

Academic Moneyball

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Abstract

We apply lessons from *Moneyball*, Michael Lewis's (2003) best-selling account of the Oakland Athletics's use of "sabermetrics" to find undervalued baseball players to help build a cost-effective team to the context of recreation, park, and leisure studies. Specifically, we coin and apply the term "academetrics" to find undervalued faculty members to help build cost-effective academic teams. We also draw analogies between the effects of long-term baseball contracts and tenure on performance, as well as describing different kinds of academic leagues, different kinds of academic players, and what it takes to "win" in academe. We conclude with a discussion of how academe's traditions, just like baseball's traditions, interfere with the progress of the "game."

Keywords: *academetrics; community colleges; undergraduate teaching colleges and universities; mid-level teaching/research universities; research universities; tenure*

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Awarding a faculty member tenure is one of the most important decisions a college or university can make. It is a lifetime investment. Moving from probationary to permanent status is analogous to shifting from an external to internal locus of control. No longer is the institution calling the shots. It is now the faculty member who is largely in charge of charting her or his own academic destiny. While colleges and universities retain some influence over tenured professors through post tenure reviews, merit pay, teaching loads, etc., their jobs are secure barring any major ethical or legal impropriety or institutional fiscal exigency.

When a college or university awards tenure, it is a decision driven by a faculty member's academic track record during the probationary period. The institution is saying it appreciates the work done and expects more of the same after earning tenure. What tenure often means to faculty members, however, is that they are now free to follow their own path, whether it corresponds to the institution's preferred path or not. Some tenured faculty members grow in new directions, aspiring to administration or rededicating themselves to particular aspects of teaching, scholarship, and service. Other tenured faculty members turn their attention to outside interests.

From an institutional perspective, the tenure decision is guided more by a concern for securing future productivity than rewarding past productivity, and though conventional wisdom has it that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance, it doesn't always turn out that way. Consequently, it would be useful for colleges and universities to know before granting tenure which professors are going to continue doing the kinds of things that earned them tenure, and which professors are going to use the security tenure provides to reinvent themselves, perhaps in ways that do not serve the institution's intended purpose (Krieger, 2011; O'Donnell, 2011). It is both figuratively and literally a million-dollar question; a question that, insofar as we know, cannot be answered. Therefore, the question we attempt to answer instead is "How can institutions of higher learning reduce the risk associated with making lifetime investments in faculty members without knowing for sure how they will conduct themselves after earning tenure?"

Moneyball

We ground the discussion in analogies from *Moneyball*, Michael Lewis's (2003) best-selling account of how the Oakland Athletics professional baseball team changed its way of doing business based on "sabermetrics," a new kind of metrics developed to assess player performance that could be used to better the chances of winning games. As Lewis described it, "At the bottom of the Oakland experiment was a willingness to rethink baseball: how it is managed, how it is played, who is best suited to play it, and why" (p. xiv). We do the same thing here. We rethink academe: how it is managed, how it is played, who is best suited to play it, and why.

Before we begin, however, it is important to clarify why we think the analogy between professional baseball and academe is apropos. One of the key issues Lewis probed in *Moneyball* is an all-too-frequent inverse relationship between long-term contracts and performance on the playing field. He pointed out that marquee players often are overvalued relative to their performance, while obscure players often are undervalued relative to their performance. Sabermetrics provided new kinds of factual information about player performance that the Oakland A's used to search the player pool for those undervalued players, and then made strategic cost-effective player acquisitions that led to several highly successful seasons. Along the way, the A's general manager, Billy Beane, defied many of baseball's long-standing traditions. As Lewis recounted it:

Many of the players drafted or acquired by the Oakland A's had been the victims of an unthinkable prejudice rooted in baseball's traditions. The research and development department in the Oakland front office liberated them from this prejudice, and allowed them to demonstrate their true worth (p. xiv).

Is it possible that in academe, too, there is sometimes an inverse relationship between long-term contracts (tenure) and performance on the playing field (accomplishments in teaching, scholarship, and service)? Peter Witt, a long-time editor of a number of recreation, park, and leisure studies journals, once remarked that "only a small percentage of people are publishing beyond tenure" (Witt, 2003, p. 333). Is it also possible, then, that some faculty members are overvalued relative to their performance, while other faculty members are undervalued relative to their performance? And is it possible to develop an academic equivalent to sabermetrics that college and university search committees could use to scour the faculty pool for those undervalued faculty members, and then make strategic cost-effective faculty acquisitions that would lead to their own successful seasons? Finally, just like baseball, is it possible that there are long-standing prejudices rooted in academe's traditions that work against high performing faculty members who are largely unknown beyond their own institutions, and that we can liberate those faculty members from those prejudices and allow them to demonstrate their true worth?

The Nature of the Game

It is important at the outset to understand the nature of the game. Baseball is about pitching, catching, hitting, getting on base, and scoring runs. Academe is about teaching, scholarship, and service. But just like baseball, upon closer examination, things get muddled quickly. Just as pitching, catching, hitting, getting on base, and scoring runs all interact with one another in various ways to form a baseball gestalt, so, too, do teaching, scholarship, and service interact with one another in various ways to form an academic gestalt. And just as individual baseball players exhibit different skill levels with regard to pitching, catching, hitting, getting on base, and scoring runs, so, too, do individual faculty members exhibit different skill levels with regard to teaching, scholarship, and service.

Baseball teams are made up of singles hitters and homerun hitters. So, too, are academic departments. Baseball teams have players who rarely strike out and others who strike out often. So, too, do academic departments. Baseball teams employ position players and utility players. So, too, do academic departments. Moreover, the job of academic department heads, just like baseball managers, is to get the most out of their charges in a manner that puts their team in the best position to win. This requires understanding the strengths and weaknesses of every player on the team and managing them in a way that maximizes their strengths and minimizes their weaknesses. Successful academic department heads, just like successful baseball managers, must be good strategists.

And what is "winning" in academe? Winning is being a department that is highly valued within its own college or university as well as being highly valued beyond the campus (Schwab, Greenwood, & Dustin, 2014). Winning in academe is characterized by a high level of sustained performance over time, good coaching, and collegiality. Winning in academe, just like winning in baseball, comes from the synergy that results when individual

team members play together in ways that add up to more than the sum of their individual performances. Academe, just like baseball, is a team sport (Fairweather, 2002).¹

A League of their Own

We all know what baseball leagues are, but what are academic leagues? There are four such leagues: community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, mid-level teaching/research universities offering master's degrees, and research universities offering doctoral degrees. In recreation, park, and leisure studies (RPLS), there are only a few dozen research universities playing the RPLS game, in contrast to a few hundred community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid-level teaching/research universities (U.S. College Search, 2013).² By deduction, the vast majority of academic careers in RPLS play out in community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid-level teaching/research universities. This is the first "academic" to which we direct your attention.

We create professors in our own image on the playing fields of RPLS research universities. We drill them over and over again to be competent social scientists, and then we ship the vast majority of them off to other leagues where the demands of teaching and service leave little time for scholarship. Put differently, we drill our doctoral students incessantly on how to do good social science, while offering little to no instruction on how to do good teaching and service, skills that are particularly essential to winning in their leagues. One has to wonder whether this is really the best way to prepare future RPLS academicians.

Would it not be a better strategy to devote significantly more time to pedagogical issues in our doctoral programs of study that will be central to RPLS faculty members as they make their way onto the playing fields of community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid level teaching/research universities? The thematic focus of the recent Academy of Leisure Sciences Teaching Institute is illustrative. The overall theme was enhancing students' 21st century literacies with an emphasis on collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, creativity, and personal, social, and environmental responsibility (Academy of Leisure Sciences, 2013). Mastering these student-centered teaching skills is important no matter the academic league, and improving pedagogical performance warrants much more attention in graduate education than we currently give it. Moreover, professors who excel at teaching pedagogy should be liberated from the prejudicial academic tradition that treats teaching as if most anyone can do it.³

Finding Undervalued "Players"

Despite the odds, some of those same professors who play for community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid level teaching/research universities make important contributions to the literature. They can be lost, however, to research universities. For example, in a recent article in the *Journal of Leisure Research*, Walker

¹This is a bone of contention within some academic circles. Some people see professors as "individual contractors" while others think of them as "team members."

²The exact number of academic programs in recreation, park, and leisure studies is elusive. While the National Recreation and Park Association counts 79 accredited undergraduate programs, U.S. College Search identifies 334 programs at all levels of higher education. It is safe to say the number of programs is well into the hundreds.

³There is evidence of some progress being made among RPLS doctoral degree-granting institutions in mentoring graduate students in the teaching/learning process as well as hiring teaching faculty with no research responsibilities.

and Fenton (2011) examined the institutional concentration of leisure research. The authors compared earlier data compiled by Jackson (2004) with their follow-up data to identify the “Top Ten” universities in North America producing authorships. With the exception of one mid-level teaching/research university,⁴ the “Top Ten” were research universities. Noting an increasing concentration of scholarly productivity, Walker and Fenton pointed out that while the “Top Ten” universities in Jackson’s earlier study accounted for 38.8% of all authorships, their results showed that the “Top Ten” universities now accounted for 46.2% of all authorships. Their conclusion was that “while more are doing a little, a few are doing more” (Walker & Fenton, 2011, p. 481).

What is intriguing about Walker and Fenton’s reporting from an academetic perspective is what may be hidden in the aggregates. By focusing on the 38.8% statistic from Jackson’s study and the 46.2% statistic from their study, Walker and Fenton pay less attention to the 61.2% of authorships from Jackson’s study and the 53.8% of authorships from their study that come from other than the “Top Ten” universities. Granted those authorships are spread out among a much larger population of authors. But it follows that if there are only a smattering of other research universities with RPLS programs beyond the “Top Ten,” a plurality, if not a majority, of RPLS authorships must come from elsewhere, including community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid-level teaching/research universities. Consequently, it would behoove faculty search committees in the market for productive scholars to scout well beyond research universities for those hidden “gems” playing in other academic leagues. But conventional academic wisdom has it that one cannot easily move from a teaching university to a research university, so the focus tends to be on research university “farm systems” when looking for new talent. Academetics proponents contend this is a mistake.

There is a parallel here with baseball’s conventional wisdom that potential superstars are to be found at the high school level and not at the college level, because they stand out from the masses and are easier to identify. But Bill James, the father of sabermetrics, studied the history of baseball’s draft and found that “college players are a better investment than high school players by a huge, huge, laughably huge margin” (Lewis, p. 99). In similar fashion, it may be that research universities looking for potential academic superstars would be better served by canvassing community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid-level teaching/research universities for already productive and more seasoned faculty members rather than focusing on newly minted PhDs coming out of their own research universities.

To put a finer point on it, if we cannot identify which faculty members will remain productive post tenure, academetics suggest it might be a sounder strategy for research universities to seek out tenured faculty from community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid-level teaching/research universities, who, despite heavy teaching and service loads, manage to sustain their scholarship, earn tenure, and otherwise remain productive. Such faculty may appear to be more expensive hires, especially if they require advanced rank with tenure, but the risk of making a bad lifetime investment in them is reduced considerably because they have already demonstrated sustained performance after

⁴Brigham Young University (BYU), which did not even make the “Top 40” in Jackson’s 2004 study, catapulted into Walker and Fenton’s “Top 10” in 2011. When interviewed for this article, BYU’s department chair attributed the dramatic rise in BYU’s ranking to strategic hires from mid-level teaching/research universities and a few freshly minted PhDs, who coalesced around a family leisure theme that catalyzed scholarship throughout the department.

earning tenure. The million-dollar question, of course, is how many of those undervalued faculty members are out there? We won't know for sure unless and until we actively scout and recruit them.

It is also important to note that the conclusions drawn from Jackson's and Walker and Fenton's studies about the increasing concentration of leisure research in a relatively small number of North American universities are based largely on reviews of authorships in six journals (*Journal of Leisure Research*, *Leisure Sciences*, *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, *Leisure/Loisir*, and *Loisir et Societe*). By excluding a score or more of other relevant journals from their reviews,⁵ significant numbers of RPLS authorships and authors may be falling through the cracks. "Academicians" would caution against drawing sweeping conclusions about RPLS based on only six journals. The field of study has become too wide ranging and too eclectic to be reduced to a handful of journals. Moreover, as RPLS departments specialize in one area or another (e.g., adventure and outdoor programming, commercial recreation, conservation and parks, event management, sport management, sustainable tourism, therapeutic recreation, etc.), their faculty are likely to publish in journals other than traditional RPLS outlets. Finally, as Witt (2003) has reasoned elsewhere, readership may be more important to some faculty members than publication outlet. Despite institutional pressure to publish only in "top-tier" journals, many RPLS academicians publish elsewhere because their readers are elsewhere. Ignoring those outlets means potentially missing out on a significant part of a promising faculty pool.

Finding Undervalued "Managers"

Academicians also remind us that when entry-level RPLS professors play for community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, or mid level teaching/research universities, they typically are required to play multiple positions. Yet in our doctoral programs we emphasize specialization and a narrowing of research focus.⁶ We tell our doctoral students they must carve out an academic niche for themselves that distinguishes them from everyone else. Then we send them off to leagues where highly skilled position players are not what is needed. Utility players are needed to cover the bases of small programs. Entry level professors are often asked to teach a variety of courses, advise a variety of students, supervise a variety of interns, serve on a variety of department, college, and university committees, and perhaps even take on a variety of administrative responsibilities. Over time, this results in a large pool of faculty members at community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid level teaching/research universities who have been shaped by circumstance to be widely knowledgeable in matters

⁵e.g., *Academe*; *Annals of Tourism Research*; *Camping Magazine*; *College Teaching*; *Conservation Biology*; *Environment and Behavior*; *Environmental Management*; *International Journal of Wilderness*; *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership*; *Journal of Environmental Education*; *Journal of Experiential Education*; *Journal of Forestry*; *Journal of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*; *Journal of Interpretation Research*; *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*; *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*; *Journal of Sport Behavior*; *Journal of Sport Management*; *Journal of Sustainable Education*; *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*; *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*; *Journal of Youth Development*; *Legacy*; *Park Science*; *Parks & Recreation*; *Research in Outdoor Education*; *Scholar: a Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education*; *Society and Natural Resources*; *Tourism Analysis*; *Tourism Geographies*; *Tourism Recreation Research*; *Youth First: The Journal of Youth Sport*; and *World Leisure Journal*, to name a few.

⁶This increasing specialization within RPLS has also contributed to a fragmentation of the field. It is harder to think of each other as team members when specialized academic expertise leads us down different intellectual paths.

of academic administration and faculty governance.

Academicians conclude from this that we should be looking for future academic administrators in community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid-level teaching/research universities as well as in research universities. But this advice runs counter to conventional academic wisdom that department heads, especially at research universities, should be nationally renowned scholars, preferably with a research university pedigree. The academic fact of the matter is that a more robust pool of promising administrators is likely to be found in community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and in mid-level teaching/research universities where playing multiple positions has equipped professors with a more comprehensive view of academic life as well as the world of professional practice, a view that lends itself to academic leadership. To the extent we have been ignoring this academic in looking for future RPLS administrators, we have not been casting a wide enough net.

“On Base” Percentages

Academicians, then, uncover those hidden metrics that more conventional metrics do not recognize as being significant. In sabermetrics, for example, James found that one of the things that really mattered in playing winning baseball was a player’s on base percentage (OBP), not how a player got on base. Getting a walk was as good as getting a single. Getting hit by a pitch was as good as a walk. Even striking out was a good thing if there was a passed ball on the third strike and the batter beat the throw to first. Proclivities for bases on balls, being hit by pitches, or beating out passed balls, however, were typically not considered to be metrics that mattered in baseball. Players who excelled at these unconventional ways of getting on base flew under the radar. James’s OBP identified them, and the Oakland A’s general manager, Billy Beane, acquired them.

In what ways might some RPLS professors also fly under the radar? Consider the scholarly notion of “impact factor.” Conventional academic wisdom has it that impact factor is a function of the number of citations a professor’s work receives in scholarly journals. But is this the only kind of impact that matters? What about professors who have positive impacts on their students? What about professors who make positive impacts on professional practice, professional organizations, and on the quality of community life? Are these not equally significant, if not more significant, impacts that tend to be overlooked by traditional academic accounting practices (Schwab et al., 2014)? If so, who are the professors making these impacts, where do they work, and might they be interested in working elsewhere?

Academicians, in sum, encourage us to rethink academe: how it is managed, how it is played, who is best suited to play it, and why. Moreover, its devotees are inclined to ask unorthodox questions as they step outside the academic batter’s box. For example, is there only one right way to play the game? Is academe really just about teaching, scholarship, and service? Are there not new and emerging positions like “funded scholars” and “academic entrepreneurs” that require new kinds of skills from new kinds of position players? And what does good scholarship really look like? And what does good teaching really look like? And why is service so often treated as a poor stepchild to teaching and scholarship? And why do some professors “retire” after earning tenure while others do not? And which professors are well known without high profile publication records? And how did they gain their reputations and what can we learn from their example? And what is the nature of

their impacts? And why have their impacts mattered? In sum, what kinds of academic accomplishments should count as “hits,” “getting on base,” and “scoring runs,” and what can we do to make sure those accomplishments are respected, honored, and rewarded by the larger academic community (Middaugh, 2011; Olson, 2011)? Answers to these questions would be worth their weight in gold to most any faculty search committee.

Strategizing

An academic team, just like a baseball team, requires many different kinds of players. These players need to support one another in various ways (Fairweather, 2002), and it is up to the department head to shuffle the lineup in a way that capitalizes on their respective skills and abilities. When new players are needed to fill vacancies on the roster, the department head must move beyond academic traditions that limit the playing field just as Billy Beane moved beyond baseball’s traditions. We have identified six such limiting academic traditions: 1) the assumption that most anyone can teach; 2) teaching people how to teach is unnecessary; 3) one cannot easily move from a teaching university to a research university; 4) faculty searches should concentrate on freshly minted PhDs from research universities; 5) journal status matters more than readership; and 6) department heads, especially at research universities, must be accomplished scholars with good academic pedigrees. To leave these limiting academic traditions unchallenged is to treat community colleges, undergraduate teaching colleges and universities, and mid level teaching/research universities as the “minor” leagues. This does a disservice to the academic talent playing for them. Their professors are simply playing in different kinds of academic leagues, where different kinds of performance metrics are used to measure their worth. And while there certainly are many more RPLS professors playing for the community college, comprehensive teaching college and university, and mid-level teaching/research university ranks than are playing for research universities, it would be a mistake to assume those professors could not play for research universities if they so desired. Many RPLS professors self-select for teaching colleges and universities because they prefer the kinds of “games” played there. Others end up at teaching colleges and universities because there are fewer RPLS openings out of graduate school at research universities. It is the latter kind of professor who might be ready, willing, and able to move on to a research university. But fostering a new kind of openness and mobility between academic leagues requires discarding long-held prejudicial academic traditions that limit a sense of the possible, just as Billy Beane found out in the context of professional baseball.’

Having an eye for undervalued academic talent involves more than academetrics, and managing an academic department in recreation, park, and leisure studies, just like managing a baseball team, requires more than a facility with numbers. Having a feel for the game and a tacit understanding of people and personalities are also part of successful strategizing. Academic managers, just like baseball managers, must use their imaginations, think creatively, anticipate where the game is going, and then get ahead of it (Remember the BYU example.) Academic management, just like baseball management, is as much art as science (Dustin & Schwab, 2014; Dustin, Brown, Bricker, & Schwab, 2011; Dustin et al., 2012; Dustin, McDonald, Harper, Lamke, & Murphy, 2014). It requires quick reflexes in response to constantly changing conditions as well as understanding the game’s more predictable ebbs and flows (Dubrow, Moseley, & Dustin, 2006).

For the Love of the Game

At the beginning of the academic game, it is almost impossible to predict how an individual faculty member will conduct herself or himself on the playing field, especially after receiving a lifetime contract. Our best educated guess is that intrinsic motivation is the most reliable indicator of a long and distinguished academic career (Bailey, 1999; Chen, Gupta, & Hoshower, 2006; Hardre, Beesley, Miller, & Pace, 2011). Faculty members who do what needs to be done to earn tenure and then reinvent themselves, just like baseball players who play especially well when their contracts are up, are likely externally motivated. They “hit” because they have to hit to “get on base.” They have to get on base to “score runs.” And they have to score runs to “win” the game. To them, being tenured is winning the game. The years that follow may seem almost anticlimactic. To their universities, however, tenure signifies the beginning—not the end—and they expect to see sustained performance from their tenured faculty members for the duration of their careers.

When competing on the academic playing field, it is fair to say that department heads want to get the most out of every professor in teaching, scholarship, and service. And while the academic game can be played in a variety of ways, we believe intrinsically motivated professors are best suited to play it, because their love of academic life will sustain them after tenure (Dustin et al., 2014). This, at least, was the conclusion Lewis drew about big league baseball players and long-term contracts. Marquee players often failed to deliver what their long-term contracts promised. And so the Oakland Athletics looked elsewhere for players they could count on—undervalued players who were performing on other playing fields for the love of the game. Academic departments in recreation, park, and leisure studies could stand to learn a thing or two from baseball’s lessons.

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