Editorial: Metrics and accountability—Expectations, evaluations, and thinking big

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Over my career, I have read many annual evaluations of university researchers, support staff, faculty, and administrators, as well as those of CEOs of nonprofit organizations. Certainly, there is a strong cohort of people doing an exemplary job, always striving to take the institution or their program to the next level. Then there are the individuals who seem to meet minimum expectations and seem happy to do it. Finally, there are those who do not seem to meet expectations.

As I reflect on this topic, one of the most important questions is what should the expectation be. It is probably easier to define reasonable minimum expectations than expectations for stellar performance, whether we are considering a full-time researcher or faculty member? Is it unreasonable to expect 1 or 2 refereed papers per year for a full-time researcher or faculty member with a position responsibility including research? What is the minimum expectation for external funding? What are reasonable expectations for teaching responsibilities—number of courses taught? Student satisfaction? Number of master’s and doctoral students graduated? I would encourage discussion of minimum levels for satisfactory performance and agreed measurable objectives for the subsequent year.

What is stellar performance? Obviously, it goes beyond meeting minimum expectations or even some multiple of the metrics. The metrics listed above are examples of outputs, not outcomes or impacts. Outstanding performance should go beyond outputs and get into the outcomes and the impact of the work. A refereed paper could be viewed as an output or perhaps, an outcome.

The impact is the effect on the field of science or the industry. The impact factor of a paper is widely used as an indicator of quality but this is not uniformly accepted (Gorman, 2008). A patent is an output, and a licensed patent might be considered an impact but would a better metric of a patent’s impact be royalty income or jobs created (or saved)? The number of courses presented and number of student credit hours taught are outputs. Student satisfaction and, I hope, learning is an outcome of instruction in and out of the classroom. The impact is the effect on the lives and careers of undergraduates and graduates. We have to ask ourselves if we want a job title (something that looks good on a business card) or do we want a position in which our responsibilities allow us to make a difference.

Are we thinking big enough? We can ask the question as we plan our careers, pick a research topic (addressing a important question), design a study, write a grant proposal, teach a class, develop or revise a curriculum, conduct strategic planning, and initiate collaborations together with fostering long-term strategic partnerships. It is apt to remember that “Big thinking precedes great achievement” (Wilfred Peterson, American writer, 1900–1995).

REFERENCES