

Defining 'Star' Faculty in Academic Pharmacy: Attributes, Perceptions, and Institutional Variations

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Abstract

This research aimed to determine the key attributes or performance factors that define a "star" faculty member in the field of academic pharmacy. Additionally, it sought to explore how faculty members' perceptions of these factors vary across different disciplines, academic ranks, years of experience, types of institutions, and supervisory roles. An online survey was distributed to a sample of 3,378 members from the 2018 American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACCP) mailing lists. The performance factors were drawn from literature that discusses academic roles and behaviors. To increase response rates, reminder emails were sent. The survey data were analyzed using frequency distributions and the Kruskal-Wallis statistical test. A total of 463 faculty members responded. Key traits that were seen as most indicative of a "star" faculty member included providing high-quality teaching (rather than focusing on quantity), publishing in peer-reviewed journals, and maintaining positive collegial relationships. Perceptions of what qualifies as a star varied primarily based on the type of institution and between those in pharmacy practice versus other academic fields. Faculty from private institutions reported that their deans and department heads were less likely to recognize or retain star faculty members. However, responses remained largely consistent across those with and without supervisory roles. The study highlighted that qualities such as collegiality, exceptional teaching, and scholarly productivity are crucial for defining star faculty members in academic pharmacy. As such, academic pharmacy institutions, particularly those in the private sector, should make a concerted effort to acknowledge and retain faculty who exhibit these star qualities.

Keywords: Academic governance, Star faculty, Collegiality, Organizational culture, Productivity

Introduction

Research on academic faculty productivity and the concept of "star" employees has been expanding. In general, star employees are those who consistently perform at a high level over an extended period, becoming highly visible and contributing to the organization's success and reputation [1]. Oldroyd and Morris emphasize that these star individuals build social capital within their organizations by establishing trust,

expanding their professional networks, and facilitating smoother communication [2]. Perkmann and colleagues found that in academia, star faculty use their expertise to forge partnerships that lead to positive outcomes, such as securing grants, enhancing community service projects, and creating student placement opportunities [3].

It has been observed that star employees tend to generate a significant portion of an organization's results [4]. The loss of such individuals can severely impact the organization, with their absence often affecting operations for years after they leave [5]. Furthermore, star employees contribute to cultivating "star" organizations, which attract additional high-performing individuals because the collaborative environment is more likely to produce impactful achievements [6].

In academic pharmacy, the factors that define productivity in teaching and research have been well-

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documented, especially for faculty in the basic sciences [7-10]. Additionally, the contributions of practice faculty in areas like teaching, research, and service have also been explored [11]. These discussions often consider the importance of collegiality as part of an ideal reward system for faculty members [12-14].

While it's easy to recognize indicators of high-level performance, such as numerous high-quality publications or excellent student evaluations, determining the specific mix of activities that define a "star" faculty member is more complex. Previous studies involving CEO deans have identified that a star in academic pharmacy is often someone who is reliable and consistently willing to assist others when needed [15].

Understanding how different faculty and administrators from various types of institutions define the qualities of a star faculty member is crucial. Knowing these defining characteristics can help institutions refine their recruitment strategies and enhance their retention efforts for the most valuable faculty. The goals of this study were to identify the most important traits and behaviors that faculty members consider indicative of a star faculty member, both at their institution and others, and to analyze how these perceptions differ across faculty based on tenure, appointment status, and type of institution.

Materials and Methods

The study was approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the principal investigator's institution. This research used a cross-sectional design and involved a self-administered questionnaire that was sent via email to a comprehensive sample of faculty and administrators affiliated with the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP). The survey was distributed to members across several email lists maintained by the AACP, including those for CEO deans, academic section members, and department chairs. After removing duplicates, the final sample consisted of 3,378 individuals targeted for participation in the study.

In order to maximize survey participation, the research team followed Dillman's recommended procedures [16]. This included sending an initial pre-notification email to the selected individuals on May 6, 2019. A week later, an email with a link to the survey was sent, followed by additional reminder emails every week to encourage further participation. The survey was conducted using the Qualtrics platform.

Respondents were presented with a list of 18 different activities and behaviors commonly associated with academic pharmacy faculty. They were asked to rate the importance of each item on a four-point scale. The participants were instructed to first assess the importance of these behaviors in terms of their overall contribution to faculty productivity, and then specifically with respect to what makes someone a "star" faculty member versus simply a productive one. Self-assessments of the faculty members' productivity were not included in the results, as the focus was on their perceptions of characteristics that define a "star." Furthermore, participants were not given a formal definition of a "star" faculty member, as the aim was to allow their responses to shape this understanding organically. The list of behaviors was adapted from existing literature on faculty roles, including studies outside the field of pharmacy, although two pharmacy-specific papers were particularly influential in identifying relevant activities [13, 17]. Additionally, respondents were asked to provide their level of agreement with 13 further statements using a six-point scale. These questions covered topics such as the necessity of excelling in multiple areas to be considered a star, how stars are developed at their institutions, and how their institutions recognize star faculty.

To ensure the validity and clarity of the survey, eight academic leaders from the field of pharmacy reviewed the questionnaire. These individuals came from diverse disciplines, academic ranks, and institutions and had varying levels of experience. Some also had expertise in survey design. The review process was conducted asynchronously via email.

The survey responses were imported into SPSS (IBM SPSS for Windows, v.25, 2017) for statistical analysis. The data were analyzed by calculating frequency distributions and percentages for each item. To simplify the analysis and avoid sparse data, some demographic variables—such as institution type, faculty discipline, and years of service—were combined. Nonparametric tests, including the Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test, were used to compare the responses of different groups.

Results and Discussion

Out of the 3,378 survey invitations distributed, 29 were either undeliverable or returned with error messages. Of the 568 faculty members who started the survey, 463 completed it fully. This resulted in a usable response rate

of 13.8%, which is consistent with typical response rates for web-based surveys targeting academic and healthcare professionals [18]. The demographics of the respondents and their institutions largely mirrored those of full-time faculty members in academic pharmacy (**Table 1**) [19]. However, the survey sample included a higher proportion of faculty members from social and administrative

sciences (7% compared to 16%) and pharmacy practice (57% compared to 49%), as well as a greater percentage of female faculty (56% compared to 51%) compared to the AACP database. Over 40% of the participants identified themselves as "star" faculty, and an additional third believed they were on their way to becoming one.

Table 1. Demographic information of pharmacy faculty respondents on defining "Star" faculty (n=463)

Characteristic	Category	N (%)
Sex	Male	184 (39.7)
	Female	261 (56.4)
	Prefer not to answer	18 (3.2)
Race	White/Caucasian	350 (75.6)
	Black/African American	18 (3.2)
	Asian/Pacific Islander	37 (8.0)
	Hispanic/Latino	15 (3.2)
	Other	7 (1.5)
	Prefer not to answer	36 (7.8)
Discipline	Biological Sciences	23 (5.0)
	Experiential Education	24 (4.2)
	Medicinal Chemistry	14 (3.0)
	Pharmaceutics	28 (6.0)
	Pharmacology/Toxicology	29 (6.3)
	Pharmacy Practice	264 (57.0)
	Social/Behavioral Pharmacy	72 (15.6)
	Other	9 (1.9)
Academic Rank	Instructor	5 (1.1)
	Assistant Professor/Clinical Assistant Professor	146 (31.5)
	Associate Professor/Clinical Associate Professor	149 (32.2)
	Professor/Clinical Professor	151 (32.6)
	Other	12 (2.6)
Tenure Status	Non-tenure track	249 (53.8)
	Tenure track, but not tenured	50 (10.8)
	Tenured	144 (31.1)
	Other	20 (3.5)
Administrative Title/Position ^a	None	222 (47.9)
	Coordinator/Director	91 (19.7)
	Department Chair/Vice-Chair	58 (12.5)
	Assistant/Associate Dean	72 (15.6)
	Dean	20 (4.3)
	Other	12 (2.6)
Supervises Other Faculty (Previously or Currently)	Yes	123 (26.6)
	No	340 (73.4)
Ownership/Governance of Employing Institution	Public	249 (53.8)
	Private, not-for-profit	169 (36.5)
	Private, for-profit	45 (9.7)
Mission of Employing Institution	Teaching	215 (46.4)

	Balanced	154 (33.2)
	Research	94 (20.3)
Years as a Faculty Member	0–10 years	226 (48.8)
	11–20 years	128 (27.6)
	21 or more years	103 (22.2)
Self-Identification as a Star	No	102 (22)
	Not yet, but on the path to becoming a star	159 (34.4)
	Yes	202 (43.6)

^a Totals slightly exceed 463, as respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Table 2 presents survey participants' assessments of how critical various attributes are in characterizing a "star" faculty member. Notably, 77.8% of participants classified effective teaching as extremely important. Around half of the group assigned the highest importance rating to factors such as cultivating a favorable reputation both inside their own institution/college/school and across their professional discipline, consistently

publishing in peer-reviewed outlets, and displaying collegiality that exceeds simple volunteer contributions. By comparison, just 13.7% regarded securing intramural grants as extremely important. Attributes that garnered notably fewer "extremely important" endorsements included the sheer amount of teaching load and receiving invitations to give talks at local or regional levels.

Table 2. Defining the characteristics of someone you would call a "Star" faculty

Activity	Not Very Important (%)	Rather Important (%)	Extremely Important (%)	Somewhat Important (%)	Subgroup Differences (p < .01)
Effectively training/mentoring/advising post-graduates (MS, PhD, residents, fellows, post-docs)	10.2	34.8	33.5	21.6	P/P, Mission
Effectively Teaching Professional (PharmD) Students	0.4	17.1	77.8	4.8	P/P, Mission, Tenure Status, Discipline
Quantity of Teaching	7.8	35.9	20.1	36.3	Mission
Being invited to speak to local/regional groups/panels/conferences	6.3	44.7	24.4	24.6	
Giving peer reviewed posters and presentations at professional/scientific conferences	2.6	45.6	35.0	16.8	
Publishing frequency in peer-reviewed journals	3.0	34.1	47.3	15.6	P/P, Mission, Tenure Status, Supervisor
Being invited to speak to national/international groups/panels/conferences	3.9	37.4	40.8	17.9	P/P, Mission, Tenure Status, Supervisor
Publishing in high-impact factor journals	7.8	34.3	31.3	26.6	
Acquiring extramural (external) funding to support your research, teaching or programs	10.2	25.5	35.2	29.2	
Acquiring intramural (internal) funding to support your research, teaching or programs	16.2	28.3	13.7	42.3	

Service to professional associations or scientific societies external to your institution	2.4	46.9	32.0	18.8	Discipline
Committee service to your department, school or institution	5.8	37.6	39.7	16.8	P/P, Mission, Tenure Status, Discipline
Developing a positive reputation within your field locally or regionally	2.2	41.3	45.6	11.0	
Developing a positive reputation within your department, school, college or institution	2.4	26.8	64.1	6.7	
Demonstrating innovation in your teaching, scholarship and/or service	2.4	38.7	43.4	15.6	P/P, Mission
Demonstrating extraordinary collegiality beyond volunteering	5.0	32.4	47.5	15.1	
Developing a positive reputation within your field nationally or internationally	1.9	37.6	46.4	14.0	
Volunteering to help out when asked	7.6	38.9	38.9	14.7	

Abbreviations: P/P: Public vs. Private; Mission: Teaching vs. Research/Balanced; Tenure status: Tenured or tenure-track vs. not on tenure-track; Discipline: Pharmacy Practice vs. Social and Administrative Sciences; vs. Pharmacological, Biological Sciences, and Medicinal Chemistry; Supervisor: Currently or formerly supervised other faculty vs. those who have not

When investigating variations in faculty perceptions based on their roles or institutional features, the analysis prioritizes these grouping variables as a whole, rather than isolating individual factors, and highlights findings with p-values under .01 to adjust for the large number of univariate tests performed. The most consistently significant variables were institutional type (private versus public) and institutional emphasis (teaching-oriented versus balanced/research-oriented). Faculty at private and teaching-focused institutions tended to assign greater importance to effective teaching as a hallmark of star faculty status, while placing less emphasis on the effective training and mentoring of postgraduate students. Conversely, those at public and balanced/research-oriented institutions were more likely to value delivering presentations at national or international conferences, frequent publishing, and placement in high-impact journals. Securing extramural funding was also more highly prized by respondents from public and balanced/research-oriented institutions. Committee service received higher importance ratings from faculty at private and teaching-oriented institutions. Building a strong internal institutional reputation was more emphasized by respondents from teaching-oriented institutions, whereas those from public and balanced/research-oriented institutions prioritized cultivating a national and international reputation.

Non-tenure-track faculty were more inclined to view effective teaching as crucial for star status, but less likely to stress invitations to speak at national or international conferences. They also attached lower importance to publishing and obtaining extramural funding. Faculty in pharmacy practice departments assigned greater weight to effective teaching, service to the institution and professional organizations, and collegiality, while downplaying extramural funding, publications, and national/international reputation. Notably, few perceptual differences existed between faculty who supervise others and those who do not, though supervisors placed somewhat higher value on publishing and establishing a national/international reputation.

Table 3 offers additional details on views of star faculty. Close to two-thirds of respondents concurred that star status demands excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service, with no notable variations across respondent characteristics on this belief. A vast majority asserted that exemplary performance in other domains is insufficient without good citizenship to qualify as a star. About half of respondents believed that a star faculty member at one institution would probably be regarded as a star elsewhere. Around 40% agreed that department chairs deliberately work to recognize, reward, and retain star faculty. However, nearly half of respondents expressed some level of disagreement that their universities

institutionally prioritize efforts to recognize and retain such individuals.

Table 3. Further defining/identifying what it means to be a "Star" faculty member

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Slightly Agree (%)	Slightly Disagree (%)	Significant Subgroup Differences (p < .01)
A star faculty member can be merely adequate in teaching if they excel in research/scholarship	13.4	5.0	26.3	16.6	22.9	15.8	Position/Practice, Mission, Tenure Status, Discipline
A star faculty member must excel in teaching, research/scholarship, and service	27.4	3.2	35.0	6.3	19.2	8.9	None reported
Regardless of excellence in teaching or research/scholarship, poor collegiality consistently prevents someone from being considered a star faculty member	45.8	1.1	28.1	4.3	13.4	7.3	Position/Practice, Mission, Discipline
A star faculty member can be merely adequate in research/scholarship if they excel in teaching	24.8	2.2	36.3	7.8	19.7	9.3	Position/Practice, Mission, Tenure Status, Discipline
It is possible for someone to become a star faculty member even without institutional support	5.2	10.2	13.6	27.0	21.8	22.2	Years on Faculty
A faculty member considered a star at one institution would likely be regarded as a star at any other institution	13.8	5.2	30.9	11.2	21.8	17.1	None reported
Building professional networks is important for becoming a star faculty member	18.6	1.1	41.1	2.6	28.1	8.6	Mission, Supervise Faculty, Years on Faculty
A star faculty member typically works more than 40-50 hours per week	25.9	1.7	32.0	5.4	21.0	14.0	Tenure Status, Discipline, Supervise Faculty, Years on Faculty
Department chairs in my college/school of pharmacy actively work to identify, reward, and retain star faculty	13.2	7.6	31.3	11.4	24.0	12.5	Position/Practice, Tenure Status, Discipline, Supervise Faculty, Years on Faculty
The ability to effectively secure and utilize resources is important for becoming a star faculty member	22.0	0.6	43.8	1.7	25.5	6.3	Mission, Discipline
My university/institution actively works to identify, reward, and retain star faculty	8.2	10.8	24.0	14.3	28.9	13.8	Position/Practice, Mission, Tenure Status, Discipline,

							Supervise Faculty, Years on Faculty
A star faculty member must necessarily align with the organizational culture of the college/school	16.0	2.4	38.9	4.1	26.8	11.9	None reported
The dean of my college/school of pharmacy actively works to identify, reward, and retain star faculty	15.3	8.9	26.1	13.8	24.0	11.9	Position/Practice, Mission, Tenure Status, Discipline, Supervise Faculty, Years on Faculty

Abbreviations: Mission: Teaching-focused vs. Research/Balanced mission; P/P: Public vs. Private institution; Discipline: Pharmacy Practice vs. Social and Administrative Sciences vs. Pharmacological, Biological Sciences, and Medicinal Chemistry; Tenure Status: Tenured or tenure-track vs. not on tenure-track; Years on Faculty: Differences based on length of time as faculty member; Supervise Faculty: Respondents who supervise faculty vs. those who do not

Respondents in pharmacy practice showed lower agreement with the idea that networking skills and resource leveraging are key traits for standout faculty members. Conversely, those in pharmaceutical sciences tended to more strongly endorse the view that department heads, deans, and universities actively strive to identify and keep high-performing faculty. Individuals in supervisory roles were more prone to believe that top faculty regularly exceed 40-50 hours of work weekly, to highlight the value of networking, and to affirm that leaders at the department, dean, and institutional levels make deliberate attempts to appreciate and retain these star performers.

This study aimed to identify the key characteristics of "star" faculty members in pharmacy academia. The results highlighted the importance of teaching quality over the quantity of teaching, scholarly output, and involvement in academic citizenship. While some differences emerged between faculty members who supervise others and those who do not, overall, there was considerable consensus. Respondents across different types of institutions and disciplines largely agreed that a faculty member who excels at one institution would likely thrive at another. This suggests a belief that hard work and talent would allow faculty to adapt and succeed in various institutional settings, supporting findings from earlier studies [20].

The study also revealed that pharmacy faculty place a high value on teaching quality, even at research-focused institutions. However, defining and recognizing high-quality teaching remains a challenge for academic organizations [21, 22]. Faculty need to advocate for the value of their contributions, as the quantity of teaching may not be as highly recognized as its quality [23, 24].

Scholarly productivity is still crucial, with a strong emphasis on peer-reviewed publications [25]. While there were varying opinions on how crucial publishing was, nearly all respondents agreed that scholarly output was important to some degree, regardless of their rank, experience, or institution type.

Additionally, the study emphasized that "star" faculty must display collegiality and positive citizenship behaviors. High-performing faculty who lack these qualities may not engage effectively with colleagues. Faculty involved in recruitment and retention efforts should not only assess how well faculty fit within the institution but also whether they contribute to a healthy organizational culture. Addressing uncooperative faculty members has long been a challenge, but research suggests that empowering peers, rather than attempting to diminish the power of difficult faculty, can help reduce the impact of "academic jerks" [26]. Faculty and administrators need to establish clear measures for assessing collegiality as part of faculty performance [27]. Supporting faculty development, retaining top performers, and addressing poor citizenship behaviors are ongoing challenges for academic pharmacy administrators. A positive finding from this study is that faculty who supervise others were largely consistent in how they described a "star" faculty member. Supervisors should make it clear to faculty that the institution values the development of a national or international reputation. While there was some consensus on the support that chairs and deans provide to top faculty, there was variation in how strongly respondents agreed about the level of support. The role of department chairs is critical, and they are encouraged to take transparent, concrete

actions to support faculty while also helping other administrators implement institutional policies [28-31]. Among the respondents, the most significant differences in perceptions of what defines a "star" faculty member were based on the type of institution. These differences are not surprising, considering the varying missions of schools and the types of behaviors and achievements that tend to be recognized at different institutions [32]. However, faculty at private and teaching-focused institutions were less likely to agree that their chairs, deans, and institutions intentionally make efforts to retain top faculty.

Several limitations must be considered in this study. It was conducted within a single academic field (pharmacy), so faculty in other disciplines may have different perspectives. The response rate was below 20%, which suggests potential selection bias, as faculty with specific interests or strong opinions about their institutions might have been more likely to participate. The questionnaire was developed by the study's authors, so comparisons with other studies may be limited. Respondents were asked to rate how strongly they believed certain behaviors or traits defined a "star" faculty member, but not how often those behaviors actually occurred. Future research could focus on evaluating the number, type, or impact of grants, publications, or meetings that contribute to a faculty member's status as a "star," rather than simply measuring productivity. Respondents were left to interpret terms like "quality" and "quantity" in their own way, as expectations for faculty performance vary across disciplines and roles. More specific questions could have led to more varied responses, but the goal of this study was to explore the broader concept of what makes a faculty member a "star" rather than defining specific metrics. Respondents were asked to consider "star" faculty as those with a similar appointment at their institution, rather than across the discipline. The researchers did not provide definitions in the survey questions, which may have led respondents to use their own experiences as benchmarks. Some respondents identified themselves as stars or on their way to becoming one, which could indicate overestimation or response bias, as those with higher achievements or productivity might be more likely to participate. Pharmacy practice and social/administrative faculty were slightly overrepresented among respondents. While there was widespread agreement on the general concept of a "star" faculty member, a consensus on its exact definition

was not pursued, as this would likely have been impractical.

Conclusion

This study, based on a cross-sectional, self-administered survey of U.S. pharmacy faculty, identified the factors that respondents believe define a "star" faculty member. The results highlighted the significance of teaching quality and scholarly output. Faculty agreed that a "star" faculty member must also exhibit collegiality, regardless of their level of productivity. A "star" faculty member is someone who contributes to the success of their colleagues. These qualities are generally transferable across institutions, even though each institution may have different benchmarks for measuring productivity. Faculty believe that academic administrators make modest efforts to recognize and retain "star" faculty and that these faculty members work long hours and effectively leverage resources and networking. Although there were some differences in opinions across various types of institutions, the majority of faculty were in agreement. Academic supervisors, especially those overseeing faculty in pharmacy practice or non-tenured positions, must clearly communicate expectations for excellence and find innovative ways to retain top talent.

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