

— VIEWPOINT —

Benchmarking Scholarship in Economics

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People who read academic journals like this one are likely to have aspirations as scholars, and people who read this particular journal are likely to be highly motivated to serve others and seek after the truth, with the sort of character that seeks to be held accountable. That is a combination of factors that has the potential to leave anyone demoralized and worn out. You can never really do “enough” scholarship. There is always one more paper to write, and there are always peers somewhere who are out-performing you.

It may be helpful to benchmark the standard to which we should hold ourselves accountable by studying the amount of publishing that economists actually do. That is the main aim of this article. I also offer a few practical suggestions about doing scholarship in economics. My emphases are shaped by the fact that I am a faculty member at a Christian liberal arts college, but much of my method will be transferable to other situations.

I. Oddities of Our Particular Tribe

I start with three general comments about scholarship and publication in economics.

What “counts” as scholarship in economics? Our gold standard is the peer-reviewed journal article. Many would argue that this is too narrow a standard, and it certainly is more narrow than in the business-related fields, more difficult to achieve than in the sciences, and different in kind from the standard of the humanities and arts. In my experience this can set up economists to be misunderstood (and under-appreciated) by some of their colleagues in other disciplines. Books and book chapters, with their relatively loose review process, carry less professional credibility among economists, and economists typically engage in less consulting and other “practical” uses of knowledge than business professionals should. Conference papers also trade at a discount among economists; Mathis and Zech (1992) find that fewer than 20 percent of papers presented at 5 regional conferences were eventually published. On the other hand, the number of journals in economics has so proliferated that there is legitimate

concern about relying on mere publication as an index of quality; many have resorted to quality-rankings of journals in order to evaluate the significance of individual publications.

Who gets the credit for scholarship in cases of co-authorship? The proportion of co-authored articles has risen in the last thirty years, from around 20 percent to near 50 percent; Moore *et al* (2001) find that departments generally do not discount for co-authorship when making promotion and tenure decisions, and McDowell and Kiholm-Smith (1992) come to the same conclusion for promotion decisions.

How long are the pregnancies? Relative to other professions (especially the laboratory sciences) there is a long “pipeline” between submission to a journal and eventual publication, due to several factors. The profession follows a one-at-a-time submission rule, and peer review appears to follow high internal standards relative to other professions. Masson *et al.* (1992) find a mean publication delay of 118 weeks; Ellison (2000) shows that this lag from submission to publication has grown in recent decades from about six months to over two years. Coupé (2003) finds lower journal acceptance rates in economics than in other disciplines.

II. Benchmarking Individuals: Central Tendency and Distribution Around the Median

These three forces combine to result in a relatively low rate of publication for economists. Coupé (2000) cross-references published lists of Ph.D. graduates in economics (for cohorts graduating in the years 1971, 1981, 1988 and 1993) with the authors documented in the EconLit database, which chronicles most (but not all) peer-reviewed organs, tracking over 600 journals. Coupé calculates typical numbers of publications, both before tenure and over entire careers. If co-authored papers are counted as publications for all authors, between 41 percent and 46 percent of each cohort have never published even one article. (If we include only single-author papers, the percentage rises to 60 percent; hence the proverb that the median economist has zero career publications.) In the earlier two cohorts (1971 and 1981), about 43 percent of Ph.D.s had published an article (including co-authored articles) within six years of completion (that is, before a tenure decision). That percentage grows to about 57 percent in the later cohorts, when the profession switched from a traditional dissertation to a three-article dissertation.

If we limit the calculations to those who have succeeded in publishing at least one article, the median total number of career publications is three, except for the relatively young 1993 cohort among whom the median so

far is 1.5. Because publication declines with age (Coupé 2003), we can be relatively sure that the first three cohorts' numbers will not change appreciably as the scholars mature. Among those who do publish, the median number of publications before tenure is 1.5.

There are, of course, some economists who publish a great deal. It is not unusual for research universities to expect six publications in leading journals before a positive tenure decision. So what is the distribution around the profession's median? Coupé summarizes the data on roughly 35,000 economists and 600 journals with a regression estimation of Lotka's Law, which has been used to summarize publication in other disciplines. (Lotka argues that the number of authors who publish N papers generally equals the number publishing once, divided by N -squared.) Coupé finds that publishing in economics is rarer than indicated by the Lotka estimations for other fields. Approximately 15 percent of economists will publish two or more articles in a lifetime, and fewer than 2 percent will publish more than five.

III. Benchmarking Programs and Departments

How do various liberal-arts economics *departments* stand up to "the EconLit test"? First, a reminder: As in much of social science, models here will do better at identifying mean tendencies than at explaining and predicting individual behavior. There is enough room for incomplete measurement in the data that follow to counsel us that the findings should not be taken as firm conclusions about any particular school or person; rather, taken together, the data give an inkling of the general pattern of publications among economists at liberal-arts institutions.

Table 1 presents numbers of EconLit articles from 1992 through Spring 2006 by economics faculty at a set of institutions frequently mentioned as peers of my own: Christian colleges with good academic reputations, and the best liberal arts college from each of the surrounding states. I also include Washington and Lee University, which bills itself as the nation's only liberal arts institution with a nationally-ranked business school, since my economics faculty is housed in a combined economics/business department. To assure that we consider the upper end of the distribution, I include three schools chosen randomly from among the top ten national liberal arts colleges in *U.S. News and World Report's* most recent ranking: Amherst (#2), Carlton (#6) and Bowdoin (#7). (Grinnell, Washington and Lee, Oberlin, St. Olaf, Kalamazoo, Wheaton, Knox and Hope—already in our sample—rank in the top hundred, at numbers 14, 17, 22, 55, 57, 61, 79, and 95, respectively.)

To help standardize for size of department, I have included the number of economists on the faculty of each school. To indicate the “depth of the bench” I present the number of articles authored by the most prolific economist at each school. As a rough index of quality and influence of the publications, I report the number of third-party bibliographic citations referenced by Google Scholar for the economics faculty of each school.

I have ordered the schools (admittedly rather roughly) from most publication-oriented to least. The order represents an attempt to balance department size, number of publications, undue influence by a single faculty member, and number of third-party bibliographic references to the publications. As an alternative (and, though quantifiable, also rather arbitrary) composite ranking system, in the last column I present school rank based on the sum of publications per faculty member plus third-party citations per faculty member. In that column I present the rank, followed by the sum upon which it is based (in parentheses).

Table 1. Publications by Economists at Peer Institutions

Institutions, ranked by all criteria simultaneously	Number of economists	Number of EconLit articles	Number of articles by most prolific economist	Number of Google-Scholar citations	Alternative school rank: pubs/person + cites/person
Bowdoin	12	72	17	1801	2 (156.1)
Amherst	13	68	19	2087	1 (165.8)
Grinnell	9	61	21	323	3 (42.7)
Washington and Lee	16	50	18	220	6 (16.9)
Oberlin	10	24	8	192	10 (10.4)
Calvin	8	16	9	210	4 (28.9)
St. Olaf	11	16	4	139	9 (14.1)
Carlton	12	17	11	160	8 (14.8)
Wheaton (IL)	5	20	17	55	7 (15.0)
Hope	5	13	6	32	11 (9.0)
Valparaiso	6	18	17	10	12 (4.7)
Gordon	3	5	5	56	5 (20.3)
Westmont	2	4	4	0	16 (2.0)
Knox	5	3	2	7	15 (3.1)
Kalamazoo	5	2	2	20	13 (4.4)
Lawrence	6	0	0	20	14 (3.3)
Taylor	2	0	0	0	17= (0.0)
Seattle Pacific	5	0	0	0	17= (0.0)

Sources: The names of all economics faculty members at each institution were recorded from the institutions’ websites. The number of publications for each person was then tallied, using EconLit author affiliation searches. I then recorded the number of third-person citations for each faculty member from Google Scholar searches, using that source on the advice of my reference librarian.

Grinnell’s faculty’s median number of publications is 6.5; Bowdoin’s is 5; Hope’s and St. Olaf’s are 1.5; Amherst’s and Oberlin’s are 1; all other schools have medians of zero.

Consider publication at the top of the departmental distribution. At Grinnell, two-thirds of the publications were authored by two (out of nine) faculty members, and one-third of the faculty has no publications. If we were to combine the numbers from Amherst and Bowdoin into one “super department” of 25 professors (since their school statistics are virtually indistinguishable), we’d find that (approximately) the top fourth of the faculty (7 of 25) produce over two-thirds of the publications (71.4 percent); 40 percent of the faculty (10 of 25) have no publications.

Some of the Christian colleges come out looking relatively strong (consider their virtual absence from the *U.S. News* top one-hundred, compared to their placement in Table 1), and it could be argued that this standard of comparison puts at least some of the Christian liberal arts colleges at a relative disadvantage because their departments are by design more active than others in publishing self-consciously faith-related work that may not appear in the EconLit database. For example, *Faith & Economics*, though peer-blind-reviewed and indexed in the *Journal of Economic Literature* (and therefore among the “standard” economics journals) was not until recently referenced by EconLit. Similar comments might apply to the *Christian Scholars’ Review*, religion and business journals in which some faculty have published, and scholarship that is explicitly faith-related and therefore more appropriate to placement in books than non-faith-related journal publications by economists. A conservative count of such publications by the economists at my school, including only peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, but not including any academic reviews, conference papers or “popular” publications (like *Books & Culture*), yields 70 additional articles and book chapters, plus a textbook. If we include these publications, our median number of publications (7.5) is greater than Grinnell’s median of 6.5.

Departments seem always to be re-evaluating their publication requirements, especially for tenure, while fretting about just how precisely those standards should be stated. Here is a modest proposal for minimal standards: By the tenure decision, let a liberal arts college expect that an economist hired directly from graduate school should normally have published work emanating from the dissertation in a peer-reviewed journal, and should also present evidence of an ongoing scholarly agenda that is expected to continue to produce publication-quality work. That evidence would normally be some academic scholarship beyond the dissertation, either published or under final review at a peer-reviewed organ. After tenure, minimal scholarship standards could expect that peer-reviewed academic publications will follow the schedule of sabbaticals, with a publication

coming roughly as frequently as sabbatical leaves. This does not seem an overly stress-inducing set of expectations—in fact, most of my economist acquaintances think it is rather low, even for a minimal standard—and over a lifetime this process would result in economists whose publication records place them in the top few percentiles of the discipline. It also has the virtue of keeping requirements uniform both before and after tenure, which is good for the *esprit de corps* of any department.

Individual departments will have to navigate two details of implementation: how to treat co-authorship, and whether to set a minimum standard for the quality of journal in which the publications appear. It is my belief that, most of the time, co-authorship results in better publications and should be encouraged, especially at liberal-arts institutions that are relatively distant from the world of graduate assistants, low teaching loads and advanced research seminars. A department might draw up a list of acceptable journals (say, everything in EconLit, with others on a case-by-case basis), or a liberal arts college department might allow some flexibility in the journals that “count” by identifying a group of external peer reviewers who would periodically evaluate the quality of faculty research portfolios.

Some might advocate an alternative to the “set a minimal standard” approach, as minimal standards might not inspire colleagues to their best work and might even precipitate passive-aggressive behavior. Schools might instead lay out a reasonable profile of a model colleague, and evaluate faculty members relative to that standard. In my limited experience there are two problems with this approach. It does not set a clear threshold for the more difficult personnel decisions, which are the only decisions that really require a written policy. It also is rather untethered to the reality in which we live—that is, it invites senior faculty to lean back and offer a utopian standard that does not reflect the real constraints economists face (which show up in the statistics cited earlier). In fact, when I have asked advocates of the “model colleague” position to name one whom they would hold up as exemplary, and have then looked through the *curriculum vitae* of that colleague, I have always found that—to everyone’s surprise—the colleague is barely above the “minimal standards” that I set out earlier. While the standards may be *minimal*, they appear to also be near the *upper* limits of reasonable expectation for the many liberal arts faculty who are mere mortals. Indeed, a strength of the “standards” approach is that it sets a floor on scholarly expectations, to allow some colleagues to succeed who are exemplary teachers but not “models” as scholars.

IV. A Few “Lessons Learned” About Scholarship

What if a colleague (say, *you*) should simply become demoralized. Maybe you are not confident you can publish anything. Here are several principles about the scholarship process that may help—things I wish I had been taught in graduate school:

1. *Don't try to re-invent the wheel.* Read current working papers, and look for gaps in their analysis. Then fill those gaps with a project of your own. I subscribe to about a dozen of the (free) Social Science Research Network working-papers offerings, so every week I receive about 18 email announcements, each containing about eight working-paper abstracts with links to the full paper texts. This way you see work long before it is published, and you see a broad spectrum of work, some of which is certain to stimulate some dreams about scholarship you would enjoy and be capable of.
2. *Work with a co-author whenever possible.* Publishing, especially at liberal arts colleges, was meant to be done by partnerships, not sole proprietorships. You gain complementary expertise, with the accountability of always having the scholarly ball in someone's court so that projects are less likely to languish. If you feel you're too distant from your graduate program to commence a research program, try working with a younger colleague who brings complementary gifts.
3. *Work with a nice person whenever possible.* There are, of course, complications when you try to work with a co-author. I would recommend you not work with complete strangers, and that you document in writing (by follow-up email after conversations) all of your mutual agreements about how-you-will-work-together and who-will-do-what. (Sad to say, even nice people have false memory problems, and there is enough at stake here to amplify false memories into complete breakdowns of relationships.)
4. *Scholarship is like taking vitamins.* Many people seem to think that they need “big blocks of time” to complete any research. This virtually guarantees that there will be big blocks of time *between* the days on which you actually do research, so that you spend even more big blocks of time trying to get your mind back around the topic you were working on. That's inefficient and demoralizing. Think of research as you think of exercise or religious disciplines: a little bit every day is more effective than a lot once a year. Your mind will be quietly at work on your project while you are away from it, and you won't waste time refamiliarizing yourself with your research.

5. *Don't lie to yourself.* Comments like “I am on too many committees to do any scholarship” are almost never true. It is more likely that you are too good an economist to be on so many committees. Do not hide behind decoys.
6. *It's not over until it's over.* The last 20 percent of a project seems to consume 50 percent of the project's energy. Bring projects very near to completion before starting new ones, and budget some time margins into your life so you are not perpetually so frazzled that you cannot pitch in on a sudden deadline.
7. *Submit to correction and forced deadlines.* Get on the program for conferences, especially smaller, regional field conferences at which you are likely to get helpful comments. The discipline of facing a conference deadline helps move projects toward completion.

V. Tribe, Departments and Scholars

If we form a composite picture from the three levels of analysis in this paper, I think we are presented with a profession in which we can take pride and about which we should genuinely be excited. We are not surrounded by excessive grade inflation—publishing is still relatively difficult and rare—and most liberal arts institutions seem to respond by maintaining reasonable publishing standards for their faculty. Expectations are livable enough that any individual scholar can plan a career strategically and aspire to high-quality, collegial work, rather than being under constant pressure to “crank something out fast.”

There is a clear opportunity for growth, represented by the large number of economists trained as researchers who do not regularly complete research projects. I am hopeful that the suggestions near the end of this paper, along with some pastoral mentoring by the right colleagues, may help that potential find its natural destination.

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