

# E X C H A N G E S

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## “AN A IS AN A”: DESIGN THINKING AND OUR DESIRED FUTURE

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**We adopt a design-thinking perspective and focus not only on *what is* but on *what can be*. In the context of the current dissatisfaction in the management field regarding the “An A is an A” way of categorizing and valuing research, design thinking involves creating a more desirable future. In this more desirable future, we will be able to (a) more clearly define and measure research performance, (b) consider and align the interests of internal and external stakeholders, and (c) do this through the active involvement of leadership in our field. We describe knowledge that management scholars have created to enable us to turn this more desirable future into a reality.**

In the final section of our focal article in this issue of the journal (Aguinis, Cummings, Ramani, & Cummings, 2020), we concluded: “This A-journal mindset has taken hold and become institutionalized over the past few decades as business schools responded to increasing pressure to measure the value of their research for performance management and accountability purposes. The realization of the dominance of this new bottom line for valuing academic research provides a foundation for moving management research beyond A-journal strictures” (p. 148). And, we ended our article with a statement of hope: “We hope our analysis and

forward-looking recommendations and policy suggestions will spur further travel down this path” (Aguinis et al., 2020, p. 148). We are delighted that Abdul A. Rasheed and Richard L. Priem (2020) and Jean Bartunek (2020) have provided such thoughtful and informative exchanges that help us travel down this path.

In this exchange, we focus on our future, not our past or present. We draw on the design-thinking perspective recommended by 1978 Economics Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon (1996), who suggested that applied sciences are concerned not only about *what is* but also about *what can be*. Essentially, design thinking involves creating preferred futures (Aguinis & Vandenberg, 2014; Van Aken & Romme, 2012). In engineering, for example, following Simon’s approach might mean creating a desired future involving more fuel-efficient and environmental-friendly vehicles. In the context of the overall current dissatisfaction in the management

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field regarding the “An A is an A” situation, design thinking involves creating a more desirable future—one in which we are able to more clearly define and measure research performance, consider and align the interests of internal and external stakeholders, and do this through the active involvement of leadership in our field. Thankfully, management scholars have created sufficient knowledge over the past several decades to enable us to make a more desirable future a reality. We focus on each of these three selective yet critical issues.

### THE CRITERION PROBLEM

What are appropriate criteria to use in evaluating research performance? How do we define and measure rigor, quality, and impact? Clearly, research performance is a multidimensional and dynamic construct. And, it is used for many different purposes, such as administrative decisions (e.g., promotion, tenure), faculty development, and institutional rankings. What different criteria can be used for each of these and other purposes? Decades of conceptual and empirical research addressing this “criterion problem” (Aguinis, 2019; Austin & Villanova, 1992) can be useful in answering these questions and creating our more desirable future.

### INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER ALIGNMENT

How can we align the interests of current and future management educators and scholars, university administrators, current and former students, organizations that may benefit from the knowledge produced in business schools, and society at large (including governments and policy makers)? How can we create greater congruence among the goals of those who seek to create management knowledge and those who try to apply it in their work and extra-work lives? Conceptual and empirical research on stakeholder theory (Parmar et al., 2010) can help us understand how value is produced and traded across various stakeholders concerned with creating a more desirable future for how management knowledge is produced and used.

### LEADERSHIP

What is the role of senior scholars, journal editors, university administrators, and professional organizations in leading the path toward a more desirable future? What policies, procedures, and reward systems can be

implemented to make greater stakeholder alignment, as described earlier, a reality? Again, there is abundant conceptual and empirical research regarding the combined influence of multiple leaders—and at different levels of analysis (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2017). It is through our understanding of the role of these and other leaders that we will be able to create a more desirable future.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS: OUR JOURNEY HAS BEGUN

Taken together, the articles published in this issue offer a comprehensive discussion of the current “An A is an A” situation, including not only negative but also positive aspects. Overall, the sentiment is that we can and should create a more desirable future in which positive aspects of the “A is an A” situation are maintained while negative aspects are minimized or even eliminated. Adopting a design-thinking perspective means that creating a more desirable future is a journey. We are heartened that the journey has begun and optimistic that it will lead to a comprehensive and broadly useful way to conceptualize and measure the value of management research.

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