

Commentary

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Austerity Metrics and the Restructuring of Public Higher Education

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Over the past two decades, public universities have experienced a precipitous decline in government support. The diminishment of public funds is a national phenomenon with powerful implications for the restructuring of higher education. Most dramatically, an expansive cohort of flagship public university campuses, including, but not limited to, the University of Minnesota, the University of Oregon, and The Ohio State University, have

undergone a sea change, with less than 10 percent of their budgets now attributable to tax-levy public money. The City University of New York has lost more than a half billion dollars of its public funding in the past five years. The California systems have also been targeted for similar cuts. With the politics of austerity policy, privatized forms of revenue, most notably tuition, have replaced public funding. The calculus is simple: as public funding declines, private forms

of replacement revenue fill shortfalls. Importantly, the middle classes and the poor, especially people of color, are being asked to increasingly subsidize public higher education costs. Many students are making the choice to work and/or shift to part-time status to afford a college education. In turn, this extends time to graduation.

The consequent political fallout associated with rising student debt and the difficulties facing middle-class families in financing college education are the frictional grist sparking the present debate regarding restructuring. All of this change has occurred rapidly and with great consequence for the future of public higher education. Broad political and economic trends regarding austerity policy, however, are rarely emphasized in discussions about managerial “performance rating systems.” Instead, the discourse regarding higher education has emphasized the lesions or symptoms of austerity policy: graduation rates and rising tuition. What remains essentially invisible is the restructuring of the university on the basis of external demand to tighten the vise of shrinking public revenue. This is the political and economic context for Thomas Rabovsky’s article “Using Data to Manage for Performance at Public Universities.”

Rabovsky seeks to integrate into his inquiry the present rapid decline in state support for public higher education. He understands that new accountability structures imposed by government emerge partly out of funding policies “that seek to link institutional funding to organizational performance.” The new gold standards for measuring university effectiveness are controlling tuition costs, tamping down internal costs, and producing more graduates. Rabovsky’s article raises many questions for future inquiry that flow from this interplay between context and changing university practice. What if the context of austerity policy making is essentially the primary, if not the singular, driver of a politics reshaping the uses of performance management systems? If that were the hypothesis or hunch of the investigator, how might it influence an interrogation of the function(s) of performance management tools? How is the present implementation of assessment tools remaking the culture, goals, and practices of public higher education? In what ways do the technical tools of performance management support a political intention to downsize and privatize public higher education? Answers to these questions would likely promote understanding of the complex interchange among a rapidly changing

context, a radical restructuring of public higher education, and the uses of performance management tools.

Rabovsky’s article might have gone further by questioning the structure or function of contemporary performance management tools. Consequently, the analysis may imbue these tools with more scientific authenticity or objectivity than they merit, thus legitimating what they are measuring in determining the worthiness of specific public higher education projects and goals. Drained from this equation is the direct fallout of brutal cost reductions, including, but not limited to, more mechanized or uniform curriculum, reductions in full-time faculty, and diminishment of faculty autonomy to extract cost savings. Performance management systems in such context can be and are used to mask and legitimate this transition to a starved public higher education.

The choice of university presidents as the sample for the study is emblematic of its limitations. Ultimately, the role of university president dictates accommodation to this set of circumstances. Presidential socialization, role, and need to survive demand such accommodation. Consequently, the study sample of presidents, although rational given issues of access, knowledge, and limited research budgets, promotes a somewhat restricted understanding of how performance management systems are remaking the university.

In sum, this commentary questions the academic default choice for methodological rigor over complex questions often most salient to the phenomenon being studied. Such choice has particular relevance in this moment. In a historic era when basic understandings of public higher education are being radically rewritten, internal methodological rigor, although necessary, is simply insufficient. The interrogation of phenomena such as performance management tools must be investigated consistently and systematically in the nexus between context and institutional change. Anything less serves to legitimate technical managerial tools by scientifically mystifying them and promoting their use to enact the present austerity reform agenda. This moment, because of an especially hostile context to public higher education and, more generally, to the public sector, demands that academics find a way to systematically incorporate messier contextual factors to methodological rigor in order to optimize their impact on public policy.