

New Role for Business School Research

A major accreditation group suggests new relevancy standards for B-school studies—and some researchers are wary

by [Francesca Di Meglio](#)

What is the ultimate goal of business school research? That's the question being raised by a draft report from the accreditation organization AACSB International, which proposes, in part, to encourage B-school researchers to produce work that is most immediately applicable to the practice of business.

The [draft report](#)—which has been submitted for comments to member schools—is causing a stir among B-school administrators and faculty who are concerned that the AACSB stance might cause major changes to the way schools evaluate scholarship and ultimately earn accreditation. They're also concerned that research into esoteric subjects could be discouraged.

On the surface, the group's seven recommendations seem benign. They include suggestions that AACSB develop an awards program to recognize "high-impact" research by faculty, have the AACSB work with publishers of the major journals, and support studies examining the link between research and education in degree and non-degree programs.

WHO DEFINES RELEVANCE?

It's the group's first recommendation, "Extend and augment AACSB accreditation guidelines to require schools to demonstrate the impact of faculty intellectual contribution to targeted audiences," that has set some teeth on edge. Basically the group would ask B-schools to define a metric to demonstrate that people are actually applying or using the knowledge acquired in these research projects. For example, if a professor focuses his studies on improving accounting education, the school could measure his impact by looking at the number of people using his cases, textbooks, or other materials in the curriculum, according to the report.

Some people fear that pushing for immediate relevance could deter researchers from studying uncharted or esoteric subjects. "We need to push boundaries and explore new frontiers of knowledge," says John Sailors, assistant professor of marketing at the [Opus College of Business](#)

at University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis. He also says that the choice of who is responsible for deciding what is relevant could limit the type of research that surfaces. If everyone is focusing on improving what's already happening in business, says Sailors, they won't make discoveries or find new ways of doing things.

Others, although pleased to see someone is paying attention to business school scholarship, agree that creating a metric could cause problems. "Looking for that immediate payoff is a mistake" says Thomas F. Cooley, dean of the [Stern School of Business](#) at New York University. He also says that faculty should create new knowledge and if people find it useful, they'll apply it.

ELEVATING THE DISCUSSION

At the heart of the report is a call for better communication among the AACSB, its participating schools, their faculty, and business practitioners. Joseph A. Alutto, the interim president and provost of Ohio State University and chair of the AACSB committee that put out the report, says the group is merely hoping to get business schools thinking about the types of research they are conducting. He says that the kind of data schools are asked for during the accreditation process might change. But the basis of accreditation—analysis of the alignment of the school's mission with its activities—will remain the same. "We hope [the suggestions] encourage more honesty," says Alutto.

The report, *Impact of Research*, is partially a reaction to criticism in recent years of B-schools for being irrelevant (see [BusinessWeek.com](#), 5/25/05, "[Bringing Shakespeare to B-School](#)"). Many in the B-school community agree that spurring discussion about scholarship is a good idea and could elevate the importance of the research coming out of business schools. Optimists see the group as providing a new structure for scholarship.

"This could do for business schools what Sarbanes-Oxley did for business," says James Dean, senior associate dean for academic affairs at the University of North Carolina's [Kenan-Flagler Business School](#). He adds that this road map for how to deal with

scholarship could broaden the view of what constitutes research and scholarly activity and could lead faculty to pursue other types of publication and projects.

ACADEMIC/PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE

Another recommendation that has some academics wary is for the AACSB to strengthen the relationship between academics and practicing managers. The idea would be to create a two-way dialogue so that academics can explain in laymen's terms the purpose and results of their more esoteric studies. The other side of the dialogue would have practicing managers describing the most pressing issues they face as a way to offer ideas to professors on what to cover in their research.

"I don't think solving business problems with academic research is fruitful," says Regina Anctil, assistant professor at Opus College, who adds that a large chunk of the knowledge-gathering is meant to help educators do their jobs better. Anctil says that most businesspeople have surpassed the fundamentals, and business school research does not have to be as readily transferable to them. She says business research serves students. But she adds that there's room for lots of types of scholarship and that her school is in line with the AACSB's proposal because it aims to produce good teachers and researchers.

In fact, Opus dean Christopher Puto says that the balancing act is a top priority. "We're a teaching university where everyone does scholarship," says Puto, who adds that he rewards both pursuits.

Schools have until Sept. 1 to comment on the report. Ultimately, any changes to accreditation standards must be approved by a vote of the accredited schools. With or without accreditation changes however, B-school faculty clearly have two tough assignments: find the middle ground between being a good researcher and a good teacher and produce work that is useful to academics, practicing managers and students.

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