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Ask the Business-school Ranking Media to Walk their Talk

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Ask the Business-school Ranking Media to Walk their Talk

Arbaugh, Fornaciari and Hwang (2016) are to be commended for undertaking two worthy tasks: demonstrating the value of citation counts in the Business and Management Education (BME) field and attracting new scholars to the field drawing on rigorous citation analyses. In this commentary I first address the use of citation counts in BME research and then conclude with my own idea for attracting more scholars to the field.

Citations have always been of interest to institutions in evaluating their research faculty. In previous years, anyone wishing to see the citation counts for scholarly papers had to trek to their campus library's reference section and look them up in already out-of-date tomes. Now that citations are kept in easily accessed online databases, citation counts increasingly are used by more universities to evaluate their faculty. Despite their limitations, citation counts seem to loom ever larger in importance. Yet, we all know the limitations of citation counts, all of which are magnified in BME research: citation counts only assess a narrow kind of scholarly impact (whether other published articles cited the work), and do not assess the impact BME research might have in the classroom (instructional innovations) or in curriculum reform and design.

Nevertheless, Arbaugh, et al.'s (2016) citation-based analyses lead to some important insights. I won't repeat all of the insights they list in their article, but do wish to expand on three of them and then suggest a method nit pic that has implications for the role of citation counts in BME research. First, the BME areas with the most scholarly citations are, I suspect, also the ones for which educators have most often sought practical help. Interest in

entrepreneurship and distance or online education has exploded in business schools in the past two decades. Many of those who are asked to teach in these areas are desperately searching for ways to successfully communicate the material (entrepreneurship) or cope with an unfamiliar delivery method (distance or online education). The third most common type of articles, ethics, is certainly not a new interest, but one that is not easy to teach. So, we are all interested in new ways to effectively convey ethics in ways that can lead to more ethical actions. I am heartened that the scholarly citation counts the authors compiled reflect what I hope will remain a central focus of *Journal of Management Education* and other BME journals: to have a significant impact on our understanding and practice of management education.

Second, I would like to elaborate on what I believe may be an overly narrow interpretation of their finding regarding a reputation effect. Yes, scholars in management are more likely to read an article by someone with a stellar reputation – say, Jeffrey Pfeffer - than by someone they have not yet gotten to know. That is a reputation effect. However, that reputation was not inherited; in academia, reputation is earned based on previous work. Scholars with higher citation counts are more likely to be experienced in laying out their ideas clearly and crisply, and making their case in a way that captures their audience's interest. I know if I read something by Jeffrey Pfeffer, I am likely to be amused, irked, to have learned something new, and entertained. And, if I read such an article, I am more likely to cite it in my own work. It is too easy to dismiss reputation effects as mere status effects, i.e. curtsying to the master just because he (or she) is the master. If this is so, then reputation effects are unfair and disreputable. However, to me, there is an action implication of the reputation effect Arbaugh et. al. found, particularly for junior scholars; that is, to deconstruct the writing of these highly-

cited scholars and ask why this paper was so interesting to others? Of course, not all highly-cited articles are well written. Sometimes, such articles have just caught a popular wave at the right time. However, an author's h-index over 40 (meaning that at least 40 of the author's papers have been cited 40 or more times) indicates a scholar who repeatedly picks interesting questions and presents them well.

Third, I want to draw attention in particular to one recommendation by Arbaugh, et al. (2016). They found, like Bedian (2004), that there is insufficient use of our shared intellectual history in BME research. For example, research on business internships might be useful to those interested in corporate social responsibility education but is unknown to them. This may be because many scholars turn to BME research only after already contributing in their subject-matter discipline. So, these scholars remain unaware of relevant foundational BME research on which they should build. If we had fewer authors trying to redesign the wheel in BME research, we would have fewer single-cited topics in a future iteration of Arbaugh, et al.'s (2016) Table 2. I would not want to dissuade experienced discipline-based scholars from turning to BME research but, if I am right, this places a larger burden on BME journal editors to select reviewers who have a broad understanding of the range of BME research and insure that these reviewers provide full citations so the authors can find the missed work with which they may be unfamiliar.

Finally, a citations methods nit pic: the use of such a high h-index has unduly limited and possibly distorted Arbaugh, et al.'s (2016) results. An h-index over 40 is extremely high in business school research. My cursory examination of their data suggests that high h-index scholars are more likely to write about business education in general rather than on specific

topics. These will be senior scholars and no doubt their extensive experience teaching, working on curriculum revisions, and speaking with alumni have demonstrated the many flaws in institution-based business education. I have no problems with their complaints (I usually read them with satisfaction); however, I believe these complaints are the least useful BME articles. Have any such complaints or recommendations since the Gordon-Howell Report of 1959 (which was backed by substantial Ford Foundation monies) really ever made difference? Business school curricula and the content of what we teach do change, sometimes quite substantially, but usually in response to student demand or individual instructor knowledge or insight, not because of yet another harangue.

All in all, the authors are to be commended for their interest in increasing the legitimacy of BME research and so attracting more scholars to this important field. Business management research is extremely difficult to do well. It is almost impossible to do “gold standard” double-blind randomized experiments in the field. This means that left alone, BME research would probably not be able to gain the legitimacy of research that can have greater experimental control and so more confidence in its conclusions. This is just the way it is. Yet, as Arbaugh, et al. (2016) note, there is a growing and increasingly vital need for more careful research on what does and does not work in university-based business education. For example, we need more insights from outside North America on what aspects of established curricula do and do not work in local context. We need more systematic research about the student experience and institutional loyalty of students learning through distant and online education formats. There are many important BME questions, but additional complaints about the well-known flaws in business education are not among them.

I will conclude with my own modest suggestion for increasing the legitimacy of Business Management Education research and so its attractiveness to more scholars. I agree with the authors that junior faculty in most institutions need to publish in the journals used in the business media rankings. In fact, junior and senior faculty members alike face increasing pressure to publish in these journals. However, I observe that business media claim to care about educational quality but assess it using highly unreliable and biased graduating-student surveys even when Business Management Education research is more rigorous and valid than the results of those surveys. Further, business media claims that it cares about educational quality, but assesses it in a primitive and biased way - one that costs them time and money to produce invalid data with little ability to differentiate good from bad education. Better might be for BME editors and associations (and maybe even a few deans) to effectively communicate to the editors of these media that if they used publications in the top BME journals in their rankings, they would save time and money and could more reliably differentiate which schools care about business education quality. If even one business and management education journal counted in the business-school rankings, I am confident we would see an immediate boost in the legitimacy of such research, and this would lead to more scholars doing more BME research – something useful to us instructors, and most importantly, to our students.

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