constitutes scholarship. These criteria could also undervalue engaged scholarship, which addresses social, civic, and moral problems.^{11,12} Such work is important but may not generate a product that meets these criteria.

Given the diverse roles of faculty and the changed landscape of disseminating scholarship, consensus agreement on the criteria for deeming faculty work to be scholarship has the potential to modernize the promotion process. Universities allow latitude for their many schools regarding the definition of scholarship. These guidelines can be shared and discussed as departments and schools assess nontraditional dissemination of scholarship. Future studies will need to assess how these criteria are viewed by junior faculty and how they perform when applied in the deliberations of promotion-weighting committees. Do they provide greater clarity, consensus, and consistency in deliberations of scholarship? How many criteria do committees feel must be met for work to be judged as scholarship?

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