

Valuing Scholarship by Manuscript Reviewers: A Call to Action

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Each year, promotions, merit review, and other committees apply criteria to assess the scholarly work of faculty. Many individuals volunteer their evenings and weekends to review work authored by others in support of the peer-review process.¹ Where does review work count in the assessment of faculty scholarship? For many institutions, this effort remains invisible. It is past time that reviewers receive credit for this critical scholarship through academic recognition and reward systems that assess the quantity and quality of reviewers' work.

In all areas of research and innovation, including medical education, scholarship requires dissemination of new work to allow critique and commentary by others.^{2,3} The written products of researchers and educators are rarely easily and fully understood by others on initial submission: nearly all submitted articles require substantial assistance from editors and reviewers to enhance their clarity and quality. Editorial work usually garners "points" for promotions and merit review score cards, but, for most institutions, serving as a reviewer does not. Yet peer review is an essential component in evaluating and disseminating scholarship. Serving as a peer reviewer represents outstanding altruism and "citizenship": the reviewer, often anonymously, donates considerable time to advance a field of knowledge, for the benefit of all. Articles may undergo massive revisions because of careful insightful reviews; however, a reviewer's work may be acknowledged only via an email or annual "thank you" by the journal. Thus, while reviewing is a foundational component of advancing any field, its value is often hidden. When reviewing is done exceptionally well, it should be recognized and rewarded as vital scholarship.⁴

Peer Review

Authors and reviewers are intrinsically related; they represent 2 sides of the same coin of synthesizing and

advancing knowledge. Each has a crucial role in developing work that advances a field. Authors create and then transform their scholarly work into manuscripts. Peers in the field assess the quality of the work and the degree to which it advances what is already known. These judges offer critical appraisals—of importance, study methods, logic of author arguments, how the work is situated within other advances in the field—as well as suggestions for improving the clarity and organization of a paper.⁵ These recommendations may extend to several pages of detailed organized comments, including suggested wording for rewrites and additional references to bolster or refute arguments. Reviews also inform editor decisions regarding the relevance of the work to the journal's mission and audience.⁵ When published, authors may receive honors and accolades—and financial (merit) incentives—for their work; reviewers, who may have improved the article substantially during 1, 2, or even more revisions, usually do not.

Recognizing Peer Review as Scholarship

There are many benefits to reviewing, such as learning about new developments in the field, research methods, article organization, graphics strategies, and how to write clearly.¹ In addition, reviewers deserve credit for their scholarship. Although specific requirements vary among specialties, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) considers "serving as a journal reviewer" a scholarly activity for faculty.⁶ At least one professional society includes serving as a journal reviewer in their point system for determining eligibility for fellow designation.⁷ Some academic institutions have begun to acknowledge reviewer contributions as evidence of scholarship (Lalena M. Yarris, MD, MCR, written communication, March 12, 2021). For others, faculty may demonstrate the quality of their work by submitting sample reviews as part of their annual performance review for promotion (BOX 1).

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BOX 1 Promotions Committee Actions to Recognize Journal Reviewing as Scholarship

- Add review activities to annual merit, promotions, and other required documents as evidence demonstrating medical education scholarship.
- Develop rubrics for weighting reviewers' activities as scholarship (eg, 5 high-quality medical education reviews = 1 peer-reviewed short report article).
- Add mentorship of junior reviewers or leading group reviews to mentoring criteria in promotion rubrics.

Some journals send letters to reviewers' supervisors—such as department chairs or division chiefs—describing exceptional reviewer performance. Other journals, including the *Journal of Graduate Medical Education (JGME)*, annually send a certificate to reviewers ranked in the top 10% in review quality or recognize reviewers who have completed more than a certain number of reviews per year. Yet journals can do more to support reviewer recognition (BOX 2). A transparent system to evaluate the quality of reviews, beyond metrics such as timeliness and number of reviews per year, would be a critical element of this process.

Estimating the Quality of Reviewing

For promotions and other committees to factor in review performance, either journals need to provide credible measures of review quality or committees must assess actual written reviews, similar to their assessment of an individual's original publications. Currently, many journals do rate review quality and have metrics such as how many reviews have been done annually and review timeliness. Providing this information to reviewers seems a minimal return for reviewer efforts, yet may require additional staff and editor time, always in short supply. In addition, the reliability of ratings is often unknown, and journals use different, although usually similar, systems.

For *JGME*, reviewers' metrics include: the number of requested reviews per year; number of declined reviews; timeliness of completed reviews; manuscripts' numbers, titles, and final dispositions; and an average of all review ratings, assessed by the editors. These data are created in real time and often go back to the journal's inception, for most journals. These metrics reveal information about professionalism, engagement, and review quality in comparison with other reviewers.

At *JGME*, each review is rated by the handling editor on a score from 50 to 100 on the quality, accuracy, and clarity of the review. The Editor-in-Chief may adjust these ratings according to editors' tendencies to score reviewers either high or low, to

BOX 2 Journal Actions to Support Reviewers' Work as Scholarship

- Send letters noting exemplary reviewer performance to supervisors or deans each year, including a comparison metric.
- Publish highest-performing reviewer names in the journal each year and/or list on the journal website.
- Provide metrics—average rating of reviews and number of reviews per year—upon request to reviewers to use for their local performance evaluations.
- Ask reviewers to write commentaries, to be published in the journal, for accepted articles.⁸
- Include reviewers' names (eg, in acknowledgements, on published articles when substantive reviews contributed to article quality).

homogenize the “tough” vs “easy” raters. Although subjective, editors' review ratings tend to converge after they have served on the editorial board for 1 to 2 years (ie, different editors tend to rate the same review similarly). These ratings may have consequences, as reviewers with low average ratings, based on several papers, may not be asked to review again. A more rigorous, while still efficient, rating system would be preferred. Nonetheless, existing metrics could be used, by faculty members seeking promotion, as evidence of high performance akin to assessments of faculty teaching and mentoring (BOX 3).

Our Bottom Line

Promotions or merit review committees should add reviewer performance to their criteria. Journals do collect metrics on review performance that could be helpful. Just as in other forms of scholarship (eg, publications, research grants, presentations), a single review would rarely be considered sufficient evidence

BOX 3 Reviewer Actions to Support Scholarship Credit

- Keep track of the number of reviews each year for each journal, the actual reviews, and final paper dispositions; consider using an online tool like Publons⁹ to track your completed reviews.
- Add your review work to your CV, educational portfolio, or annual performance review with quality and quantity evidence as available from each journal.
- Add the names of journals for which you regularly review to your academic website.
- Ask journals for your reviewer metrics.
- Work across specialties and professional societies to inform leadership about the value of reviewer work, particularly in medical education and faculty mentoring.
- Work with departmental and college/university promotions committees to add reviewer work to their assessment documents and rubrics.

of sustained productivity. Review quality and quantity over time is essential. We hope that that this editorial adds impetus to the conversations around reviewing and leads to increased recognition for reviewers' essential work in advancing scholarship.

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