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INVESTIGATING THE APPARATUS

The National Research Council Ranking of Research Universities: Its Impact on Research in Economics

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[Abstract, Keywords, JEL Codes](#)

THE ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY AT MANY UNIVERSITIES view their missions as teaching, research, and service, and among a substantial subset, research is the central mission upon which the other two missions are built. Administrators and faculty at research universities view their institutions as more prestigious than universities that focus primarily on teaching, and among research institutions there is also a hierarchy based on the quality of the faculty and the quantity and quality of the research done at the institution. Most people could recite a list of the most prestigious research universities—Chicago, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and so forth—but quality is difficult to quantify, and people may have a harder time evaluating universities farther down the quality scale without additional information. Nevertheless, a measure of quality might be desirable for many reasons. Students choosing a graduate school could benefit from such an indicator, for example, and university administrators might be interested in some measure of how departments in their institutions compare with those in other universities. In response to the desire for some quantitative ranking of research universities, the National Research Council (NRC) has produced

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several studies ranking graduate programs. This paper discusses some of the effects of the NRC rankings on research activities in economics departments.

The NRC rankings quantify the quality of research done in economics departments, but they also can affect the type of research done in economics departments. The NRC rankings affect research activity within some departments because the administrations at some universities have set an explicit goal of improving their NRC rankings. For example, at my institution, Florida State University, faculty have been told that one of our goals is to improve our NRC ranking, the administration has communicated to faculty the details regarding how the NRC ranks faculty, and individual faculty are asked to report their own research activities following the NRC format. This way, each faculty member is able to judge his or her own contribution to the department's NRC ranking.

One result is that faculty members can be compared with each other based on the NRC criteria, and given the administration's goals, this affects the department's evaluation of faculty research, decisions on hiring, promotion, and tenure, and sends a signal to faculty regarding how their activities contribute to the overall institutional goal of improving the department's NRC ranking.¹ Activities that are counted by the NRC get increased emphasis, while those the NRC does not count are deemphasized. I have discussed this phenomenon with colleagues at other mid-level universities (Florida State's economics department ranked 60th in the most recent NRC study) and found that their institutions have similar goals and are using similar methods.² Although it does not appear that many other universities are adopting NRC methods as directly as FSU is, Mr. James Voytuk, who aided the production of the 1995 NRC study, and who is currently the chair of NRC's Committee for the Study of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States, reports that he observes strong interest in NRC's rating methods from representatives of the Council of Graduate Schools and similar organizations.³ Before considering the effects

¹ Hires right out of graduate school may have little to show in any of these dimensions, but senior hires will be evaluated this way and junior hires will be evaluated on their potential for scoring high using these criteria.

² Klein and Chiang (2004a) present survey results indicating that citation counts are used more at mid-level universities than at the top schools. Their survey obtained responses from a subset of universities and I have discussed these issues with colleagues at other universities that were not among the respondents to Klein and Chiang's survey.

³ Mr. Voytuk conveyed this observation in a telephone conversation with Daniel Klein on 21 September 2004.

of this competition in more detail, the NRC ranking procedure will be described and discussed.

THE NRC RANKING PROCEDURE

The NRC is an outgrowth of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), which was created in 1863 by an Act of Congress to promote science and technology.⁴ The Civil War prompted the NAS's creation, and it investigated issues like how to protect the bottoms of iron ships, and how to correct for magnetic compass deviation. The NRC was similarly founded by an Act of Congress in 1916 to coordinate scientific and technological research and development, this time related to the outbreak of World War I. The NAS promotes and funds research projects and the NRC, as a part of NAS, has undertaken several studies evaluating the quality of academic departments at research universities.

The results of the most recent NRC study are found in Goldberger, Maher, and Flattau (1995), cited as NRC throughout the remainder of this essay, which ranks 3,634 doctoral programs in 41 fields at 274 universities in the United States (NRC, 19). Of 135 programs that awarded doctoral degrees in economics from 1986 to 1992, a total of 106 economics programs are evaluated (NRC, 20). The rankings were done by mailing questionnaires to faculty at those institutions and asking them to evaluate a subset of other programs in their field. Respondents were asked to rank the scholarly quality of program faculty (as distinguished, strong, good, adequate, marginal, or not sufficient for doctoral education) and the effectiveness of the program in educating research scholars and scientists (as extremely effective, reasonably effective, minimally effective, or not effective). The responses were then placed on a numeric scale and the rankings aggregated to give each program a score of 1-5 in each of the two areas: quality of faculty, and effectiveness of the program. Departments are listed in the NRC volume in rank order determined by the subjective evaluation of the quality of their faculty, and because of this, the subjective quality-of-faculty measure is viewed as a department's overall NRC ranking.

⁴ Background information on the NAS and NRC can be found at www.nationalacademies.org/about.

The NRC study ranks individual doctoral programs at universities, but it does not rank the universities.⁵

The NRC notes that there are several objective measures that are highly correlated with the subjective ratings of departments, and reports three in their results: publications per faculty member, citations to faculty publications, and research grants to faculty. If the rankings were given in a different format—for example, if departments were listed in alphabetical order—readers might be more inclined to weigh different metrics when evaluating a department. For example, if one department ranked 12th in citations and 15th in the subjective evaluation of faculty quality, that department might (or might not) be viewed as a better department than one that ranked 15th citations and 12th in the subjective evaluation of faculty quality. Because the rankings are presented in order of the subjective faculty quality rankings, however, it would appear to most readers that the first department ranks 15th overall while the second ranks 12th. The way the rankings are presented has a big impact on the way they are perceived. The rating for effectiveness in educating students is in the study right beside the rating for quality of faculty, but because schools are ranked by the survey results on quality of faculty, that metric is clearly the one that counts most. The tables give a total of 20 columns of data, including faculty publications, citations, grants, mean year to get a degree, and other factors that might be important indicators of quality. Yet by the table's design, ultimately it is the survey results on faculty quality that determines the quality-ranking of a department, and the other information is there if people want it.

Nearly 600 pages of the 740 page NRC study are tables that examine and present the rankings of doctoral programs. Each program has 20 data fields describing it, including the current rankings and change in ranking from the earlier study, demographic information such as number of faculty, students, female students, minority students, US students, and faculty publications, citations, and grants. While the departments are presented in rank-order of their faculty quality as measured by the survey, the data are available in electronic form through the NRC, and the study notes that “many other types of analyses are possible and encouraged” (NRC, 15 and 59). Discussions with colleagues at other universities have revealed that many universities in addition to my own have taken this suggestion

⁵ Rankings of doctoral programs based on faculty opinion goes back at least to 1925 (NRC, 10), and the NRC first produced such a ranking in 1982 (Jones, Lindzey, and Coggeshall, 1982). The purpose of the 1995 NRC study was to update and improve on what was presented in the 1982 study.

seriously and used the NRC data to assess the quality of their departments, and to look for ways to improve their NRC rankings. One result of this is that faculty evaluations place more emphasis on those indicators reported by the NRC. Apparently, the idea is that if a department improves in those objectively-measurable areas, their subjective survey rankings will also tend to rise.

QUANTIFYING QUALITY

One can see the justifications for trying to quantify the quality of a program, such as giving potential students a rough indication of the relative qualities of graduate programs they might be considering. But for purposes such as this, it should be apparent that quality is not a single-dimensional characteristic. Graduate programs have different strengths, and a program well-suited for one student may not meet the interests of others. While people might recognize that some programs are clearly higher-quality than others, for some purposes there will be no way that, in an objective sense, programs can be strictly rank-ordered by quality. Yet by creating this type of ranking, a metric is created that enables university administrators to compare their departments with others and to try to improve their quality, as measured by that ranking.⁶

The NRC (3, 40, and 422) notes the correlation between the quality ranking and the objective indicators of publications, citations, and grants, so it is a short step for university administrators to conclude that their departments could increase their NRC rankings by improving in these dimensions. Therefore, one result of the publication of the NRC study is that university administrators are emphasizing those metrics as performance measures of their faculty. Thus, it is reasonable to examine those criteria and see what incentives they imply for economic research.

⁶ See Toutkoushian et al. (2003) for a justification of research rankings and a methodology for calculating them from the ISI publication database.

Journal Publications

While the NRC study discusses faculty publications, what it actually measures is publications in journals that are compiled by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI). The ISI maintains a database that includes information from a subset of all academic journals, including 163 economics journals, and only articles in those journals are counted in the NRC publication methodology. The number of economics journals covered is substantial, but many economics journals are not included in the list, and the list does not include books or monographs.⁷ This creates an obvious bias toward publications in ISI journals, and an obvious bias away from writing books or publishing scholarly research in any form except for ISI journal articles.

This bias may result in some departments being ranked lower in publications than if books and other outlets were considered. When one recognizes that the NRC criteria are often factored into promotion, tenure, and hiring decisions, it creates a bias against scholars who spend their time writing books, and points researchers toward the production of journal articles rather than books. Certain types of ideas and analysis are better presented in books, where the author has room to present a more detailed argument. The ISI/NRC metric discourages those forms of scholarship.⁸ Certain fields may produce research more conducive to book-length treatment (economic history may be an example), and scholarship in those fields may be discouraged relative to other areas. At a minimum, the

⁷ All ISI publications and citations are counted equally, so as far as “measuring” quality by publication and citation counts, a publication or citation either counts or it does not. But economists have a long history of rating their journals by quality too. See Brauniger and Haucap (2003, 178) who note, “To test for any prejudices in favour of theoretical and quantitative journals, Hawkins, Ritter, and Walter (1973) included two ‘dummy’ journals in their survey of economists. Their nonexistent *Journal of Economic and Statistical Theory* ranked in the top third of all journals surveyed (24th out of 87) while the equally non-existent *Regional Studies and Economic Change* ranked in the bottom third (59th out of 87).” It may be that similar biases exist in rating entire departments, but this conjecture is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁸ For example, economists working in the Austrian tradition seem to be more inclined to publish their ideas in books rather than journal articles, perhaps creating a bias against such scholars. There are two journals aimed explicitly at publishing Austrian economics, *The Review of Austrian Economics* and *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*, but neither is in the ISI/SSCI database. For obvious reasons, this could push young scholars interested in the ideas of the Austrian school, but hoping to achieve tenure at a research university, toward doing more mainstream types of research.

publication of scholarly research will be biased toward journal articles in ISI journals.⁹

The NRC methodology only counts articles that were published in the most recent five years,¹⁰ so their ranking is an indicator of recent scholarship rather than lifetime achievement. An argument can be made for this, in that it places younger scholars on a more equal footing with senior scholars. However, one of the stated purposes of the NRC study is to help prospective graduate students to get an idea about the quality of doctoral programs, and if so, a longer time frame might provide a better indication of the scholarly achievement of a department's faculty.¹¹

Citations

The same database used to count publications is also used to count citations. Each article in the ISI database has a list of citations associated with it, and that list is used as the starting point for obtaining the NRC citation count. While every citation in an article is listed in the database, the NRC citation count truncates this list of citations in two substantial ways. First, the NRC only counts citations to articles that are in journals in the ISI database; second, the NRC only counts citations to articles that were published in the past five years.

Figure 1 shows the peculiar method of NRC. In the left column are three sources of scholarly publications, an article in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics (QJE)*, which is in the ISI's Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), an article in *Constitutional Political Economy (CPE)*, which is not in SSCI, and book called "Book X." Assume that each of these three publications cites the three references in the right column of the figure: an article from the

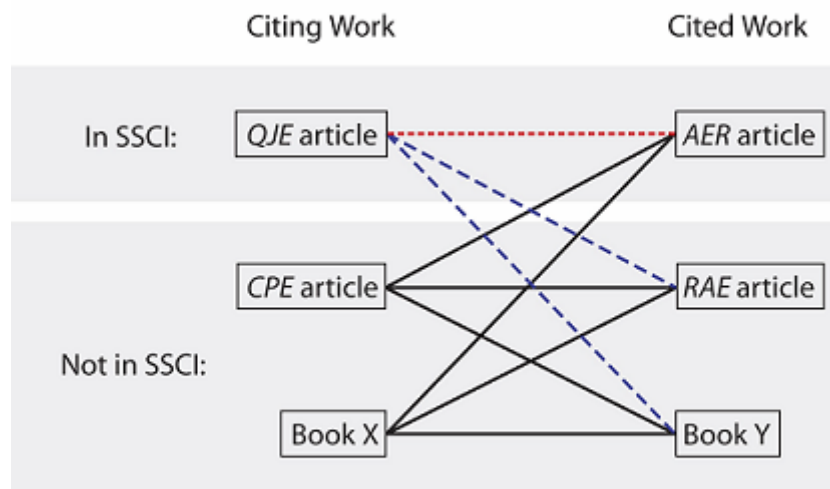
⁹ Klein and Chiang (2004b) suggest that there may be an ideological bias in the journals that are included in the ISI database as well.

¹⁰ The NRC 1995 report was actually completed in 1993, and used the five-year data period 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1992, as indicated on p. 3 of the NRC study. This was confirmed by Mr. Voytuk in a telephone conversation with Daniel Klein, 21 September 2004.

¹¹ The NRC presents publications per faculty member, rather than total publications, and who counts as a faculty member is determined by the institutions being ranked. They send a list of "program faculty" to the NRC; faculty on the list are counted, while those not listed are not. This clearly provides some discretion to the institutions, because it may not always be clear which faculty are a part of the doctoral program and which are not. I have no indication that universities have strategically excluded some faculty who are not publishing, but if the rankings are important to university administrators, the possibility is there.

American Economic Review (*AER*), which is in the SSCI, an article in the *Review of Austrian Economics* (*RAE*), which is not in the SSCI, and Book Y. Thus, three sources each make three citations, for a total of nine citations. Yet ISI/SSCI would count only three citations: those from the *QJE* article. NRC truncates even further by requiring that the cited work be in the ISI/SSCI, thus counting only one of those nine citations: the *QJE* citation of the *AER* article.

Citation counts do not count many citations



The diagram shows nine citations. SSCI counts only three (the dotted red and dashed blue citations). The NRC counts only one (the dotted red citation).

If citation count is intended to reflect the scholarly impact of a faculty member's work, there would seem to be no justification for not counting books, monographs, technical reports, and the like that are cited in ISI articles. The reason these citations are not counted has nothing to do with the merits of ISI journal articles relative to other cited publications, but is a function of the limitations of the ISI database. One problem with assigning citations to particular faculty members is that many people share names, so one cannot go by the author's name alone to determine who is being cited. The articles in the ISI database are cataloged by, among other things, the Zip Code of the author (NRC, 143), and the author's name

along with the Zip Code are used to assign citations under the NRC methodology. In order for the NRC to find the Zip Code of the cited author, the cited article must be in the ISI database. Thus, as with the publication count, if the work cited is a book, monograph, or article that is not in an ISI journal, it will not count as a citation because there is no Zip Code associated with the publication to identify the author. Part of the problem is that with so many faculty and publications, it is not feasible to count citations any way other than by using a computerized database, and one can utilize only the data that are cataloged. As the study notes, "The result of this matching was the identification of approximately 1 million publications that could be credited to the program faculty in the study." With so many publications, it would be infeasible to try to assign authorship to those works cited without a Zip Code in the ISI database.

Certainly in the case of some authors who have written frequently-cited books (e.g., Nobel laureates Douglass North and James Buchanan), their NRC citation counts seriously underrepresent the number of times they actually are cited relative to scholars whose cited works are published in ISI journals. Checking the ISI database to count all citations rather than just those to ISI articles is a relatively easy task, so for any one individual, one could correct for this oversight. However, if an institution's goal is to increase its faculty citations in the next NRC study, citations to articles in ISI journals will count more in that institution's incentive system.

Another problem with citation counts as an indicator of faculty quality is that some fields tend to cite more literature, and to cite more broadly, than others. For example, articles in macroeconomics tend to have fewer citations than those in labor economics, and articles in macroeconomics tend to cite a smaller set of key papers while articles in labor economics tend to cite a broader set of work to give a better feel for the empirical findings of past studies. The use of citation counts as an indicator of faculty quality tends to favor some fields of economics over others, so for hiring, promotion, and tenure, there may be a bias in economics departments favoring scholars in certain fields.

According to what the NRC study says, it appears that all citations appearing in ISI articles in the past five years to articles in ISI journals are counted, whenever the cited articles were published. However, the administrators at my university say that the NRC methodology only counts citations in ISI articles published in the last five years to articles published in ISI journals in the past five years, and this was confirmed by the NRC's Mr. James

Voytuk.¹² Thus, the NRC citation method is even narrower than the narrowness illustrated in Figure 1. If the cited article was published more than five years ago, it does not count as a citation in the NRC methodology. For purposes of annual evaluations, one thing we (economics faculty at Florida State University) report is a citation count done following the NRC methodology. The reason for not counting citations to articles published more than five years ago appears to be because the NRC used the same database of articles to count publications and citations, so articles older than five years would not have appeared in their database.

As with publications, this five-year truncation levels the playing field between junior and senior faculty. But if a department's prestige is based partly on faculty who have written classic articles, those articles would not be included in the NRC citation count, so the count would understate the prestige of such departments. The citation of older articles would suggest that those articles have stood the test of time, whereas newer articles may not, so if anything, it would appear better to bias the citation count in favor of older articles rather than to exclude them.

Considering the publication process in economics, it is difficult to get many articles cited in this time frame. After an article is written and submitted to a journal, the review time, the likelihood that the article will be rejected from a journal and submitted to a second one, and the frequency with which even accepted articles go through a process of revision, may take several years. Then there is often a publication lag of a year or more, so if a manuscript submitted for publication cites a newly published article, that article may be several years old before the manuscript citing it is published as an article. This lag would favor top departments in the citation count process, because it is more likely that an author in a top department would have colleagues that might cite their forthcoming work, allowing more of their work to be cited within that five-year window. By the time the citing article is published, the cited article may also be, and the citation can then be changed to list the final publication data.

Top departments may be favored for another reason. If scholars are evaluated by their citation counts, individuals can help each other in this regard by citing each others' work. This works best when those citing each others' work publish frequently in ISI journals, and because publication counts are higher in top-rated departments, those departments have an edge if this type of reciprocal citations occurs. This would not have to be an overt conspiracy to take advantage of the NRC methodology. People might

¹² In telephone conversation with Daniel Klein, 21 September 2004.

cite those they know well, such as their colleagues, and also might cite people in the hope that those authors will notice their work and reciprocate. That is more likely to happen when there is a personal connection. The Lucas (1976) critique applied to macroeconomic policy may also apply to citation counts. When citations are first counted, they may be a useful indicator of the influence of the author's work, but once people know they are used this way, the indicator loses its usefulness as authors exploit the system.

Finally, note that citations count the same regardless of the reason the work is cited. If an article has an error in it that is pointed out in a later work, or if the work is cited as an example of shoddy scholarship, it still counts as a citation.

Grants

Another metric in the NRC data is federal grants. The logic of using grants is that in order to get grants, researchers must submit their grant applications in a peer review process that evaluates the quality of the proposed work. The NRC does not use all grants, however, but only federal grants from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Defense. As the study notes (NRC, 37), these agencies accounted for nearly three-quarters of all federal grants over the study period. The stated reason for limiting grant awards to these federal grants, however, is data availability. The principal investigators for these grants can be provided by the federal government and matched to the list of faculty supplied by the institutions. The NRC only counts federal grants because data are readily available from federal agencies (NRC, 37), and does not argue that federal grants are a better indicator of research quality than grants from private organizations or states, or that federal grants from these particular agencies are a better indicator than grants from other federal agencies.

The argument for including this measure in the NRC departmental rankings is that there is a positive correlation between federal grants to faculty and the quality rankings generated by the survey. Yet there are so many fundamental questions regarding this metric that one hardly knows where to start. The most obvious is that private grant support would seem to be at least as good an indicator of the quality of the recipient's research. To omit private grants obviously biases the rankings in favor of those who receive government versus private support. It also biases the incentives of

researchers toward seeking federal government support for their research rather than private support. This may affect the type of research one pursues. The National Institutes of Health and the Department of Defense have particular research interests that they want to fund, for example.

When one looks at the source of federal grants, this indicator of research quality can provide poor incentives. For example, the National Institutes of Health provides the bulk of their research dollars to universities with medical schools, so universities with medical schools will have an advantage in attaining federal grants. While grants are totaled by department, the synergy created between units can help generate grants. For example, it is easy to see that an economics department in a university with a medical school will be better positioned to obtain grants from the National Institutes of Health. This metric may bias the rankings of departments in favor of those that are at a university with a medical school, and may even create an incentive for a university to create a medical school in order to increase its federal funding, and thereby increase its NRC ranking.¹³

State and local government grants are not included in the NRC measure. This creates another bias, in that national issues are favored over local issues, and because of that, academic research in economics may tend to favor more centralized government activity over decentralized activity. Perhaps another factor is that the top universities, who have input into designing the methodology, tend to garner a larger percentage of federal grants, so federal grants is a measure that reinforces the perception that these departments have the top faculty.

Another problem with the idea that the amount of grant funding is a measure of the quality of a faculty is that it creates a bias toward undertaking more expensive research. Normally, in the private sector of the economy, if something can be accomplished more cheaply, that is viewed as desirable; yet, using grant funding as an indicator of quality, the more expensively one can undertake research, the better that will be for a department's ranking.¹⁴ Admittedly, there is some logic to using dollars as the metric from the standpoint of a university administration, because

¹³ At Florida State University, the administration is very conscious of the NRC rankings and encourages its faculty to get federal grants. Florida State University also established a medical school in 2000. While I have no evidence that the medical school was created as a method of increasing the university's federal grants, establishing a medical school may be a way to increase its performance in an area that the NRC finds is correlated with higher rankings of faculty quality.

¹⁴ Toutkoushian et al. (2003, 124) note that the level of grants may be a better measure of inputs into the production of research than the research output that is produced.

money is fungible, and grant money can be used for overhead, funding graduate students, and other purposes. From a social standpoint, however, less expensive research should be preferred to more expensive research, and it would seem that researchers should be praised for reducing the cost of their research. Instead, they are rewarded for increasing its cost.

Note that it is the dollars that are counted, not the number of grants. If the logic behind using grants as a measure of quality is that grants go through a review process that judges the quality of the research, number of grants would seem to be a better measure of quality than total grant dollars. From a quality standpoint, it would seem that five separately-reviewed grants for \$50,000 had more peer review, and should count for more than one \$250,000 grant-funded project.

The incentive structure creates some pressure for any researcher to seek out grant money, and especially federal grant money. It also may bias a department's interests toward those areas that are more expensive to undertake research, if that research might attract grant money. For example, experimental economics and computational economics are two areas in which it is relatively expensive to undertake research because of the cost of running experiments and the cost of computer equipment. These areas are frequently funded by National Science Foundation grants, making them good areas in which to specialize if a department wants to increase its federal grants. In this way, this criterion may bias the direction of research in economics in those departments that want to increase their standing in the NRC rankings.

Another issue related to federal grants is that the money to fund them comes from taxpayers who are forced to tender their tax dollars to the federal government. If my research depended on money that was forcibly taken from others, at the very least I would not be proud of this particular aspect of it, yet academic recipients of federal grants appear completely unapologetic of the fact that their work is funded by money taken from taxpayers against their will. Indeed, they even seem proud of it. At least with private funding, those who supply the grants do so voluntarily, and for this reason alone it would appear to me that foundation funding is far superior—on moral grounds alone—to government funding.

THE IMPACT OF THE NRC RANKINGS ON ECONOMIC RESEARCH

The NRC is working on an update of their rankings of doctoral programs, and because administrators at some universities want to see their doctoral programs rise in the rankings, the NRC rankings have an impact on economic research. I see this first-hand at my own institution, and colleagues in other mid-level economics programs tell me they see the same emphasis on the NRC rankings at their universities.¹⁵ Surely it is not unreasonable for university administrators to take account of these rankings, and to want their departments to improve in the rankings. The rankings are very visible to the academic community, and higher rankings provide more prestige to the university and to its administrators. Administrators cannot be intimately familiar with their doctoral programs that are well outside their fields of expertise, so it is natural for them to rely on this kind of outside ranking as at least a partial indicator of the quality of their programs. But by so doing, they alter the research incentives, hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions in their economics departments, even if that is not their intention. The NRC metrics are used as a measure of faculty performance simply because the information is collected and reported, and the incentives they imply affect the direction of research in economics. The methodology in the new updated study may differ from that in the current study. Yet because the new methodology is unknown at this time, the things that “count” right now are those used in the 1995 study.

In my own department, faculty are asked to supply a count of their publications, citations, and federal grants following the NRC methodology as a part of the annual evaluation process. This information is then passed on to the provost, who keeps track of faculty performance using the NRC methodology. These data are only a small part of the information on which faculty evaluations are based, and the provost has never said that he wants faculty to reorient their work so that they will add to the department’s NRC scores, but those NRC criteria take on an added importance because of the clear institutional goal to move up in the NRC rankings. They provide some incentive for faculty to orient their work so that they can get publications,

¹⁵ It is perhaps worth a footnote to remark that if quality is measured by these rankings, it is a zero-sum game among universities. If universities want their departments to move up in the NRC rankings, the successes of some automatically generate failures for others.

citations, and grants. Perhaps more significantly, they provide the incentive for the department to hire people who can do well in those areas.

The NRC ranks departments, not individual faculty.¹⁶ Individual faculty may be judged based on how they add to the NRC numbers, but a good way to “improve” a department, according to the NRC criteria, is to hire people who excel in those things. This may increase a department’s ranking (but remember, the ultimate rank order is a subjective evaluation, not these objective measures), and may also take some of the pressure off existing faculty to orient their work that way. The NRC rankings create an incentive to hire a particular kind of scholar. Doing interesting work, being intelligent, and working hard are all good things, but if they lead to publications, citations, and grants, as measured by the NRC, that is even better. As a result, departments that have their eyes on the NRC rankings will tend to become more homogeneous because they benefit from hiring in fields that tend to get more citations or grants. Departments may avoid individuals whose work is somewhat outside the mainstream because such work is less likely to be cited, or who may have good ideas but a slow publication rate, and the diversity of ideas in economics departments will likely decline as a result.

Thirty years ago, economics departments at places like UCLA, the University of Washington, and Virginia Tech had identities that set them apart from other departments. Now the research coming from those departments is much more similar to the research done in departments that rank above them. Among all the top-ranked departments, there is much more homogeneity today than there was decades ago.¹⁷ The homogenization of the discipline extends beyond schools of thought to the narrowing of fields of inquiry to focus on those that tend to get more citations, publications, and grants.

This emphasis on research and graduate education has also robbed academic economics of some of its relevance to real-world economic phenomena. Research departments give virtually no credit to faculty who write magazine articles, newspaper editorials, policy reports, or other material designed to enlighten the general public. Of course, one cannot blame the NRC departmental rankings for this, but the NRC rankings are a

¹⁶ One result of this is that there is no way for individual faculty members to look at their own numbers following the NRC methodology and identify any mistakes the NRC might have made in their calculations.

¹⁷ One department that stands out as having a unique identity is George Mason’s, which ranks 46th in the NRC study. See Landreth and Colander (2002, 6-8) for a discussion of the role of heterodoxy in the development of economic ideas.

part of a larger movement toward judging the quality of faculty in a very narrow way, such as by their academic journal publications, citations, and grants. The result is an academic discipline that is increasingly incapable of speaking to a general audience about real world problems.¹⁸

Looking at the big picture, the NRC ranking of economics departments is responsible for, at most, a small part of the changes in the nature of research done in economics departments, but it is part of a larger movement, as institutions want to improve their departments and try to do so by making their departments more like the top economics departments. This results in more homogeneous departments, and pushes individuals in those departments to orient their work more toward the mainstream so they can get publications, citations, and grants. As a result, the distinct identities that departments had 30 or 40 years ago are becoming more blurred. Without departmental rankings, departments might pride themselves in being among the best in a particular field, or for nurturing a unique approach or vision, but numerical rankings remove any value to uniqueness, and if anything, show that those unique characteristics do not pay off in terms of measured quality. The NRC rankings contribute to this homogenization of economics departments, and if one takes a Kuhnian (1962) approach to the advancement of the discipline, economics is likely to be worse off as a result.

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¹⁸ Years ago I had a colleague who, over lunch, told a story of a question asked by a student in his intermediate microeconomics class. The student asked what relevance the material they were covering had to the real world, and my colleague reported to us with delight that he told the student, “This is a theory class. If this material has any relevance to the real world, it is just a coincidence.”

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