

Developing Excellence in New College Faculty

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What makes a great liberal arts college? Most people would say it has something to do with the quality of the education offered. And while alumni testimonials and community beliefs are interesting in this regard, there is no substitute for hard data. That's why most education researchers look at indicators like absolute levels of graduate earnings 10 years out, graduate earnings compared to what students of similar caliber attained after graduating from other colleges, and the overall return-on-investment (a measure that includes the cost of attendance).

These are useful for New College to consider as it rebuilds into a preeminent liberal arts college. The college had fallen well behind its top-ranked peers in recent years. In the model of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, New College ranked 160th out of 217 liberal arts colleges in terms of graduate earnings after 10-years, and 124th out of 217 on the 20-year ROI measure.

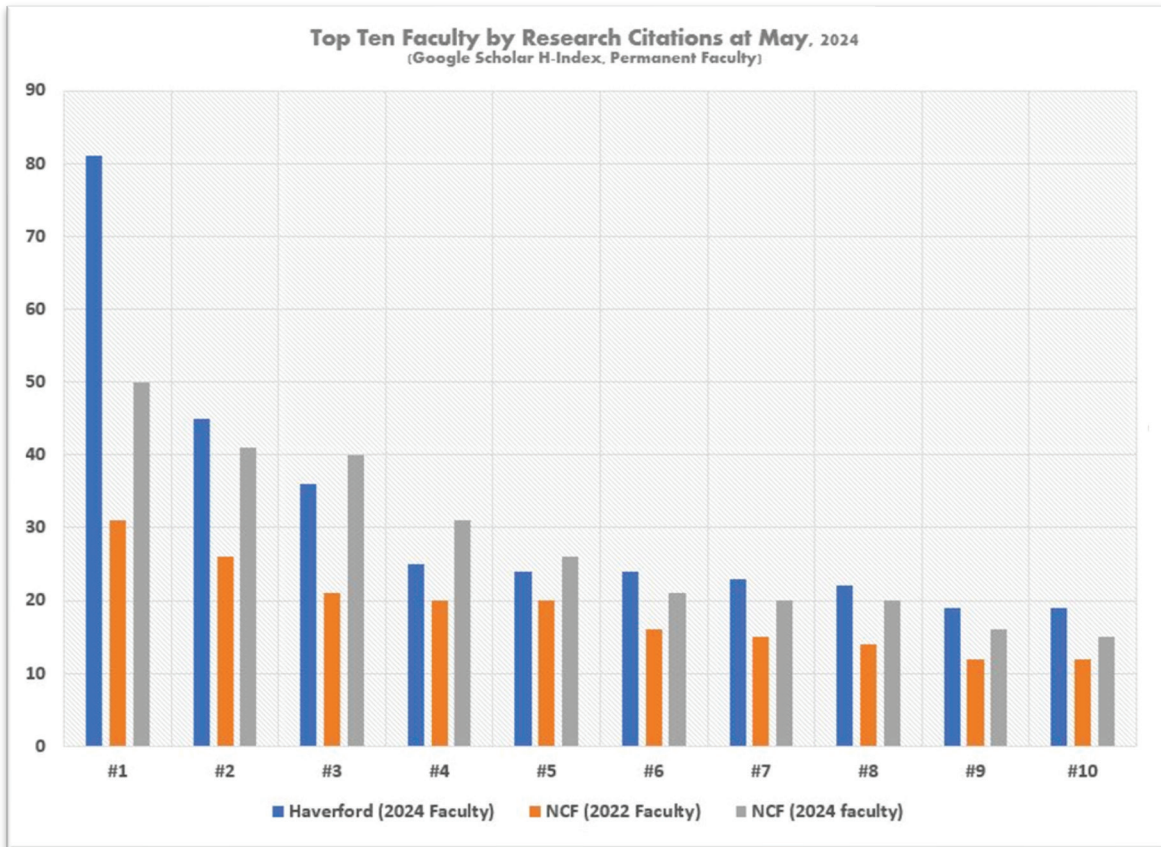
But there is another way to determine what makes a great liberal arts college: great professors. Again, alumni testimonials about "the class that changed my life" and community support for "engaged" faculty are interesting. But in the end, there is no substitute for the research record of a scholar to know if they have the potential to be a great professor.

Of course, being a cutting edge researcher does not guarantee a great teacher much less an inspiring mentor. But being a sub-par researcher guarantees that what is taught in the classroom will be second best. The public often assumes that faculty research is valued because of its contribution to knowledge. That is true. But it has a more practical use: as a signal about scholarly abilities. A good research record is a measure of competence to stand before a group of students and communicate the best of what is known. If you cannot produce it, you cannot teach it to its fullest. Full stop.

So faculty research impact, even for a liberal arts college, is important. It not only attracts top students to an institution – who does not want to spend four years in the classroom with world experts in their field? – but is also ensures a high level of learning in the classroom. It both signals and delivers excellence.

New College, alas, has some catching up to do on this front. The chart below uses the so-called "H-index" for the top 10 faculty from the broadly inclusive Google Scholar citations model. This is a measure of research breadth as well as impact, showing the highest number X such that the scholar has X publications that have been cited at least X times.

Now, of course different disciplines vary widely in norms about co-authorship, citation practices, publication frequency, and publication footprint. Those in the sciences tend to be on top of those in the humanities and social sciences as a result. Some fields, like design and music, simply do not produce as much research in the form of citable articles. Also, bigger research universities with dedicated research faculty will do better.



That is why it is important to compare New College to a similar institution. I choose top-ranked Haverford College in Pennsylvania, whose student body of 1,400 is roughly what New College hopes to attain and which has similar programs. (Use of the H-Index from the narrower Scopus model yields similar results).

The results show that before its transformation in 2023, New College struggled to attract and retain top researchers. If Haverford is a good benchmark for faculty quality and impact at a liberal arts college, then New College faculty quality was less than half as good as it needed to be.

This means two things. First, New College needs to attract, support, and retain top researchers who might be dissuaded by the liberal arts college label. That can be tricky, but places like Haverford show it is possible to develop a dynamic environment of teaching and research that blend together seamlessly.

The good news is that a number of tenure-track hires made for the 2024-25 year have already improved the results. The hiring of high impact researchers like Birana Aguila-Ames in Chemistry and David Mikics in English have in a single year done more for New College faculty quality than all the griping by low impact scholars. A few more years of hiring excellence, and New College will perhaps be able to call itself “the Haverford of the South.”

Second, in addition to rewarding faculty with good research results, New College needs to develop a culture of denying tenure to faculty who prove limited in their research capabilities. It is notable, for instance, that the most vocal critics of the New College transformation have been lamentably poor as researchers. Only one highly-cited scholar, Tiffany Doan (H-Index of 21), now at the University of Central Florida, has left. The loudest departures have been from faculty with little or nothing to show for their research. The vocal neuroscientist Elizabeth Leininger, now at St. Mary's College of Maryland, has a Google H-Index of 5. Most do not even register.

Denying tenure to such scholars would thus achieve two goals. Raising faculty quality and solving the problem of activist faculty who prefer drum-circles in the quad to the arduous work of objective research. The best researchers (and teachers) I know are too smart to take their own political biases without a large dose of humility and show curiosity about opposing viewpoints. Good research, good teaching, good results. And now, if I may be excused, I have some research to do. ENDS