Thoughts on Faculty Scholarship at RIT

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I. Introduction: Over the past few years, RIT has had an impressive impact with the research, scholarship, and creative work produced by our faculty. Our faculty are publishing papers and books, creating new digital products, crafting artistic works and performing both locally and internationally. Our faculty are exploring the deepest mysteries of space, while working to preserve our planet for generations. They are addressing environmental, industrial, and social challenges and developing life-changing technologies. All of this effort is inspiring and clearly contributing substantially to raising the national and international reputation of RIT.

After discussion with many faculty members, it became clear that there is an opportunity to ensure that our scholarly environment supports the work of the faculty; in particular to clarify how our expectations for scholarship can accommodate the changing nature of research.

Like the thought paper on promotion distributed in January, I decided to use a similar approach to discuss scholarship. In this set of remarks, I attempt to capture some broad, high-level ideas, and in some cases, principles, regarding faculty research and scholarly work at RIT. There are three basic objectives: (i) to reaffirm key principles of scholarship at RIT; (ii) to clarify expectations where possible; and, (iii) to provide greater flexibility to account for emerging and evolving forms of scholarship.

These comments and remarks are grounded in RIT policies E4.0, E5.0, E6.0, the 2009 Provost’s Expectations on Hiring, Promotion, and Tenure, and specific RIT College policies. Additionally, this work has benefited from numerous conversations with deans, chairs and faculty. And, like the thought paper on promotion, the ideas are not intended to set policy or provide new guidance but rather to provoke a discussion across campus.

Finally, for the purposes of these remarks, ‘faculty’ will refer to tenure-track (pre-tenure or post-tenure) faculty at RIT.
II. The Teacher-Scholar model – an expectation of all tenured and tenure-track faculty: At the heart of why RIT embraces scholarship in its academic mission is the underlying principle that scholarly activity enhances our educational effectiveness. In many respects, this principle is best captured by the teacher-scholar model, which RIT, with its strong roots and values in teaching and learning, is perfectly suited to embrace. The teacher-scholar model (i) assumes a healthy balance of teaching and scholarship; (ii) expects that one’s scholarship is integrated with and influences the educational experiences of our students; and (iii) supports scholarly activities that are not limited to traditional scholarship of discovery. Simply put, the teacher-scholar is a faculty member who is engaged in scholarship in such a way that this work is integrally fused with the education of our students.

It is interesting to recall the narrative from the soon-to-be-finalized RIT 2015 strategic plan on scholarship:

“Assessments of the quality and quantity of faculty scholarship should place particular emphasis on the extent to which it is strengthening faculty teaching and student learning. That is, scholarship is integral to, and not separated from, all aspects of a student’s total educational experience at RIT. Opportunities for faculty to embed scholarship into the student learning experience and career focus of the university include, but are not restricted to:

- integrating relevant aspects of scholarship into course material, classroom discussion, laboratory/studio experiences, and out-of-class assignments;
- connecting, wherever possible, scholarship activity with course material and co-op/internship experiences;
- including discussion of scholarship in one-on-one and small group interactions in the faculty advising/mentoring process;
- encouraging/requiring students to attend relevant scholarly presentations as integral/complementary to course material;
- providing opportunities for participation in scholarship through Special Topics/Independent Study courses;
- requiring participation in scholarship as part of the curriculum; and
- encouraging/facilitating the interaction between students formally engaged in scholarship with those not as engaged (both graduate and undergraduate)."

For a thorough discussion on the teacher-scholar model, see the article “Why Teacher-scholars matter: Some insights from FSSE and NSSE” by George Kuh, Daniel Chen, and Thomas F. Nelson Laird. All tenured and tenure-track faculty are expected, therefore, to annually provide evidence of ongoing scholarship, appropriate for and within the scope of the individual faculty plan of work.
III. Characteristics and definitions: There are a number of characteristics – some explicit and some implicit in RIT policy – that are worth articulating.

- **Documentation, dissemination, and validation:** While RIT Policy E4.0 describes scholarship at RIT at the very broadest level, it specifically mentions that scholarship must demonstrate three necessary characteristics – scholarship must be: (i) documented, (ii) disseminated, and (iii) peer-reviewed or externally validated in some form.

- **Four types of scholarship:** Policy E4.0 also clearly articulates that RIT embraces all four types of scholarship – discovery, pedagogy, integration, and application. It is important for reviewers and committees to keep in mind that faculty are empowered to pursue any of these four types of scholarship.

- **Discipline variety:** Of course, scholarship varies widely by discipline. As a result, due to the wide range of disciplines and perspectives at RIT, individual colleges and departments must provide additional clarification and definition regarding discipline-specific scholarship expectations.

- **Scholarship quality and quantity:** While quality is emphasized as the overarching value we place on scholarship, quantity or productivity also plays a role and is integrally connected to the faculty plan of work.

- **Impact:** Finally, we strive to assure that scholarship at RIT has impact, which can be assessed via the dissemination of the work or through the external validation process.

Documentation, dissemination, validation, quality/productivity and impact are discussed in greater detail below.

**Documentation:** Today’s research and scholarly work can take many shapes and forms – traditional publications and books, performances, works of art, and works that may have a limited temporal existence. As a result, it is especially important that the work be documented or recorded in some way so it can be reviewed and validated by peers and external experts. Traditional scholarship is typically straightforward to document. In the cases of specific exhibits, performances, or installations where such recording is not possible (or would not capture the nuances of the experience), faculty are encouraged to document the venue, the event, public or private notices, and any press or critiques generated by the event in question when possible and through any appropriate means.

**Dissemination:** Just as it is critical that the scholarly work is reviewed and documented, it is also necessary that the work be effectively disseminated so as to have an impact on the field. It is critical to recognize that such dissemination may occur in a wide variety of venues and through a variety of different media, ranging
from traditional printed form to digital presentation, from inclusion in permanent collections to temporal performances and experiences. However, in each case, the faculty member has the responsibility to identify the audience and method of dissemination.

**Peer-review and external validation:** At the core, external validation serves to provide a third-party objective assessment of the quality, impact, and sometimes accuracy of the scholarly work. Because we embrace the four forms of scholarship mentioned in RIT policy E4.0, there are subtleties in who provides external validation. We often use ‘peer review’ as synonymous for external validation but too often we narrowly define the notion of ‘peer.’ If the scholarly work takes a theory or technique and applies it to a new domain, the reviewer of that work need not be a scholar in the field that gave rise to the theoretical underpinnings of the work. For example, the work of new media may be applied in many different applications and therefore external validation could come from experts in those application domains or disciplines.

For the purposes of evaluating work, RIT recognizes two key constituencies as relevant peers or experts in considering the work of the faculty. The first are academic colleagues at other institutions working in the same academic discipline. The second are non-profit, commercial, and/or industry colleagues who are engaged in the exploration, review, and/or research and its applications. It is important to keep in mind that we aim for as much objectivity as possible; consequently, maintaining separation between the reviewer and the faculty candidate, where possible, will maximize fairness and avoid bias.

It is critical to understand that external validation will vary greatly by discipline. In traditional forms of publication, external validation often occurs in the form of peer-review prior to the publication of the actual scholarly work. However, in the creative arts, external validation may take the form of a professional critical review after the work has been performed. In other words, external validation may occur both before and after the dissemination of the work.

**Scholarly productivity - quantity versus quality:** At RIT, it is important for all faculty to keep in mind that scholarship quality should be the overarching goal. While important to meeting performance criteria for tenure and promotion, scholarly productivity is influenced by workload and will vary across programs and colleges at RIT. Moreover, colleges set expectations for productivity viewed through the complementary dual lenses of quality and quantity. Typically these expectations are in the form of published tenure and promotion policies for the faculty that are then
reflected and incorporated into the faculty member’s statement of expectations and plan of work. In general:

- Productivity expectations must address levels of scholarship for the advancement to tenure, as well as ongoing productivity requirements in the post-tenure period;
- Productivity levels in the post-tenure period may vary within and across colleges based on teaching and service requirements; therefore productivity goals will need to be addressed in individual faculty plans of work;
- Time that is set aside for scholarship should be defined as a percent of total effort and the amount of time should be commensurate with the scholarship productivity outlined in the faculty plan of work;
- In the post-tenure period, faculty are expected to annually devote time and effort to scholarship;
- Chairs and directors should be responsible for assessing productivity goals (e.g., adhering to the overall college’s policies) in discussions with individual faculty; the dean maintains final sign-off and facilitates agreement on productivity goals.

**Impact:** With its experiential nature as well as its history that includes the blending of the arts and humanities curriculum of the Athenaeum and the technical training of the Mechanics Institute, RIT has, in its fundamental character, a commitment to make an impact on the world. It stands to reason, then, that RIT aspires to see that the research and scholarly work of its faculty members also have impact. A single scholarly activity may impact the faculty member’s discipline, the domain of application, a specific group of stakeholders, or some combination. However, it is expected that an individual’s collection of scholarly activities, taken as a whole, will have an impact on their discipline. For example, mathematical research could impact the field of mathematics itself, but it could also impact other physical or social sciences as an application. Similarly, the work in some creative arts fields could impact the public at large or a more narrowly defined audience of some other kind.

As a result, the audience matters when talking about scholarship impact and the audience may not be solely our peers in academia. For example, many creative fields will use the review of critics, the popular press, open-channel comment areas, ratings systems, etc., to gauge the impact of the work. It is important to note that the objective is not to measure strict popularity but rather to assess how well the work engages the intended audience.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the digital environment is changing the way the scholarly world measures impact. Traditional measures including peer-review and
citation indexes will continue to be used, but new alternative metrics are also emerging. These ‘altmetrics’ will become increasingly important and persons in review positions must be open to these alternative methods. For more information on altmetrics, read the Chronicle of Higher Education article, the “Altmetrics Manifesto”, or the article from the London School of Economics and Political Science. It is healthy for RIT that we are open and flexible to measuring impact using a variety of methodologies. I will ask colleges to consider how altmetrics can best be incorporated into evaluations in the future.

IV. Other important factors in the assessment of faculty scholarship: Finally, it is important to underscore the role that external funding, recognition, and the changing nature of collaboration play in our assessment of faculty scholarship.

University and external support for research and scholarship: While the university strives to support research and scholarship with appropriate teaching loads and research productivity targets for tenure-track faculty, research space, library resources, and travel support, faculty are also expected to make a concerted effort to secure external funding that will enhance and complement the resources provided by the university. The expectation that faculty will secure external funding maybe greater in some Colleges or programs, often due to the financial requirements for the scholarship being performed. When such expectations are manifest, they should be clearly outlined within the plan of work established with an individual faculty member by program or college leadership.

Recognition: Beyond the role that scholarship plays in annual reviews, tenure and promotion decisions, the university at all levels must strive to recognize the effort and successes that faculty contribute through their scholarship. Awards, commendations, university or college-wide colloquia and seminars are some means to recognize the scholarly work of the faculty.

Collaboration: The 21st century will be riddled with complex challenges and problems such as global warming, national security, preserving the ecosystem, and sustainable food production to name just a few. In order to meet these challenges, society will increasingly turn to an array of researchers with different perspectives, working collaboratively, to arrive at creative solutions. As a result, scholarship will continue to evolve and will be increasingly characterized by work in areas involving multiple disciplines (“multi-disciplinary”), between disciplines (“interdisciplinary”), and even transformational disciplines (“trans-disciplinary”). In addition, scholarship is now often the result of collaborations between many researchers.
from all over the world and the effort of the individual has become challenging to assess.

RIT faculty are increasingly engaged in scholarly work that can be described as multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or trans-disciplinary. In these cases, the work is often team-based and relies on multiple academic fields or elements for success. As this collaboration is a benefit to the students and faculty involved and is a trend that will increase in the future, it is important that RIT support and encourage faculty to broadly partner with others, both within RIT and throughout the academic, non-profit and commercial landscapes. Whether collaboration results from faculty from different disciplines or from a single discipline, assessing individual contributions is necessary and so faculty have the responsibility to document their roles and contributions when participating in collaborative teams and projects. Reviewers are encouraged to seek references and comment from the partners that have engaged with candidates in such work to better understand the contribution of the individual within the context of the collaboration.

V. Conclusion: The ideas in this paper are the result of many conversations over the past several months and I share them with the hope that discussions will occur in committees and in departments about the changing nature of faculty scholarly work. These ideas are meant to provide greater clarity and flexibility in light of the rapidly changing scholarly work that our faculty create. It is my hope that this flexibility coupled with the recognition of the changing opportunities for scholarship will position RIT to take advantage of the potential for new interdisciplinary discoveries and applications.

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i RIT Strategic Plan 2015
ii http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa07/le_faf07_perspectives2.cfm
iii It should be noted however that productivity for pretenure faculty is particularly guided by the expectations set in tenure policies of the colleges.
v http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/
vi http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/12/17/scott-altmetrics-central-digital-whats-missing/