From Inputs to Impacts: Assessing and Communicating the Full Value of Biomedical Research
Ann C. Bonham, PhD, and Philip M. Alberti, PhD

Abstract
Assessing and communicating the full value of biomedical research is essential to answer calls from the government and the public demanding accountability for the spending of public funds. In academic settings, however, research success is measured largely in terms of grant funding received or the number of peer-reviewed publications produced. These credible and time-tested metrics miss the full picture of the scientific process, which continues to confer benefits to patients, communities, and the health care system well after an article is published. In this context, in 2012, the Association of American Medical Colleges, in collaboration with RAND Europe, initiated a program to provide resources and guidance for leaders of medical schools and teaching hospitals interested in evaluating—in novel ways complementary to traditional methods—the outcomes and impacts of the research that emanates from their institutions. This Perspective provides context for this initiative and delineates the process through which researchers, evaluation experts, and other stakeholders—including legislators, health system leaders, and community members—identified and vetted novel “metrics that matter” in advance of a pilot test at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which sought to assess and communicate its community-engaged science and scholarship.

Over 92% of Americans believe it is important for the United States to be the global leader in medical innovation and research, and they credit such research and innovation for improving health, contributing to the economy, advancing new discoveries, and creating jobs.1 In academic settings, research success is measured largely in terms of the volume of grant funding received or the number of peer-reviewed articles published, which are time-tested and credible metrics, as they rely, in part, on the peer review process; however, these metrics that depend solely on quantifying funding inputs and academic outcomes miss the full picture of the scientific process that continues to confer benefits to patients, communities, policy makers, and the health care system even after an article is published (see Figure 1).

A.C. Bonham is immediate past chief scientific officer, Association of American Medical Colleges, Washington, DC.

P.M. Alberti is senior director, Health Equity Research and Policy, Association of American Medical Colleges, Washington, DC.

Correspondence should be addressed to Philip M. Alberti, Association of American Medical Colleges, 655 K St., NW Suite 100, Washington, DC 20001; telephone: (202) 828-0522; e-mail: palberti@aamc.org; Twitter: @PM_Alberti.

Acad Med. XXXX;XX:00–00.
First published online
doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000001639
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to avoid. The savvy use of metrics requires building consensus around a menu of measures that fit the goals, needs, and values of an institution or a specific research program.

In this context, in 2012, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), in collaboration with RAND Europe, initiated a program to provide resources and guidance for medical school and teaching hospital leaders interested in evaluating—in novel ways complementary to traditional methods—the outcomes and downstream effects of the research emanating from their institutions. The first stage in this process included a comprehensive review of extant frameworks for research evaluation currently in use around the globe. The purpose of the review was to stimulate debate on how research outcomes can be measured in different contexts and to address different needs of various stakeholder audiences, specifically noting that distinct audiences care about distinct outputs, outcomes, and long-term impacts of the research enterprise.

During the second stage of this work, seeking to identify medical research stakeholder groups and the metrics that matter to them, the AAMC convened three expert panels, each representing a distinct area of the research spectrum: (1) basic scientists, (2) clinical outcomes researchers, and (3) community-engaged health equity researchers. The AAMC and RAND Europe asked each group to list whom they considered to be crucial stakeholders for their research. All three panels deemed some stakeholders—institutional leaders and research funders—to be key parties; however, differences also emerged.

While basic scientists identified philanthropic donors, neither of the other two panels listed that group of stakeholders as a core audience. Clinical outcomes researchers were more likely to want to communicate the outcomes of their research to scientists and leaders at other institutions, while health equity researchers more often called out local legislators and community residents as particularly relevant stakeholder groups.

The third stage of the stakeholder and metric identification process involved reaching out directly to members of the identified audiences—local and state legislators, community representatives, health system leaders—both to verify and to add to the list of measures proffered by the expert panels. Charts 1 and 2 present a selection of metrics that appeal to stakeholders both internal and external to academic health centers. The metrics are grouped into domains reflective of the categories identified by the experts and corroborated by stakeholders themselves as important potential areas of impact.

After the completion of Stage 3, the AAMC and RAND Europe felt that showcasing the concrete results of an actual research evaluation, rather than simply providing lists, would be vital. A companion piece to this Perspective (by Guthrie and colleagues) describes the methodologies used and the initial

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**Chart 1**

Research Outcomes of Particular Interest to Internal and Institutional Stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Career</th>
<th>Prestige</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of journal articles published</td>
<td>Number of PhD graduates</td>
<td>Number of media appearances</td>
<td>Start-up time for clinical trials</td>
<td>Number of research projects engaging community partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of citations</td>
<td>Five-year career outcomes for PhD students</td>
<td>Number of editorships of high-profile journals</td>
<td>How decisions are made to apply for grants</td>
<td>Number of articles coauthored with community partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success rate of grant applications</td>
<td>Number of publications per PhD</td>
<td>Number and type of prizes</td>
<td>Average time from funding to publication</td>
<td>Number of collaborations on grant applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number and size of grant awards</td>
<td>K award (career development) to R award (independent investigator) conversion rate</td>
<td>Number of applications per open post</td>
<td>Number of projects completed within deadline and budget</td>
<td>Number of staff members engaged in outreach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Proportion of funds spent on administration</td>
<td>Description of range of collaborations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 1** Illustration of the different outcomes that are of interest to different stakeholder groups. The figure, used through an agreement with RAND Europe, first appeared in Guthrie S, Krapels J, Lichten C, Wooding S. 100 Metrics to Assess and Communicate the Value of Biomedical Research: An Ideas Book. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation; 2016. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1606.html. Accessed January 31, 2017.
results of a research evaluation pilot at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UWM) to document important short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes of its community-engaged research and scholarship. UWM researchers and leaders selected the following measures to consider: (1) metrics related to its health equity and community-engaged research training programs; (2) the academic outputs of UWM health equity scientists; and (3) community- and population-level effects related to the reach of UWM’s health-equity-related research, its impact on community partners, and its estimated effect on local community economic outcomes.

Results indicate that, over the five-year period (2010–2015), community-engaged scientists and trainees at UWM have begun to outpace the world average for relative citations of their scholarly output while simultaneously increasing research collaborations both within and beyond the university. Additionally, UWM’s community-based partners agree that these research collaborations have increased community members’ research skills, ability to understand data, and capacity to advocate effectively on their own behalf. While the evaluation estimates that over 275,000 community residents have been “touched” by UWM’s community-focused research efforts (e.g., as formal research partners, as research participants, or as members of a community impacted by UWM research), the quantifying of metrics focused on health impacts attributable directly to UWM’s community-engaged science and scholarship has presented challenges. Some of the challenges are due to historical confounding resulting from policies or community health improvement activities implemented concomitantly with UMW research that make the unique effects of said research difficult to isolate.

The lessons learned through development of these novel metrics bring into high relief challenges institutions will face as they embark upon their own research evaluations: current data collection might not support the calculation of some metrics that matter; certain measures are predicated on a series of assumptions for which corroborating information might not be available (e.g., the cost savings resulting from obesity averted); and a comparison group will not be readily available unless other institutions adopt comparable metrics. Furthermore, institutions with minimal experience in evaluating science and methods, or those without staff dedicated to such efforts, will not be easily able to use the tools we have developed and described.

Despite these potential barriers, the results of the UWM pilot not only demonstrate that research evaluation is possible but also provide a more holistic view of the many ways in which research benefits institutions, learners, communities, and the country. The next challenge for UWM—and for other institutions that undertake such research evaluation efforts—will be to communicate the results of these assessments to their target audiences as a means to increase support for biomedical research locally and more broadly.

As additional institutions explore assessing and communicating the value of their research in new and powerful ways, current stressors on the research enterprise—that is, calls for accountability, fiscal concerns regarding investments in research, ongoing inequity—can be better addressed and potentially assuaged. Academic health centers and the AAMC are committed to improving the lives of all through research. Now we have the tools to show—to everyone for whom it matters—all the ways in which we are living up to that promise.

Acknowledgments: None reported.

Funding/Support: None reported.

Other disclosures: None reported.

Ethical approval: The work presented in this Perspective was determined to be exempt from human subjects review by the human subjects administrator of the Association of American Medical Colleges on March 13, 2014.


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2 Wilson J. We need a measured approach to metrics. Nature. 2015;523:129.