

Academic Journal Success and the Anonymous Peer Review Process

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Abstract: Scholarly journals shape adult education research, disseminate knowledge, and serve readers worldwide. Journals' success depends on peer reviewers, yet editors face challenges securing reviewers. We discuss the galvanizing role of journals and issues contributing to reviewer reluctance. We explore strategies to encourage participation in the adult education community.

Keywords: peer review, adult education journals

Today, academic journals worldwide face significant problems as they experience reviewer reluctance and inability to obtain sufficient participation in the peer review process (Flaherty, 2022; Goodman, 2022). Academic journals' current needs, coupled with necessity of an effective peer review process, reflect a challenge to supporting dissemination of vital research in the adult education field. Journals' existence and continuing success depend on contributions of peer reviewers, most of whom are faculty members encountering new burdens on their time and intellectual bandwidth. It is essential that universities support faculty who are pursuing future opportunities by becoming effective peer reviewers.

Peer Review Challenges Facing Today's Academic Journals

As co-editors of *Adult Learning*, we have noticed we are working hard to recruit qualified individuals to review manuscripts; conversations with editors of other journals reveal they are experiencing similar difficulties. Publishers and editorial boards should address several issues underlying the diminishing pool of peer reviewers to maintain academic journals' effectiveness in sharing knowledge generated within the field (Flaherty, 2022; Goodman, 2022). Issues include reviewer reluctance due to additional career burdens, changing expectations within universities and the broader community, aging faculty, effects of the pandemic, increasing pressure to meet new and varied job demands, and departure of many scholars from the academy. The result is article review and, ultimately, publication may be delayed. Therefore, dissemination of knowledge creation is impeded (Flaherty, 2022).

The Burnout Factor & Aging Faculty

Higher education faculty frequently serve as volunteer peer reviewers (Goodman, 2022). Faculty are less likely to participate in peer review as they experience increased workload and burnout (Gewin, 2021; Jaremka et al., 2020). Academics experience burnout (Jaremka et al.) when they face challenges such as increased stress and manifest physical and emotional symptoms, including "energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from and feelings of negativity or cynicism towards one's job; and a reduced ability to do one's job ... burnout is caused by work that demands continuous, long-term physical, cognitive or emotional effort" (Gewin, p. 489). A scholar suffering from burnout is unlikely to volunteer to review journal articles when the additional cognitive effort becomes too difficult.

Academic institutions' trend toward hiring more teaching-track and adjunct faculty (Ashcraft et al., 2021; El Haddad et al., 2022; Stein, 2022; Stone & Austin, 2021) limits the number of scholars available for peer review. Changes in workloads afford less time for non-teaching activities. Because institutions expect them to allot a significant portion of their time to conducting and publishing research, tenure-track professors have lighter course loads than teaching professors and adjuncts. Teaching and clinical professors have a higher teaching load with less time available for peer review. Adjuncts' position is precarious; their attempts to cobble together enough part-time work to produce full-time income leave even less time for peer review (Stein). The increase in teaching track and adjunct positions leads to more instructors with little time to devote to other scholarly activities, such as journal peer review, after completing course preparation, teaching, and grading student assessments.

Aging tenure-track and tenured faculty may detract from success of the peer review process (El Haddad et al., 2022; Paganelli & Cangemi, 2019). Long-term tenure-track professors across the nation are aging (McChesney & Bichsel, 2020), as are those who join the academy later in life. Many adult educators discover the field as a second career (Schwartz, 2018). Older tenured faculty may begin facing health problems. Some older instructors “working further into their careers have stalled the potential of new faculty, which includes women and minorities” (Paganelli & Cangemi, p. 151) who would be valuable new participants in peer review. As they plan for retirement, aging faculty may have less interest in maintaining expertise in new theories, pedagogies, technology, and teaching practices; thus, they are less effective reviewers (Paganelli & Cangemi). Workload increases and job pressures can cause stress and dissatisfaction among aging faculty members. They may leave academia to pursue retirement and outside opportunities, taking with them expertise that would be valuable in peer review. Recently — and projected into the future — up to two-thirds of the academic workforce may leave “due to retirement, career burnout, or job dissatisfaction” (Heffernan & Heffernan, 2018, p. 1). Such significant departure will result in a massive loss of intellectual contributions.

Changing Expectations & Increased Pressure

Institutions ask present-day faculty to do much more today than in the past. Expectations include more committee and administrative work, participation in student recruitment and support activities, and writing grants to bring in revenue. In the past, when they could accomplish peer reviews during work hours, professors valued their access to new articles and considered their review work a contribution to the field (Goodman, 2022).

Additional stress for scholars evolved not only from increasing university workloads that limited time for peer review but also the increased number of academic journals in the wake of an evaluation concentration on publishing and lack of reliable reviewers led to more and more invitations to review (Goodman, 2022). This kind of pressure means faculty have less time to support and mentor their students, write recommendation letters, engage students in research and publication, and respond kindly to common student crises. As a consequence of neoliberal policies' influencing higher education (Torrance, 2017), academics have substantially less time for requests from outside their institutions, such as journal invitations to review. “[T]he pillars that once sustained the liberal universities (critical thought, reflection and service to the

community) are now being threatened by the interests of market forces, competitiveness and a performative society” (Mula-Falcón et al., 2021, p. 130).

Changing expectations in academia (El Haddad et al., 2022) that bring higher stress levels include the “move to emphasise metricised research outputs [and] increasingly precarious employment conditions in many universities as sessional or casualised employment is growing” (Heffernan & Heffernan, 2018, p. 1). Faculty who are particularly likely to look for employment opportunities outside their institutions lack professional development opportunities, mentoring, adequate time and compensation to manage the workload, and funding for research and conference attendance (Heffernan & Heffernan).

Despite increased demands on faculty, a reduction in requirements for publication productivity for faculty appears non-existent. The recent change in focus of performance evaluations for instructors “that measure the quality of their professional output through quantification and promotion . . . linked to production” (Mula-Falcón et al., 2021, 121) is damaging to the peer review process. The commodification of education is a multi-faceted phenomenon that drastically changes faculty expectations.

Public pressure aims to increase teaching loads and reduce the number of course releases for research and other activities. Institutions ask many faculty to teach courses for which they feel unqualified, thus requiring time-consuming preparation. At the same time, requirements for assessing and documenting faculty accomplishments have become more rigid and laborious. Universities are shifting away from “an autonomous, reflexive, free and universalist institution at the service of society, whose purpose is to create scientific knowledge and nurture critical citizens and competent professionals” (Mula-Falcón et al., 2021, p. 130). Research has become a singular overarching criterion for job security and promotion; nonetheless, pressure to produce greater numbers of high-impact publications leads to narrowing contributions scholars can make to the field. “[T]he fact that research is a priority among all the duties of academics has relegated other professional activities (management or teaching) [and peer review] to positions of secondary importance” (Mula-Falcón et al., pp. 118-119). Additional pressure to prioritize output is one example of changing expectations in higher education as calls for standardized quality measurements persist (Mula-Falcón et al.).

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

With rapid pivots in instructional formats, the COVID-19 pandemic increased family responsibilities and isolation due to technologically mediated communication (Gabster, 2020; Gewin, 2021; Squazzoni, 2021) and diminished faculty members’ pre-pandemic connection to peer reviewer rewards. COVID-19 meant university professors, including adult educators, had to move back and forth between online instruction and face-to-face teaching. Meanwhile, instructors received contradictory messages about hybrid, online, or face-to-face formats for instruction. The uncertainty and requirements for fast and repeated turnarounds caused fatigue; for some, it was debilitating and left many “seriously considering changing their career or retiring early” (Gewin, p. 489). Higher education saw a rise in the number of faculty members who felt stressed, unsure about job security, exhausted, and angry as their workload due to shifting to online instruction increased, and faculty support decreased (Gewin). The pandemic exacerbated academic inequalities, especially in terms of increased burnout, anxiety, and

depression among minoritized individuals (Gewin). Journals often have difficulty finding peer reviewers with expertise in topics related to marginalized groups' experiences.

Teaching from home changed faculty members' family dynamics. Often, mothers shouldered the larger share of the burden in childcare (Petts et al., 2021). Some faculty parents also taught school-age children to supplement online education their children faced (Gewin, 2021). While it became clear that “during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an unusually high submission rate of scholarly articles, the majority of submissions were from men. Given that most academics were forced to work from home, the competing demands for familial duties may have penalized the scientific productivity of women” (Squazzoni, 2021, p. 1). Women and people of color published less due to pandemic responsibilities (Gabster et al., 2020; Goodman, 2022), “leading to loss of women’s scientific expertise from the public realm” (Gabster et al., p. 1968) and diminished their contributions to journals as both authors and reviewers. Research showed the gender differences related to journal publication and review; ironically, while women “submitted proportionally fewer manuscripts than men...., the rate of the peer-review invitation acceptance showed a less pronounced gender pattern with women taking on a greater service responsibility for journals... [revealing] that the first wave of the pandemic has created potentially cumulative advantages for men” (Squazzoni, p. 1). In other words, the more things change, the more they stay the same for women.

Conclusion

Academic salaries are flat, and inequities based on gender and ethnicity persist. Alleviating salary compression is difficult due to budget problems. Talented people are securing other employment, especially where hours are shorter, and compensation is higher. Unsupportive working conditions mean those eligible to retire may choose to do so sooner than in the past, thus increasing the workload for those remaining and reducing institutional knowledge. Editors reference “Another line in your CV. A positive reputation among your peers. Good rapport with influential editors. A place in the broader academic community” (Goodman, 2022, para. 32) as the essential benefits of engaging in peer review. Nevertheless, benefits could be enhanced if universities supported the peer review process: for example, by making peer review participation part of job descriptions for faculty, then recognizing this work as an element in tenure and promotion (Goodman).

The factors discussed here result in a terrible prediction—a squeeze on peer-reviewed publications that rely on the free labor of tenure-track or tenured faculty members. The reduction will happen gradually as faculty members retire and focus on other interests. Journal editors and professional association publication committees should be cognizant of these trends and take action to mitigate future problems. We suggest editors make a concerted effort to (1) cultivate and educate reviewers who are not university faculty, (2) provide detailed guidance for reviewers, (3) offer incentives such as free journal content and recognition, (4) inform reviewers about the fate of manuscript reviewed, (5) acknowledge reviewers in the article publication, and (6) provide public recognition of reviewers (Goodman, 2022).

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