

Health Policy Newsletter

Volume 16 Number 4

December, 2003

Article 7

Assessing the Scholarly Productivity of Allied Health Faculty

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Suggested Citation:

Lapin J, Lyons KJ. Assessing the scholarly productivity of allied health faculty. *Health Policy Newsletter* 2003; 16(4): Article 7. Retrieved [date] from <http://jdc.jefferson.edu/hpn/vol16/iss4/7>.

Assessing the Scholarly Productivity of Allied Health Faculty

Scholarship is the hallmark of a profession and is the very essence of academic life. Every faculty member has a mandate to engage in scholarship of some form. Faculty members in schools and colleges of allied health professions have traditionally emphasized teaching over scholarship and are generally characterized by limited scholarly productivity. The research that exists addressing scholarship in allied health usually focuses on the characteristics of productive faculty members and the relationship of these characteristics to measures of scholarship. However, it does not provide any benchmark by which to determine whether a certain level of scholarship is particularly high or low. As allied health faculty are comparatively new to the scholarly arena, a yardstick with which to define success would be helpful.

One approach to developing a useful benchmark would be to identify norms based on the track record of other disciplines in academe. We conducted a study to compare the level of allied health scholarship to that of faculty in related disciplines. The National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF) conducted periodically by the National Center for Educational Statistics provides a comparison group from which to develop such norms. The NSOPF is a nationally representative, comprehensive study of approximately 28,000 faculty members from all disciplines in academe.

A survey based on the NSOPF was developed. This survey, the Association of Schools of Allied Health Professions Benchmarking Survey (ABS), was sent to faculty in 11 of the largest allied health disciplines in schools who were members of the Association of Schools of Allied Health Professions (ASAHP). These disciplines were dental hygiene, diagnostic imaging, health administration, laboratory sciences, medical records/health informatics, nutrition and dietetics, occupational therapy, physical therapy, physician assistant, respiratory therapy and speech-language pathology.

Data from the most recently available administration of the NSOPF (1998) were used as the non-allied health comparison group. The NSOPF results published in 1993 were used as the second comparison group. The disciplines chosen for comparison were similar to allied health disciplines in that they are applied disciplines with a relatively strong mission of both teaching and research. These disciplines include education, business and the health sciences (health technology, health services, pharmacy and public health).

There are 105 schools and colleges that offered programs in one or more of the allied health disciplines. Two schools chose not to participate, leaving 103 schools in the survey. Following the protocol of the NSOPF, the ABS data collected in the fall of 2001 represented scholarly productivity from the previous fall semester. Surveys were returned by 748 allied health faculty members. The ABS data were weighted to better reflect the discipline distribution available from ASAHP. Two-year scholarship was defined as total number of publications in refereed journals.

Comparisons of demographic variables of the non-allied health faculty to the allied health faculty revealed some significant differences. Non-allied health faculty were older, more held doctorates, and more were at the associate or full professor level with tenure or on the tenure track. Not surprisingly, the majority of the allied health

faculty were female, which reflects the demographic make-up of the professions themselves.

The amount of scholarship produced over a two-year period differed between the groups. The mean number of publications reported by allied health faculty was 1.9, which was equal to the NSOPF 1993 cohort. However, the most recent NSOPF data representing fall semester, 1998, reported an average of 4.6, a large increase from 1993. The allied health faculty showed much more variability among the disciplines, as their average two-year publication rate ranged from a low of .4 to a high of 6.5 articles, compared to non-allied health faculty, whose range was 2.4 to 4.4 articles. Therefore, some of the professions, such as nutrition and dietetics (6.5), exceeded the comparison group, while others fell far short.

When asked about time spent in various professional activities, rather striking differences were found. Non-allied health faculty spent more time in research (17.9% to 12.3%) and teaching (53.2% to 12.3%). However, allied health faculty spent much more time in activities related to administration, service and a combined .other. category (44.3% to 29%).

The results of this study help to better understand the current state of research within the allied health professions. One conclusion that can be drawn is that many of the fields that comprise allied health are comparable to similar disciplines 10 years ago, and some are far advanced. This might suggest a potential growth pattern emerging. A second is that allied health faculty seem to spend an inordinate amount of time in administrative activities as opposed to research and teaching, which may take them away from the pursuit of scholarship. A third is that comparisons of the level of scholarship can provide goals for each of the disciplines to advance the scholarly culture of their discipline.

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