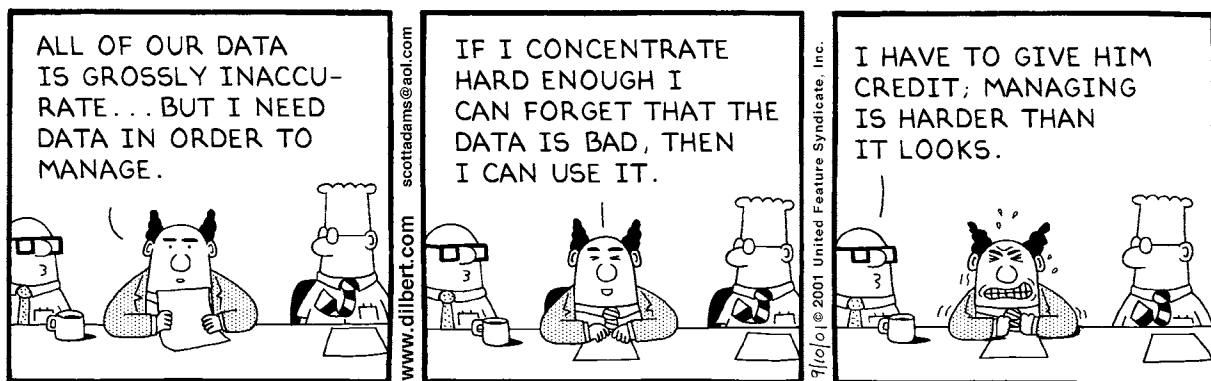




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Bruneau, William, and Donald C. Savage. *Counting Out the Scholars: How Performance Indicators Undermine Universities and Colleges*. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2002. Pp. 261. CDN\$19.95 (paper). ISBN 1-55028-711-7

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Dilbert, 9/10/01, in Scott Adams, *Dilbert: Another Day in Cubicle Paradise* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2002), 102. Reprinted with permission, United Media/Syndicate.

Governments seek to cloak ideological choices with ostensibly “objective” criteria; university administrators respond with their own evasions and justifications for all-too-clearly political decisions. This all seems the temper of the times, as evident in international affairs at the grandest level as in more provincial and parochial matters. *Counting Out the Scholars* thrusts aside the cloak, confronts the evasions, sets out the history, finally calls for a counter-attack — a counter-revolution.

Key issues, not all explicitly addressed, include increasingly interventionist governments, an apathetic public stirred only by professional sports contests and league tables (universities in competition as a blood sport), the attenuation of trust as a social bond, and the pursuit of mediocrity misnamed “excellence.” This all could be entertaining as a media spectacle, in a modest rainy Saturday afternoon way, but serious matters are at stake. Apart from the frustrating and demeaning misunderstanding of the objectives of scholarship and the damage

to individual lives (a routine side-effect of corporate maneuvers in the global market), serious human and social ends are abandoned as the institutions are corrupted and decay.

One symptom is the recent fashion for numerical measures of “accountability” applied to universities. This, Bruneau and Savage dissect in detail. *Counting Out the Scholars* is a thoughtful, well-grounded study based on a thorough examination of a wide range of sources. More specifically, it looks at “performance indicators” as the widely-adopted tool for measuring universities’ performance. It sets “PIs” in historical context, and reviews their earlier history looking back as far as John Locke's studies of the poor-house system at the end of the seventeenth century (11). The authors examine the ideas and intentions behind PIs, the arguments for PIs in higher education, the logical gap between the benefits claimed for PIs and their actual effects — that is, the gulf between what they are intended to show according to their proponents, and what they actually show. The authors ask “how should we define quality and accountability in the early 2000s?” (65) They set out their criteria of quality in the second chapter, then examine the effectiveness of PIs in measuring these, and in assisting the universities and governments in improving their performance.

The three chapters of the central section examine the experience of PIs in three key countries. England and the United States have been and continue to be sources of great influence on Canadian universities; New Zealand was the site of the most extensive of the neo-conservative experiments of the 1980s and 1990s. The use of PIs by politicians at best indifferent and in some cases actively hostile to universities is an important theme in these chapters. They note the irony that governments whose ideology was populist, antagonistic to government intervention, became most actively involved in centralized control (178). In Alberta, no centralizing control and command socialist regime could have bettered the Klein government’s attempted use of “KPI” (Key Performance Indicators) as a device for managing in detail the activities of Alberta’s universities.

In the concluding section, the authors first review this and other Canadian experiences; they examine the various forms of PIs introduced across the country, the implementation of the PIs, and the consequences that have followed at representative institutions. Finally, the authors return to the central issue of accountability. The demonstrated failure of PIs leaves a void to be filled, but how to fill it? Bruneau and Savage’s recommendations are a sober attempt to address the entirely reasonable demand that universities account for the investment that we all make in their operation. Most universities already have in place most of the authors’ suggestions; whether the universities’ political masters and their bureaucrats can be persuaded to accept these as sufficient remains doubtful.

It is not difficult to sympathize with hapless politicians, government bureaucrats, and university administrators faced with conflicting demands from various (or sometimes the same) constituencies for more public investment, less taxation, increased oversight and control, and less government intervention. The responses range from complete denial of responsibility to disingenuous claims (Premier Klein’s recent claim that education funding had increased by 47%, taking as a comparison the point of deepest provincial cuts in 1995, is an example), to apparently objective, apolitical mechanisms. PIs belong among these. Typically, PIs mix entirely valid and important quantitative measures of costs, populations, available space, and other

facilities, with invalid and only apparently objective numerical proxies for difficult- or impossible-to-measure qualities of institutions and their activities. Excellence, satisfaction, success, and contributions to individual and community development (and to the economy) in the longer term are, or seem to be, aspects of performance that we need to measure if we are to spend wisely on students, faculty, laboratories, classrooms, and lecture halls.

One problem is this mixture of valid and invalid categories, some measurable and some not. Some of this expresses considered (if misguided) policy; some of it is simple confusion. A deeply-ingrained belief in a Newtonian universe of simple mechanistic causes and directly-linked effects underlies it all. As one historian has noted, this thinking still characterizes much economic analysis,¹ and economic thought of a deeply conservative cast still determines much public policy. This is despite the cast's evident failures, not least of which is applied to education at all levels (note that this criticism comes from within the accounting profession as well as beyond).

Bruneau and Savage take seriously their role as responsible critics. Their work concludes with proposals for a different approach to oversight of university performance. The last chapter, "Towards a New Accountability," sets out separate recommendations for governments and for universities and colleges. The overriding principles are openness and local autonomy. Governments properly need, and should require, regular financial reporting and financial audits. Beyond this, they should only require that the institutions themselves review their activities regularly, and report fully and frequently to the public. These reviews and reports should be the responsibility of the institutions themselves to devise and disseminate, with appropriate inter-institutional comparisons to keep the process honest. This would include departmental and program reports, and those by individual faculty (web sites are recommended). This should not be a centralized governmental function, with an inevitable "one size fits all" approach. The authors recommend that the reports should be funded by the government from a separate account. The authors note the irony that the considerable costs of the PI exercise, although mandated by governments, have to be paid for by the universities themselves out of shrinking operating budgets.

Bruneau and Savage also address, as matters for institutional action, issues of academic freedom and ethical behaviour. Criticism of, and dissent from, a university's own policies and actions should be supported, however troubling to senior administration. Governance should be open and accessible. Mutual support for free inquiry should be seen as an international obligation. Ethics also should be addressed through openly-negotiated policies, dealing not only with research but with such issues as harassment, cheating, the treatment of the disabled. Other matters of concern include formal commitment to the improvement of teaching and learning, research policies, the collection and use of institutional data, and government and private funding. Regular publication and easy public access to university documents and information remain fundamental: universities must themselves ensure that they are seen to be fulfilling their obligations to staff, students, and faculty and to the communities that support them. Beyond the details of individual reports, and perhaps even more important, universities must continuously explain the reasons for their existence and celebrate their role and accomplishments in expressing the highest goals of human society.

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Some of the issues raised and the mass of information and data the authors have assembled to support and explain their case deserve special emphasis. Most important are trust and ethical behaviour—both closely linked²—that are vanishing from sight, as image and expedience have come to rule higher education. The alternative to trust (that the other will behave ethically) is continuous and close scrutiny and punitive sanctions. The more that mechanistic collection of data, itself linked to automatic rewards and sanctions, replaces trust in good faith and good intentions, the less incentive exists for individual initiative, and the greater incentive to beat the system through manipulation of the data and false reporting. The incentive is to behave unethically. A good example of this is the unexplained abrupt changes in the *McLean's* ratings of universities from year to year that can only be explained by a significant change in the way an institution reports its statistics. This clearly raises questions of institutional behaviour.

We have recently seen such games played with the numbers on a grand scale in the corporate world (Enron comes to mind), but similar tactics are used by universities, their academic units (and sometimes by individual faculty members) to boost their standing. Bean-counting assessments rate highly the appearance of short-term productivity; they place no value on long-term investigation and reflection. The consequences for individual faculty are too well known to bear repeating here. The same applies to entire institutions, required annually to demonstrate their productivity in areas from research to student satisfaction, to the employability of graduates, and to the efficiency of their education. The temptation, too strong to resist, is to learn from the corporate world of quarterly reports and fluctuating stock prices. The current University of Calgary president quotes Jim Collins's *Good to Great*,³ and argues that the university needs a "hedgehog concept." Beyond the bastardization of Isaiah Berlins' analysis of great thinkers, lies the assimilation of the university to the corporate world: ". . .to simplify a complex world into a simple, organizing idea." Profit-making DeVry Institutes may be built on a "hedgehog concept," but Berlins' fox makes a better metaphor for a large and diverse research university.⁴

Counting Out the Scholars is too thorough, too thoughtful, and well-documented to be read by those who need it most — the provincial politicians and senior bureaucrats. It may be read by conscientious university administrators, but trapped between provincial politicians and bureaucrats and sceptical faculty and students, they are unlikely to respond unless the ethical and professional standards that they expect in academic work carry through to their administrative actions.

Nonetheless, the book provides the facts and arguments needed for the "counter-revolution." Bruneau and Savage call for political action: First, identify the real costs of PIs for the universities, including the faculty and staff time taken up to collect and report the data but also the cost of the government and university bureaucracies swollen to administer these schemes; then carry this forward into the political arena, showing the inflated costs and the negligible benefits — and the real damage. This was done with some success in the UK, but Canadian institutions may be too closely tied to their provincial masters to risk such a campaign.

The "count" in "accountability" seems to have mesmerized the media, the public, and the politicians. We are in thrall to numbers. "On a scale from 1 to 10, how do you rate the Prime

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Minister?"; "Rate the following as better or worse on a scale from 1 to 5: Coke, Pepsi, or Brand X"; "The CNX lost 72.5 points today, the NASDAQ gained 10." We do marvelous things with numbers, but it is disastrous to mistake them for the things which they substitute. One such large-scale disaster has been the use of numbers in the form of PIs as a proxy for the successes and failures and the quality of universities, and then to determine funding, status, and judgments of quality on those numbers. This is abundantly clear in *Counting Out the Scholars*. We can only hope that Bruneau and Savage's work is read as widely as it deserves to be.

Notes

1. "Natural order for economists coming of age after World War II is still exemplified by a machine, although the manifestation of the machine has changed: it is now the computer." Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9. For those of an earlier generation, the model was of course the classical machine of moving bodies, whose operations were governed by the laws of energy.
2. A highly relevant discussion of trust in relation to power can be found in Stanley M. Stein and Thomas L. Harper, "Power, Trust and Planning," paper presented to the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, Cleveland, Ohio, November 2001. Stein and Harper refer to Davidson, Rorty, Foucault, Edwards on Wittgenstein, and perhaps most important, Annette Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).
3. James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap — And Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, c2001).
4. Jim Collins acknowledges Isaiah Berlin's much-referred-to essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," as his source. But, however closely the idea as Collins understands it may apply to Walgreen and General Electric, Philip Morris and Remington, it seems a strange planning metaphor for this university. As Berlin explains his comparison:

. . . there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more clear or articulate . . . and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and contradictory, . . . These last lead lives. . . that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; . . . seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves . . . (Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* [London: Pimlico, 1998], 436-7)

The former – the hedgehogs – include Dante, Plato, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche; the foxes: Shakespeare, Herodotus, Aristotle, Goethe, and Joyce. While any good university will number examples of both kinds of thinkers among its members, which better characterizes the university as a whole?