Rutgers faculty oppose use of ‘big data’ in academic and employment decisions

Resolution raises concerns of mistakes and narrowing scholarship

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NEW BRUNSWICK...Use of a proprietary database that purports to show the publications, citations, books and grants awarded to a professor provides far too limited a perspective on faculty achievement and creates the potential for career-ending errors, according to David M. Hughes, professor of anthropology and president of the faculty union. The same data applied to academic disciplines could lead to poor decisions on programs available to students and should not be used, according to a resolution approved by the faculty of Arts and Sciences today.

Hughes and the rest of the School of Arts and Sciences faculty voted to approve a resolution and is calling on Rutgers management to exclude the use of data provider Academics Analytics “legally, explicitly, and comprehensively across the Rutgers system.” Rutgers has been using the database since May 2013, paying $492,500 over four years for the service.

Under the terms of the contract, faculty members do not have access to the data. Hughes filed an open public records request to access his personal record in the system and found multiple mistakes. In addition to the potential for error, “The entirely quantitative approach conflates apples and oranges and runs roughshod over the nuanced peer judgment so characteristic of Academia thus far,” said Hughes.

Professor of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies and Comparative Literature Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel identified how Academic Analytics assesses publications in
international venues, or rankings of scholarship in smaller, emerging fields, or interdisciplinary programs as a concern. “Faculty thinks that scholarship should be assessed by peers based on the quality of the content and not on the numerical value assigned to a particular journal in a particular field,” she said. “Rutgers should have consulted its faculty before signing a contract with this company.”

Rutgers AAUP-AFT represents more than 6,600 faculty, including full-time faculty who are tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure track (state and grant funded), graduate students who work as Teaching Assistants and Graduate Assistants, Part-Time Lecturers, Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) Counselors, Postdocs, and Winter Session & Summer Session Instructors.