

E X C H A N G E S

“AN A IS AN A”: WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY, AND HE IS US!¹

ABDUL A. RASHEED
University of Texas at Arlington

RICHARD L. PRIEM
Texas Christian University

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In this exchange we consider the article by Professors Aguinis, Cummings, Ramani, and Cummings (2020) in this issue within the context of a recent special issue of *Academy of Management Learning & Education* on the Rhythm of Academic Life in June 2019. The bulk of our exchange focuses on Aguinis et al.’s article in this issue of *Academy of Management Perspectives*, but two of the in-press articles for the *AMLE* special issue—Harley’s article (2019) and Phillips’s rejoinder (2019) on the Harley article—address the research evaluation concerns examined by Aguinis et al. In addition to comparing the three articles, we add several extensions not mentioned in any of the three articles.

The article in this issue by Professors Aguinis, Cummings, Ramani, and Cummings (2020) provides an important service to management scholars and to the Academy of scholars more broadly. They highlight the causes, and positive and negative consequences, of a stark “an A is an A” approach to evaluating academic research. Most important, they offer several feasible ways of remediating the unintended negative effects of a dichotomous belief that “A’s” count and nothing else does.

We agree with the tone, tenor, and content of nearly all that Aguinis et al. say in their article. Nonetheless, we hope to extend their work in two important ways. First, an *Academy of Management Learning & Education* special issue on the Rhythm of Academic Life appeared in June 2019. The bulk of our exchange focuses on Aguinis et al.’s article in this issue of *Academy of Management Perspectives*, but two of the

articles for the *AMLE* special issue—Harley’s article (2019) and Phillips’s rejoinder on the Harley article (2019)—address the research evaluation concerns examined by Aguinis et al. We therefore take this opportunity to compare all three articles. Second, we add several extensions not mentioned in any of the three articles. Our hope is that this short exchange might be useful to scholars by (a) integrating these articles and (b) providing several extensions.

COMPARING AGUINIS ET AL., HURLEY, AND PHILLIPS

Fortunately, there is mostly consensus on the problem and its causes among Aguinis et al. (2020), Harley (2019), and Phillips (2019). This makes the comparison easier. Moreover, there appears to be unanimity among Aguinis et al., Harley, Phillips, and ourselves that some of the outcomes of dichotomous “an A is an A” research evaluation produces some truly awful outcomes for scholars and business schools, especially when combined with the large monetary and status benefits available for the very few winners of the research “tournament.” Table 1 summarizes our interpretations of these three

We thank *AMP* Editor Susanna Khavul for shepherding this exchange through the publication process in a thoughtful and expeditious manner. Errors are our own.

¹ This well-known quotation is from the comic strip Pogo, by Walt Kelly. It first appeared in 1970 and became the slogan for the first Earth Day. It subsequently became part of the vernacular in the United States (Cerenó, 2015).

TABLE 1
Comparing Aguinis et al., Harley, Phillips, and Rasheed and Priem

	Aguinis et al. (2020)	Harley (2019)	Phillips (2019)	Rasheed & Priem (current paper)
Reasons for “An A is an A”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance management systems • Research accountability • Clear standards • Perceived fairness • Counter scholars in other fields • Clear objectives and exemplars for doctoral students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong institutional pressures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Junior scholars’ demands for clarity in the promotion process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewarding A while hoping for B • Spurs intellectual progress by sorting research, which (although imperfect) reduces scholars’ search costs in finding top-notch articles
Positive consequences of “An A is an A”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With current high research incentives, produces: • Escalating competition • Questionable research practices • Academic vs. practical focus • Less research variety and method heterogeneity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholars’ disquiet and disaffection for their work • Journal editors gaming impact factors • Deleterious effects on teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dichotomous “A vs. nothing” is a straw man that doesn’t factor in outside reviewers or the internal department and school-wide committees that evaluate research outputs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time compression • Diseconomies in research • Separation of publication and scholarship
Negative consequences of “An A is an A”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and measurement: • Broader research measures, such as multiple indicators and continuous instead of the dichotomous “A not A” • Candidates identify their five most important articles • AoM should sign the DORA research assessment protocol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established scholars should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop pretending we are laboratory scientists • Stop supporting the myth of the heroic publishing machine • Stop supporting a flawed system and instead focus on the intrinsic value of our work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • P&T review committees should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look holistically at a scholar’s entire record • Quantitative measures (journal rankings and citations) still have an important role • Quantitative measures are important also in legitimating our work in the eyes of stakeholders who fund it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior scholars could reduce the pressure by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding the number of pages in each current “A” journal; the high cost of printing is no longer a viable excuse • Expanding the number of journals considered as “A’s” • Consider “A-” publications seriously as potentially great research
Corrective actions to mitigate negative consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research skills training in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best practices • Transparency 			

important articles, plus several extensions we discuss later.

Contributions of Aguinis et al.

We already have stated our broad agreement with Aguinis et al. on the reasons for the “an A is an A” phenomenon and its positive and negative consequences. We now briefly add our support for their conclusions that: (1) we currently are involved in a near winner-take-all tournament environment for top-level researchers; and (2) powerful incentives combine with the tournament model to distort scholars’ behavior.

Two broad cultural characteristics legitimize the tournament model in academics. First, participants in free-market economies, and especially business school scholars, believe in the beneficial aspects of competition and, thus, the tournament model. Second, sports-related metaphors, as Aguinis et al. point out, legitimize competition among scholars for a share of the relatively fixed rewards pie. Whereas we might consider every competently performed research study as a valuable addition to the body of knowledge, the tournament, “a win-is-a-win” mentality may classify research efforts too bluntly. Aguinis et al. have done a service by presenting the tournament model so clearly.

Powerful incentives, when combined with the tournament model, can distort behavior and produce unintended negative consequences. Aguinis et al. clearly explain why we are seeing this negative behavior increasingly in business schools. But beyond what they call questionable research practices (QRPs), we also are seeing instances of incentive-driven academic fraud. This is evidenced by the cases of individual business school professors who have had from six or seven up to 16 articles retracted due to data falsification issues (see, e.g., retractionwatch.org, nature.org; see also Honig et al.’s (2018) insightful reflections on academic misconduct).

Similar results have been seen at the business-school level, for false data submissions to ranking organizations from the Fox School of Business at Temple University in 2018, the Freeman School of Business at Tulane University in 2013 (Byrne, 2018), and the entrepreneurship program in the Bloch School of Management at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2015 (Hendrix & Williams, 2015). Each case of individual scholar or business school misconduct represents an instance of someone who got caught in unethical behavior. Yet, as Aguinis et al. notes, many lesser QRP violations likely remain uncovered.

Finally, Aguinis et al. do a nice job offering potential corrective actions that might mitigate the

negative consequences of “an A is an A.” Our only concern is that most universities we know already follow most of these recommended practices. Adopting all of Aguinis et al.’s recommendations will help, but will that be enough?

Contributions from Harley (2019) and Phillips (2019)

Professor Harley’s (2019) article covers similar ground as Aguinis et al. (2020). He questions elementally whether a scholarly career in management today is “a useful thing to devote one’s life to.” Harley sees strong, long-term institutional pressures for high research performance, from our schools and their stakeholders, that are unlikely to abate. Moreover, he views ranking journals as part of a broader shift toward ranking business schools, departments, faculty members, and students. Harley (2019) extends Aguinis et al.’s discussion of the negative effects of “an A is an A” in several ways. First, he notes some scholars’ “disquiet and disaffection” with their work under the high-pressure, tournament system discussed by Aguinis et al. and later by Phillips. Second, he sees some journal editors gaming the impact-factor ratings via the use of review issues, special issues, and requests that accepted authors cite more of their journals’ articles. Third, Harley sees deleterious effects on teaching from “an A is an A,” due in part to limited time available for teaching-focused activities versus publications. Harley broadens the “an A is an A” ranking mentality to include students, who also are interested in rankings, both for their schools and for themselves relative to others. He notes that once students are admitted to business schools, many exhibit an instrumental focus on achieving a career credential rather than on learning.

Harley provides recommendations for ameliorating negative effects, which, aside from what is mentioned in the prior paragraph, overlap quite well with those in Aguinis et al. Harley’s remedies involve established scholars eliminating three specific bad habits, which would set good examples for junior colleagues. The first bad habit is “pretending we’re (an idealized version of) laboratory scientists.” He argues that this pretension, combined with high monetary and status incentives, results in the unsavory behaviors identified by Aguinis et al. as QRPs. In short, we should be more honest about what we do in the research process and report those activities fully. The second bad habit is “perpetuating the myth of the heroic workaholic publishing machine.” This myth leads to QRPs; fast, multi-author publishing; and disappointment among junior scholars who do not become one of the very few

“heroes.” Instead, Harley argues for humility, open discussion of failed research projects, and mentoring of junior scholars. The third bad habit is “boosting a flawed system.” He wonders why so many well-established scholars actively champion the current system.

Phillips (2019) relies on his experience as a business school dean to offer an important, yet unstated, reason for the dominance of “an A is an A” in evaluating management research. This is what junior scholars seeking tenure or promotion demand, and deserve, clarity in the promotion process. Junior scholars are justifiably uncomfortable with a “we’ll know it when we see it” response when asking about promotion and tenure (P&T) requirements. They deserve some clarity in what must be, in part, a subjective decision. Journal rankings, citation counts, and publication numbers, when specified, help provide some of that clarity.

Phillips does *not* say that these quantitative factors are the *only* things that should be considered in P&T decisions. He supports a holistic evaluation. But he does argue that quantitative factors should have a role in any process seeking fairness and some aspect of merit. Moreover, quantitative measures are important for legitimizing our research work in the eyes of the various stakeholders who fund our research projects.

In sum, Aguinis et al. (2020), Harley (2019), and Phillips (2019) all provide a thoughtful and comprehensive evaluation of the causes, the positive and negative effects, and possible ways of mitigating the negative effects of the “an A is an A” phenomenon. They identify as causes performance management systems, the need for research accountability, strong institutional pressures, and junior scholars’ demands for clarity in the promotion and tenure process. They identify positive aspects of “an A is an A” as setting clear standards and objectives for doctoral students and junior scholars, and as increasing management scholars’ ability to counter the disregard for our work sometimes exhibited by those in other business disciplines. The list of negative consequences is longer. These include escalating competition, QRPs, loss of practical focus, decreasing variety in research types and methods, disaffected scholars, journal editors gaming the impact factor system, and research-teaching trade-offs leaning too heavily toward research. The general tone is that quantitative ease of decision making drives out qualitative inputs. The collective suggestions for mitigating the negative consequences represent a start, but only a start. These include relatively standard things: using multiple measures and continuous indicators, providing

research skills training in best practices and transparency, stopping pretending that we are laboratory scientists, and looking holistically at a scholar’s entire record. This all *should be* going on in doctoral programs and in the mentoring of junior scholars. Still, more formal processes could be useful in reducing negative outcomes and improving the quality of scholarly life. Before we go into our extensions and suggestions, however, let us reflect on how we got here.

WHY IS FACULTY EVALUATION SUCH A BIG PROBLEM NOW?

Universities are among the longest-living institutions in the world, with many having thrived for 500 to 1,000 years despite changes around them such as wars, natural disasters, redrawing of boundaries, and threats from those in power. So, the obvious question is: Why are we still debating how to evaluate faculty performance? Shouldn’t this issue have been settled hundreds of years ago? One possible reason is the change in the institutional logics of business schools. Over the last few decades, we have gone through three distinct conceptualizations of who we are as business schools—as a community of scholars, independent contractors, and tournament competitors—with accompanying changes in institutional logics.

The Community of Scholars Model

Until about 40 years ago, academic departments were essentially communities of scholars. To exist and thrive, community members had to internalize a certain value system and play their roles. This meant that there were reciprocal obligations. For a system of reciprocal obligations to exist, community members must have long-term membership and the intention to remain as members. Moreover, members must accept that there will not be much variation in the distribution of rewards among members of the community. A department chair’s role was one of ensuring harmony. Although conflicts and differences of opinion occurred, they were dealt with using accepted community norms.

The Independent Contractors Model

By the late 1980s, a new conception of departments took over. No longer communities, we became a collection of independent contractors. An individual faculty member’s obligation was to fulfill the terms of a contract and collect agreed upon rewards.

Contributing to the collective was now increasingly viewed as an activity that was irrational, or perhaps downright stupid. The role of the department chair became one of writing a clear and complete contract (teaching load, how many articles per year, how many A hits for tenure, what counts and what does not count, etc.). Journal lists and tenure documents with very specific details of expectations became increasingly common. As Phillips (2019) notes, faculty started demanding specificity because contractors cannot operate unless contractual terms are clearly specified. And no rational contractor will ever want to do anything that was not included in the original contract unless additional inducements are offered.

The Tournament Model

In the third and the current phase, we are neither community members nor even independent contractors. Instead, we are all competitors with one another within departments and across universities for a share of the rewards available. Now the department chair role is that of the referee whose role is ensuring adherence to pre-established rules and reward distribution. In this conceptualization of scholarship, an A is an A and a win is a win. A three pointer is a three pointer, even if it was a fluke. This model has been described well by Aguinis et al., Harley, and Phillips, along with its negative unintended consequences.

EXTENSIONS TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF “AN A IS AN A”

Aguinis et al., Harley, and Phillips provide a comprehensive look at the “an A is an A” issue. Yet we propose several friendly extensions for added discussion, along with the discussion their collective work will surely generate. These extensions include both positive and negative consequences of ranking journals, as described below.

Another Positive: The Sorting Function of Journals

There is a yet-unstated positive consequence of journal rankings, even of the blunt “an A is an A” variety. The quality range of management journals is immense. The A journals discussed by Aguinis et al., Harley, and Phillips are those at the very top of a ranking system that has been socially constructed by established professors. At the other end of this ranking system are “predatory journals”—i.e., those journals that guarantee publication for a fee.

Clearly, some method of sorting out journals by quality, within and across the broad areas of the management discipline, is essential for scholarly progress. Professors “curate” journal articles for their students in doctoral seminars. Most, but not all, of these articles will be from A journals. We don’t typically send doctoral students performing literature reviews to look in lower-tier journals. As Phillips (2019) notes, at the top journals we are sure that three reviewers and a senior editor have vouched for the quality of published papers. This doesn’t mean there aren’t mistakes, but A journals provide an initial sort that reduces scholars’ searching time for useful articles. This is a benefit of the journal ranking system. Moreover, the high value of this benefit is supported by academic research in economics on the benefits of “block booking”—i.e., rank-based categorizations—in reducing over-searching and over-sorting (Kenney & Klein, 1983).² Journal rankings help us and our students find the best articles with the least overall searching costs.

Another Negative: Time Compression Diseconomies in Research

The impact of the emphasis on publication performance on doctoral education also requires some reflection. As business schools engage in competition

² The economists Kenney and Klein (1983) used the De Beers Company, which at the time controlled almost the entire diamond market, as an example showing how “block booking”—i.e., the practice of grouping like with like and selling diamonds in groups called “sightings”—is efficient at reducing over-searching costs for buyers and over-sorting costs for sellers. Buyers would specify how many diamonds in each category they would purchase for a fixed price set by De Beers. Buyers then could view their “sights” and decide whether to buy them or not. If buyers decided not to buy, however, they would not be invited back. Thus, the stochastically dominant strategy for buyers was to say yes to De Beers’ offer. Kenney and Klein explained that, although this system may appear anti-competitive, it was efficient for both De Beers and the buyers. De Beers would sort the diamonds only as much as was required to satisfy the buyers that they would, on average over several sightings, come out about even. This saved DeBeers on over-sorting costs. It also saved buyers over-searching costs relative to other options. For example, if buyers could view a sight and then select only those diamonds that were best from within that grouping, earlier buyers would search to receive the best diamonds, later buyers would search again to receive the best diamonds, but now of lower quality, and even later buyers would search yet again among even lower-quality diamonds.

for faculty talent, doctoral students' campus interviews start earlier and earlier each year. And many schools will not even call candidates for an interview unless they have top-tier publications already accepted. Unfortunately, to have publications by the start of their fourth year, doctoral students must make journal submissions at least by their second year. In short, if scholarship is a developmental process that takes time to nurture and mature, we need to discard the very idea of scholarship and get our doctoral students focused on publishing before they have gained a critical mass of knowledge about their area of study and the scholarly process. Worse still, doctoral students may graduate fully internalizing the idea that publications are not only more important than scholarship, but are independent of scholarship.

Yet Another Negative: The Separation of Scholarship and Publication

Professional meetings, like those of the Academy of Management and various doctoral consortia, now spend more time in sessions on how to publish rather than how to do research. Some universities in Asia and elsewhere fly in editors of North American journals to teach their faculty how to publish. Individually, these are perfectly legitimate ways to enhance production capability of individuals and institutions. Publications were once outputs of scholarship. Scholarship was developed over time through reading of the classic works in the discipline and by studying a phenomenon through direct exposure to it. The combined effect of these institutional responses has been a separation of scholarship and publication. One need not be a scholar to publish. Instead, one needs to learn and perfect the routines that lead to publication. Thus, research has become increasingly an activity resembling playing chess. Chess requires a highly developed intellect, years of painstaking training and coaching, and total dedication. However, chess has no significance beyond the board on which it is played, and not even the most fanatic chess fan will say that chess is scholarship. Much of our academic research has become like elegant chess games, brilliantly played, but devoid of any substantive content.

EXTENSIONS FOR AMELIORATING THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF "AN A IS AN A"

We now offer other ways the negative consequences of the "an A is and A" phenomenon could be ameliorated, all of which senior scholars may have some ability to implement. Our ameliorating extensions are

an attempt at mitigating the elemental, underlying cause of the "an A is an A" phenomenon (i.e., the intense pressure on many scholars to publish in a very few journals). We offer the following ideas as ways in which established professors can help in reducing this underlying pressure and, thereby, reduce the negative outcomes that have been outlined so well in the articles we have reviewed.

Some may think professor-led institutional change is impossible. Yet research in management has shown that institutions can be changed, from the bottom up, by those with high status and even by small groups without high status. Sherer and Lee (2002), for example, showed how a single, high-status law firm was able to start the process of overturning the previously well-established institution of the Cravath "up (to partner) or out" system for junior lawyers. A shortage of junior attorneys led the high-status firm to establish dual partner and professional tracks, and other law firms followed. The professional track offered a career path for those highly skilled lawyers who were turned down for partner. Vaccaro and Palazzo (2015) showed how a small group of friends started the growing "addiopizzo" movement, which helped merchants successfully stand up against paying protection money to the Mafia.

How the Pressure Built Up

Many changes over the past 30 years have contributed to the increasing pressure for management scholars to publish in A journals. In 1988, the Academy of Management meeting in Los Angeles attracted about 1,000 scholars. The most recent meeting in Chicago attracted well over 10,000. This reflects organic growth in our discipline and increasing participation by scholars worldwide. Yet from 1988 to now, the number of A journals in our field has not increased. There have been increases in the number of articles per issue and the number of yearly pages in several A journals, but that is about it. Some journal editors and board members may rejoice in low acceptance rates, but that is a flaw rather than a benefit. It reflects our discipline's immaturity (Hambrick, 2005).

Senior management scholars have what may be the best job ever, with autonomy, intellectual stimulation, and (for some) the salaries and status that accompany publishing success. Yet we may be like long-tenured CEOs who stick too long with the paradigm that brought them early successes (Amason & Mooney, 2008). Beyond the suggestions of Aguinis et al., Harley, and Phillips, what else might be done to ensure that future management scholars enjoy the

benefits we have enjoyed? A common theme in the Aguinis et al., Harley, and Phillips papers is the immense pressure felt by junior academics in our field. Next, we focus on ways of gradually reducing this pressure, as one would slowly let air out of a car tire.

Suggestions for Reducing the Pressure

One way to let some of the air pressure out of our collective car tire would be to further expand the number of annual pages in each current A journal. The high cost of printing is no longer a viable excuse for keeping the number of pages low. Moreover, more pages could provide more space for research explorations. That is, we likely could achieve more innovative research outcomes if more Type II errors occur in current A journals, rather than fewer.

A second way to let out some pressure would be to at last recognize some of the A journals as A's. This could be especially useful with general management journals like the *Journal of Management* and the *Journal of Management Studies*, but other more niche journals such as *Journal of International Business Studies* or *Journal of Business Venturing* could also be considered. Our expanding discipline should be able to develop other top-quality A journals in addition to the old stalwarts.

Third, we collectively could consider articles published in the remaining A- management journals much more seriously as potential qualifiers for tenure. Specifically, when we say that tenure decisions should consider a scholar's complete body of work, we should mean it. This includes those supporting articles in a scholar's portfolio from A- journals, in addition to the A journal articles.

What It Would Take

Each of these three suggestions would require more work from established professors than many do now. For example, we would need to pay more attention to article specifics when making P&T decisions. We would need to do more in educating doctoral students and mentoring junior scholars in research, for two reasons. First, so doctoral students can develop the quality research needed to fill the additional pages and journals. And second, so doctoral students will understand the importance of transparent research reporting, as mentioned by Aguinis et al. For all scholars, we likely would need at least one AoM "ethics in research" workshop for every AoM "how to publish" workshop. And we would need to be more

developmental in our reviewing, guiding authors toward much better papers and eliminating sarcastic, "burn-it-down" reviews. Overall, we would need to be less "me first" and more communitarian in our thinking, so we could move away from the tournament model and more toward a community of scholars.

AN EXTENSION OF THE REASONS WHY "AN A IS AN A" EXISTS

Steffen Mau (2019) pointed out that we now live in a "metric society," with ever-greater clamor for measurement and ever-greater capacity to measure. More business schools, for example, are using Digital Measures, which keeps detailed track of almost everything a faculty member does. Google Scholar can provide one with an up-to-the-minute citation count. Rate My Professor broadcasts student ratings to the world. A recent article even calculated interdisciplinary "exchange rates" that can be used for valuing publications across different disciplines within a business school (Korkeamäki, Sihvonen, & Vähämaa, 2018). Yikes!

The problem is that, once a measure is codified, quantified, and made transparent, dysfunction follows. First, of course, is gaming the system. And, when faculty begin to game the system, one normal response is to add more metrics. Second is behavior modification. That is, faculty focus only on those activities that are counted and disengage from everything else. Third, as the well-known French statistician Desrosieres (2015, p. 334) pointed out, "once codification procedures are encoded and become routine, their products are objectified. They tend to become 'reality' in an apparently irreversible way." That is, the measure takes a life of its own and itself becomes a goal, even after the reasons why it was introduced are long forgotten.

The "A is an A" phenomenon is an example of these processes, wherein we engage in article counting and commoditize journal articles. The commoditization of research has been followed by its monetization and valorization. This, in turn, has led to an increasing marketization of the academic economy. That is, each publication has a tangible monetary value. Because publications are readily monetizable, faculty do not invest in activities that are nonmonetizable or nonportable. One example of this marketization has been the sudden increase in the importance of business school rankings and the legitimacy that has been accorded to them, despite all kinds of problems with the criteria used to

construct these rankings. Business schools have responded to this in several ways. One is to hire people whose job is to deconstruct the rankings, focus on variables that are included in the rankings, and feed the ranking organizations data to help the school move up in the rankings. A second response has been to create one's own ranking list and then to promote its use. Individual schools now promote their journal ranking lists because greater adoption can increase the legitimacy of their list, especially if the list was originally produced to make that school look good. As Mau (2019) pointed out, in a society where everything is quantified, power will eventually accrue to those who are keeping the score.

In sum, another reason for the “an A is an A” phenomenon is that we may be committing “the folly of rewarding A while hoping for B” (Kerr, 1975). That is, management scholars *may be* rewarding what we can measure rather than what would lead to a desired outcome. The “*may be*” in the preceding sentence is there because we can't know for sure; many management professors may prefer the current system over a more communitarian one.

CONCLUSION

Our three suggestions for possibly ameliorating the negative consequences of the “an A is an A” phenomenon, plus the suggestions offered by Aguinis et al., Harley, and Phillips, would seem to be well within the collective abilities of established management professors to accomplish. Yet that outcome is not a prediction. We know that professors cling too long to the paradigms that brought them success (Kuhn, 1962/2012). Established management scholars must resist this tendency if we are to change our discipline. Otherwise, to paraphrase Walt Kelley's character Pogo, we will have met the enemy, and he is us!

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Abdul A. Rasheed (abdul@uta.edu) is the Eunice and James L. West Distinguished Professor of Management in the College of Business at the University of Texas at Arlington. He teaches in the areas of strategic management and international business. He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh and his MBA from the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta. His research interests include strategic decision processes, environmental analysis, outsourcing, franchising, foreign market entry, international comparisons in strategy and governance, and the implications of capital market integration for firm strategies. His research has appeared in journals such as *Academy of Management Review*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Strategic Organization*, *Management International Review*, *Journal of International Management*, *International Business Review*, *Academy of Management Executive*, and *Corporate Governance: An International Review*. He

has taught at Nanyang Technological University, Tongji University, and the Beijing University of Science and Technology.

Richard L. Priem (r.priem@tcu.edu) is the Luther Henderson Chair of Strategic Management and Leadership and a professor of management in the department of management and leadership at the Neeley School of Business at Texas Christian University. He received his Ph.D. in strategic management at the University of Texas at Arlington. His areas of interests include strategic decision making, corporate governance, demand-side strategies, and top management fraud. Prior to his current position he was the Robert L. and Sally S. Manegold Professor of Management and Strategic Planning (an endowed research chair) at the Lubar School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His work has appeared in *Strategic Management Journal*, *Journal of Management*, *Academy of Management Review*.



E X C H A N G E S

WHAT DO, WHAT DID, AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT “A’S”?

JEAN M. BARTUNEK
Boston College

Original article: Aguinis, H., Cummings, C., Ramani, R., and Cummings, T., “An A is an A:” The New Bottom Line for Valuing Academic Research, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2017.0193>

In responding to Aguinis, Cummings, Ramani, and Cummings’ (2020) article in this issue, I reflect on contemporary approaches to measuring and comparing scholarly success, as well as some important dimensions that are ignored in their article. I also summarize prior approaches to such comparative measurement, such as election to membership in the Royal Society and Académie des Sciences, and indicate that there will always be means of comparing success that will make some happy and others angry. This comparison makes evident that whatever the problems with contemporary indices, there is certainly less bias than in the past. Contemporary indices are part of a longer progression of measurement approaches that will continue to evolve.

There isn’t much to disagree with in the main claim of the paper “An A is an A” (Aguinis, Cummings, Ramani, & Cummings, 2020). What it describes is indeed how many people at stellar universities talk, how they rate success, and how they decide whether or not to bestow tenure and other promotions and awards. The paper also makes evident how important such factors have been in academics’ indices of success. This is despite the fact that there are inherent problems with the main ranking system, the Web of Science (e.g., Jappe, Pithan, & Heinze, 2018; Klein & Chiang, 2004), such that at an annual meeting of the American Society for Cell Biology in 2012, members passed a declaration on research assessment that advocated “the need to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations.”¹

This paper is not the first (e.g., Adler & Harzing, 2009) or even the most recent (e.g., Huse, 2019) to make the claim that too much attention to A publications or impact factors or some equivalent is detrimental to academia. For example, Elangovan and Hoffman (in press) claimed that “the career path and

priorities for individual professors that focus narrowly on A-level academic publications [and] are embraced uncritically as the ‘right’ way to succeed . . . have . . . caused a stealthy but steady erosion in the very essence of academia.”

One thing that does seem fairly certain is that publications that decry publication rankings such as impact factors and A designations are likely to be cited frequently, thus increasing, if ever so slimly, the impact factors of the journals in which they are published, and thus these journals’ creeping, if ever so slightly, closer to an A designation (e.g., Bartunek, 2014). Indeed, I am assuming that this paper will increase the citation count for *AMP*. Thus, virtually all of the discussion of A journals, in whatever scholarly outlet, contains some irony, even though the original science citation index was apparently initially designed without any irony in mind (Garfield, 2007).

In this short exchange I will describe a few things I find particularly admirable in the Aguinis et al. (2020) paper and a few things that concern me about it. I’m also going to ponder the following: What did scholars do (long) before the Science Citation Index (Garfield, 1998) to rate scholarship?

¹ See <https://sfedora.org/read/>

SOME OF WHAT IS ADMIRABLE IN THE ARTICLE

This article does a very fine job of laying out contemporary discussions of A publications, as these take place at a number of universities whose research is highly ranked or universities that wish their research to be highly ranked. If anything, the article simplifies the rating system. There are so many ways of rating publications in different countries and systems,² that “A” is actually a helpful shorthand for conveying what counts according to whatever ranking system one wishes to use, whether it be a very high impact factor according to the web of science, or a 4* Journal of Distinction used by the Chartered Association of Business Schools,³ or the *Financial Times* top 50 list⁴ or some other system entirely.

The article also suggests that the emphasis on A journals has both positive and negative consequences (see especially Table 1, p. 144). This is a much more balanced perspective than those that primarily bemoan such audit-based external indicators of success, almost as if the extrinsic positive or negative reinforcement they provide will take away from the intrinsic motivation that should be present.

Further, the article also does a very good job of discussing the much greater importance of performance management systems and research accountability at business schools today than before. This issue, as part of our larger “audit society” (Walsh, 2011) is, of course, much more extensive than just management academics, or research, or academia itself. As it has evolved over time, the Research Excellence Framework in the U.K.⁵ has been a primary exemplar of the auditing of research by standard academic criteria and now its social impact as well. In my own university we now employ people whose primary job is to prepare for audits such as the AACSB. I don’t even want to imagine how many employees are required to put together materials for audits not only by the AACSB but also other accrediting agencies such as EQUIS and AMBA for the universities who advertise themselves as triple accredited.

Finally, it is very helpful that the paper proposes some truly practical implications. These in particular

involve skills training, which is related to a number of important issues, especially the fact that some faculty and doctoral students have much more access to training in necessary skills for accomplishing A hits or publication more generally than do others. It is important that the article recognizes the very helpful work done by CARMA, the Consortium for the Advancement of Research Methods and Analysis.⁶

SOME OF WHAT IS OF CONCERN IN THE ARTICLE

A Need for Much More Empirical Data

While there is much to like and admire in the article, I also have some concerns about it. One of my primary concerns is that while it calls for empirical data, it doesn’t actually include any beyond what seems to be the case in discussions of A’s and their equivalent. Aguinis et al.’s argument “relies on the current literature, regular reports by journal editors at editorial board meetings aimed at providing evidence that their journals should be included on the A-list, informal conversations with colleagues, prevalent institutional practices at research-driven universities, and our own firsthand experience in leadership roles in several universities as well as professional organizations such as the Academy of Management” (p. 137).

This is helpful information, but I don’t know how broad and representative it is. For example, I have served as an external reviewer for universities that give much broader ratings of publication values than those suggested by the article. I have also served as an external reviewer for universities that care primarily that a professor makes an independent, substantive intellectual contribution. And, of course, I have also served as an external reviewer for universities that do seem to count A’s regardless of whether there seems to be a coherent theme in a promotion candidate’s publications. But this is not my universal experience.

Further, I am a member of the board of trustees for a university that cares primarily about teaching excellence and innovation, and pays little attention to faculty publications, as long as faculty members publish occasionally. I have also served on editorial boards of journals that are clearly A’s and of journals that are nowhere near an A, but aspire simply to be rated a 3 in the Chartered Association of Business Schools Ranking. And I have noted above how much the situation differs across countries.

² See <https://harzing.com/resources/journal-quality-list>

³ See <https://charteredabs.org/academic-journal-guide-2018/>

⁴ See <https://www.ft.com/content/3405a512-5cbb-11e1-8f1f-00144feabdc0>

⁵ See <https://www.ref.ac.uk/>

⁶ See <https://business.unl.edu/outreach/carma/>

Given the fact that what Aguinis et al. (2020) are arguing is not entirely new, it would have been very helpful, to me at least, if they had attempted to collect some more systematic data from a wide range of business schools, especially those located outside the U.S. It seems likely that the universities and colleges that do not focus on A's are quite likely to be underrepresented in the conversations reported to Aguinis et al., especially since faculty from these schools are less likely to be appointed to editorial boards of A journals or to become officers of the Academy of Management.

There Are Other Measures in Addition to A's

This article seems to convey the notion that an A journal is overwhelmingly the primary measure of success. However, there are other indices as well. For example, Ashford (2013) convincingly suggested that one appropriate way to measure the quality of articles is whether they are used as exemplars to teach doctoral students how to conduct good research. Aguinis, Ramani, Alabduljader, Bailey, and Lee (2019) have measured how often particular authors have been cited in textbooks as a measure of their influence over the field. (When I showed the Aguinis et al. listing in this issue to some of the doctoral students in our program, they noted that there was a comparatively high number of leadership scholars listed, suggesting that scholars who want to be really influential should study leadership.) Further, as the article notes, some journals, such as *Organization Science*, may be rated as A journals (as is the case in my own university) even if their impact factor is not comparatively high. This suggests that something else is going on in what counts as an A in addition to impact factors.

There is No Accounting for Quality

There is a good deal in the article that bemoans the fact that where an article is published is often taken as a measure of its quality ("this journal-proxy method provides a relatively objective and generalizable measure of research value that can apply across individual researchers, research disciplines, and academic organizations" (Aguinis et al., 2020, p. 136)). But there is no exchange whatsoever on other indices of quality of articles, and/or how journal review processes attempt more or less rigorously to accomplish high quality. From my own experience over time as an associate editor for three journals, and as an editorial board member and ad hoc

reviewer for many more journals than that, I am very aware that some journals put much more effort into the review process than do others. They have higher standards for which submissions make it to the review process, their expectations of reviewers, and of the types of decision letters associate editors are expected to compose. Not surprisingly, those journals labeled as A's often are those that have very high standards for papers and reviewers. Of course, there is not a perfect correlation between journals with very rigorous standards for the review process and the most impactful publications (Starbuck, 2005). Nevertheless, the amount of work and effort put into the review process is very important in producing papers that come to be rated as A's. To ignore the differing standards used in the article preparation process is a major problem in an argument such as that in this paper.

How Bad (and Good) is the Situation?

This article seems to suggest, as do other papers, that the current audit system is primarily problematic. The article basically argues that yes, there are both costs and benefits of the clear emphasis on A publications, but overall, noted Aguinis et al. (2020, p. 135): "University performance management and resource allocation systems, for example, are increasingly driven by a corporate audit culture where resources and rewards are contingent on quantifiable measures of research value" and that "This bottom-line and auditing mentality is at odds with the ethos of research that seeks to uncover important truths having scholarly and practical significance (Walsh, 2011)." In other words, the particular ratings may have both costs and benefits, and the auditing mentality is really problematic.

But perhaps we can consider this too a bit more broadly. For example, Power's (in press) paper acknowledged that we live in an audit society, but also proposed that "accounting and auditing are not inherently pathological and value-subverting but may be value-enhancing."

Using an example based on the Research Excellence Framework's emphasis on external impact, Power's paper described the processes through which the logic of an audit trail can turn a researcher's initial interest in "curiosity-driven research for its own sake" into a commitment to collecting materials that can be "auditable for the impact officer and any possible external inspection." This is very consistent with the underlying concerns of "An A is an A," and an emphasis on how

university leaders “come to embrace the logic of the audit trail.”

But Power also suggests that an audit trail may not only crowd out deeper values (such as curiosity-driven research) but also may “crowd in” such values. Power noted that “the values we care about are inherently precarious in that the moment of their operationalization also places them at risk.” Thus, an audit may highlight the kinds of values that are most important at the same time that it “enable(s) decision making under uncertainty.” Building on Power’s example, what would be an actual measure of the value of curiosity-driven research for its own sake? How could this be conveyed to faculty members and administrators in other business school departments and other schools within a university? The A ranking system, in other words, may enable us to convey values deeper than rankings.

WHAT DID “WE” DO BEFORE A’S?

What if it’s in our nature to have some kind of comparative ranking system? The abundance of them noted above by Harzing suggests that somehow scholars, administrators—and many others—need to create some kinds of criteria to categorize and comparatively rank different outputs.

While there may be older scholarly societies than this, it occurred to me to wonder about the Royal Society in the 17th through the 19th centuries, especially the criteria they used for admitting members. And that in turn led me to be curious about the French Académie des Sciences and the criteria they used. Their approaches seemed like legitimate early models of research assessment.

The societies are, obviously, not a specific ranking of articles and are probably closer to communities of fellows. On the other hand, the journal system such as we have today did not even exist two centuries ago, and the criteria for admittance to scholarly societies were, in theory at least, based on scholarly accomplishment. The stories of their admittance of new members provide an interesting context for considering contemporary journal ranking systems.

The Royal Society

The Royal Society, or in full, The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, is the oldest national scientific society in the world, originating in 1660. Founded as “a Colledge for the promoting of Physico-Mathematicall Experimentall Learning,” it soon started publishing a journal, *Philosophical*

Transactions, which is, today, the oldest scientific journal in continuous publication.⁷

When founded, the Royal Society was comprised of “a great assembly of Gentlemen” (Hunter, 1976, p. 10) from various occupations. Its London base limited who was involved. As Hunter (1976, p. 11) noted: “Though hardly any important scientist of the Restoration period did not have at least a nominal association with the Society, it is clear that it was never central to the scientific activities of those based on Oxford, Cambridge or the provinces rather than London.”

Further, initially, the Royal Society “failed to include many with scientific interests who might have been expected to join” (Hunter, 1976, p. 13) because the Society was “anxious to enroll the support of the eminent and titled in order to achieve greater respectability.” It wasn’t until 1730 that the idea that candidates for election “should have a special claim to scientific knowledge was formalized” (Crosland, 1983, p. 167). Even then, however, scholarly achievement was not always enough by itself: “In eighteenth-century England birth was often considered more important than achievement in any evaluation of a person” (Crosland, 1983, p. 172).

Over time, however, the requirement for documentation of “details of status and qualifications” (Crosland, 1983, p. 178) became more commonplace, and they “came to be used for all candidates for election who were not in the privileged class of Peers of the Realm, etc.” However, the number of foreign members started to grow too much, and so in 1765 “it was accordingly resolved that ‘no foreigner be proposed for election that is not known to the learned world, by some publication or invention which may entitle the Society to form a judgement of his merit’” (Crosland, 1983, p. 178). In addition, in the 19th century reforms were put into place that would limit the members admitted to “men of high philosophical eminence” (p. 179). Over time gaining membership became much more difficult, and by the 1860s the Royal Society was without question truly scientific and scholarly.

Académie des Sciences

The Académie des Sciences was established in Paris in 1666 “to advise the French government on scientific matters.”⁸ Not long after, in 1699, the

⁷ See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Royal-Society>

⁸ See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Academy-of-Sciences-French-organization>

academy received a formal constitution, allowing six subject areas to be recognized: mathematics, mechanics, astronomy, chemistry, botany, and anatomy. Among the membership there was a hierarchy, with senior members (known as pensioners, who received a small remuneration) followed by associates and assistants. During the French Revolution the Académie des Sciences was abolished for a time, but it was later revived in a somewhat revised form.

There is much less known about election to the Académie des Sciences prior to the 18th and, especially, the 19th century than there is about the Royal Society. Nevertheless, what is known about criteria for election to the Académie des Sciences during the latter time is still important.

For example, the first appearance of the use of lists of publications took place in the Académie des Sciences, not in universities, and arose shortly after the French Revolution. As Crosland (1986, p. 605) noted, the lists “replaced personal recommendations and royal private patronage by a procedure with some claim to objectivity.” They were also meaningful because prior to the Revolution most publication, if it occurred at all, was in book form and there was little formal training in science. That changed over time, but it also meant that in the 18th century scholarly training could not be used as a criterion for election, though it could be in the 19th century.

The number of members that could be elected to the Académie des Sciences was restricted, and thus the process of election was very competitive and the qualifications of candidates had to be carefully documented. Crosland (1986, p. 415) noted that a potential candidate, “embarrassed to claim too much for the quality of his own work, would tend to emphasise quantity.” However, scholars who represented potential candidates’ cases tended to focus more on the “most important works.”

Early in the 19th century discussion of potential candidates was mostly informal. However, it became more formal and thorough by the 1820s, and by the mid 1860s there were written reports on all the candidates.

Contrary to the Royal Society, the Académie des Sciences was divided into a small number of disciplines, and candidates were rank-ordered for each discipline in terms of order of preference for the experts in that discipline. In addition, they generally could only be elected when there was a vacancy, usually because a member had died. And further, “the character and style of the candidate was also referred to” (Crosland, 1986, p. 428).

Finally, Crosland noted that the Académie was primarily concerned with French candidates but had contact with scientists in other countries who might become corresponding members of the Académie, or *associe étranger*. Crosland concluded his article by suggesting that “Despite very occasional problems of nationalism or—more important personal favouritism, its reports show that on the whole the Académie des Sciences went to great lengths to proceed objectively to debate the merits of rival candidates for election” (1986, p. 432).

Has There Been Progress?

These historical sketches provide a useful background for reflecting on A’s, and suggest that, in comparison, they may not be so bad. They do not require residency in one country or another. They are not based on the class or status of the authors of papers. They are not restricted to papers by gentlemen. They are purely based on the citation of papers by other scholars. They do not require certain scholars to present a case and try to convince others of the value of the work. They do not require competition with other scholars to fit into a predetermined number of slots regarding a particular topic. They do suggest that issues of quantity vs. quality have been around for a long time.

There are clearly many problems with A’s. But they represent considerable progress since the 17th century and other competitions for prestige. They open the playing field to a wide variety of people, albeit with some having many more advantages than others.

It seems to me that there has been so much criticism, and with so much passion along similar lines, the primary issue now for those who are concerned about ratings is to develop more effective assessment systems that are as easily used as the current metrics. This work doesn’t have to begin as full-blown measuring systems. Garfield (1956), for example, started with the aim of making knowledge available for more people, and other uses of his citation index grew from there. It is well worth the time to develop new indices, perhaps with similar smaller aims in mind, that will increase our ability to share knowledge and rate it in ways that don’t seem so arbitrary.

In conclusion, Aguinis et al. (2020) have composed a thoughtful article, but focus on the current situation without a lot of attention to the past or to what would be better in the future and how to create this. Recognizing the current system in light of what has been and, in particular, what might come to be

and how this will happen, is the crucial next step for meaningful discussions of impact.

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Jean M. Bartunek (bartunek@bc.edu) is the Robert A. and Evelyn J. Ferris Chair and professor in the department of management and organizational development at the Carroll School of Management at Boston College. Her primary interests center around academic–practitioner relationships and organizational change. She is interested in multiple dimensions of links between theory, research, and practice, including collaborative research, how knowledge is shared across boundaries, and relationships that transcend research. In addition, she studies multiple dimensions of the processes of organizational change, especially relationships between change agents and recipients, and interactions within and across these groups.



E X C H A N G E S

“AN A IS AN A”: DESIGN THINKING AND OUR DESIRED FUTURE

HERMAN AGUINIS
The George Washington University

CHAILIN CUMMINGS
California State University–Long Beach

RAVI S. RAMANI
Purdue University Northwest

THOMAS G. CUMMINGS
University of Southern California

Original article: Aguinis, H., Cummings, C., Ramani, R., and Cummings, T., “An A is an A:” The New Bottom Line for Valuing Academic Research, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2017.0193>

We adopt a design-thinking perspective and focus not only on *what is* but on *what can be*. In the context of the current dissatisfaction in the management field regarding the “An A is an A” way of categorizing and valuing research, design thinking involves creating a more desirable future. In this more desirable future, we will be able to (a) more clearly define and measure research performance, (b) consider and align the interests of internal and external stakeholders, and (c) do this through the active involvement of leadership in our field. We describe knowledge that management scholars have created to enable us to turn this more desirable future into a reality.

In the final section of our focal article in this issue of the journal (Aguinis, Cummings, Ramani, & Cummings, 2020), we concluded: “This A-journal mindset has taken hold and become institutionalized over the past few decades as business schools responded to increasing pressure to measure the value of their research for performance management and accountability purposes. The realization of the dominance of this new bottom line for valuing academic research provides a foundation for moving management research beyond A-journal strictures” (p. 148). And, we ended our article with a statement of hope: “We hope our analysis and

forward-looking recommendations and policy suggestions will spur further travel down this path” (Aguinis et al., 2020, p. 148). We are delighted that Abdul A. Rasheed and Richard L. Priem (2020) and Jean Bartunek (2020) have provided such thoughtful and informative exchanges that help us travel down this path.

In this exchange, we focus on our future, not our past or present. We draw on the design-thinking perspective recommended by 1978 Economics Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon (1996), who suggested that applied sciences are concerned not only about *what is* but also about *what can be*. Essentially, design thinking involves creating preferred futures (Aguinis & Vandenberg, 2014; Van Aken & Romme, 2012). In engineering, for example, following Simon’s approach might mean creating a desired future involving more fuel-efficient and environmental-friendly vehicles. In the context of the overall current dissatisfaction in the management

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field regarding the “An A is an A” situation, design thinking involves creating a more desirable future—one in which we are able to more clearly define and measure research performance, consider and align the interests of internal and external stakeholders, and do this through the active involvement of leadership in our field. Thankfully, management scholars have created sufficient knowledge over the past several decades to enable us to make a more desirable future a reality. We focus on each of these three selective yet critical issues.

THE CRITERION PROBLEM

What are appropriate criteria to use in evaluating research performance? How do we define and measure rigor, quality, and impact? Clearly, research performance is a multidimensional and dynamic construct. And, it is used for many different purposes, such as administrative decisions (e.g., promotion, tenure), faculty development, and institutional rankings. What different criteria can be used for each of these and other purposes? Decades of conceptual and empirical research addressing this “criterion problem” (Aguinis, 2019; Austin & Villanova, 1992) can be useful in answering these questions and creating our more desirable future.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER ALIGNMENT

How can we align the interests of current and future management educators and scholars, university administrators, current and former students, organizations that may benefit from the knowledge produced in business schools, and society at large (including governments and policy makers)? How can we create greater congruence among the goals of those who seek to create management knowledge and those who try to apply it in their work and extra-work lives? Conceptual and empirical research on stakeholder theory (Parmar et al., 2010) can help us understand how value is produced and traded across various stakeholders concerned with creating a more desirable future for how management knowledge is produced and used.

LEADERSHIP

What is the role of senior scholars, journal editors, university administrators, and professional organizations in leading the path toward a more desirable future? What policies, procedures, and reward systems can be

implemented to make greater stakeholder alignment, as described earlier, a reality? Again, there is abundant conceptual and empirical research regarding the combined influence of multiple leaders—and at different levels of analysis (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2017). It is through our understanding of the role of these and other leaders that we will be able to create a more desirable future.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: OUR JOURNEY HAS BEGUN

Taken together, the articles published in this issue offer a comprehensive discussion of the current “An A is an A” situation, including not only negative but also positive aspects. Overall, the sentiment is that we can and should create a more desirable future in which positive aspects of the “A is an A” situation are maintained while negative aspects are minimized or even eliminated. Adopting a design-thinking perspective means that creating a more desirable future is a journey. We are heartened that the journey has begun and optimistic that it will lead to a comprehensive and broadly useful way to conceptualize and measure the value of management research.

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Herman Aguinis (www.hermanaguinis.com) is the Avram Tucker Distinguished Scholar, a professor of management, and Chairperson of the Department of Management at the George Washington University School of Business. His research addresses the acquisition and deployment of talent in organizations and organizational research methods. He has published five books and more than 160 journal articles, is a fellow of the Academy of Management (AOM), and currently serves as AOM's vice president. He received AOM's Research Methods Division Distinguished Career Award, AOM's Practice Theme Committee Scholar Practice Impact Award for lifetime impact on policy making and organizational practices, the Losey Award from the

Society for Human Resource Management Foundation for lifetime achievement in human resource research, and best article of the year awards from six different journals.

Chailin Cummings (chailin.cummings@csulb.edu) is an associate professor of strategy and organization in the College of Business Administration at California State University in Long Beach. Her research and publications address interorganizational collaborative strategies, strategic alliance ambidexterity, and rhetorical analysis of management knowledge.

Ravi S. Ramani (rramani@pnw.edu) is an assistant professor of organizational behavior and human resource management in the College of Business at Purdue University Northwest. His scholarship foci include employees' emotional experiences of work, organizational research methods, the science–practice gap, and management education and scholarship.

Thomas G. Cummings (tcummings@marshall.usc.edu) is a professor of management and organization at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. His research interests include strategic change and organization design. He has published more than 70 articles and 23 books and was formerly president of the Academy of Management.

