

RETHINKING RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

IDEAS FOR ACTION



5 COMMON MYTHS ABOUT EVALUATION

Hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions are largely made on “merit.”

Quality research is easy to recognize and rises to the top

JIF and other similar journal-based indicators measure research quality

Researchers mostly care about journal reputation

Assessment practices will naturally improve over time

Assessing research and researchers, especially in research-intensive institutions, frequently relies on indicators like Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and similar measures as proxies for quality in research, promotion, and tenure (RPT) decisions. But a closer examination indicates that the perceived value of JIF is often grounded in **five common myths**:

Large volumes of applications for faculty searches make it difficult for evaluators to distinguish between top-tier candidates, and unintended biases—like the halo effect, availability, and confirmation bias—influence decision making.

Novel research, including breakthrough Nobel-prize winning work², often becomes influential (and cited) outside of the JIF measurement window³, and findings with significant societal impact are not always published in journals with a high JIF.

JIFs are intended to reflect overall journal measures, and do not provide reliable or scientifically sound information about individual articles or researchers⁵.

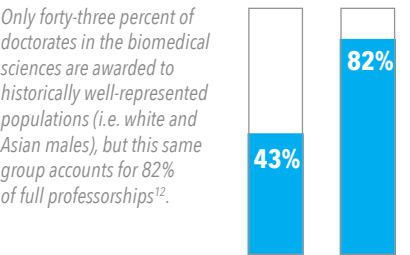
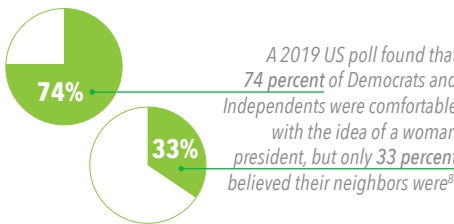
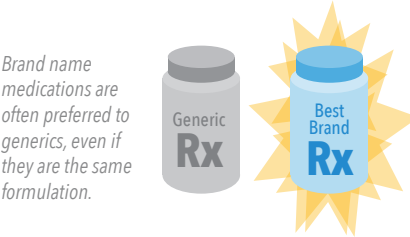
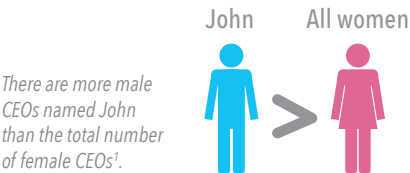
Forty percent of research-intensive institutions in North America mention JIF in RPT documents, but interpret it inconsistently to mean quality, importance, or prestige⁶.

Faculty members claim to prioritize peer readership when publishing, yet the perception that their peers value prestige and a reliance on university rankings puts pressure on researchers to publish their work in high impact factor journals⁷.

“Invisible work” like service is typically not valued in RPT, yet disproportionately falls on women and other scholars historically excluded from research^{9,10}.

Based on a model of current post-doc to faculty transitions, faculty diversity will not significantly increase until 2080 without active intervention¹¹.

Analogous examples of these myths exist, both inside and outside of science:



5 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

to help institutions experiment with and develop better research assessment practices

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Instill standards and structure into research assessment processes

This might look like...

Tools like **narrative CVs** and **assessment matrices**¹³ provide standards to increase consistency in decision-making.

Discussion amongst evaluators can be used to **define expectations and identify desirable qualities** before any assessment takes place.

Prioritize equity and transparency of research assessment processes

This might look like...

Needhi Bhalla compiled a **checklist of proven strategies to increase equity in hiring**¹⁴.

The Molecular, Cell and Developmental Biology Department at UC Santa Cruz **includes untenured faculty in departmental tenure decisions** to demystify the promotion and tenure process. Other institutions **invite postdocs to “chalk talks”** of faculty candidates discussing their future plans to provide insight into the faculty interview process.

Foster a sense of personal accountability in faculty and staff

This might look like...

The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya established a **working group**¹⁵ to **develop and implement an action plan** for responsible research assessment.

The University of Utrecht hosted a **series of town halls**¹⁶ to **collect feedback** before revising their policies.

Make it explicit that it’s **everyone’s responsibility to “stop the line”** in the face of suspected bias at the beginning of every decision-making situation.

Take a big picture or portfolio view toward researcher contributions

This might look like...

The Biology Department at the University of Richmond **evaluates the applicant pool** to better identify the subset of faculty candidates that match their needs, rather than focusing on individuals¹⁷.

Cluster hires can help institutions think about hiring in terms of their larger academic portfolio¹⁸. They are also a proven strategy to increase diversity.

Refine research assessment processes through iterative feedback

This might look like...

Make short and long-term goals for new policies and practices to measure success. No process is perfect; there needs to be flexibility to revisit and refine policies and practices as needed.