



Three Numbers that Matter

by Greg Butler

The corporate view of a University irks us in so many ways, but perhaps the most chilling is the drive to measure everything, and even worse, to allow those numbers to drive decision-making.

Numbers *per se* are not the problem. Quantification can support decision-making by simplifying comparisons and providing transparency. However, for a set of measurements to work in an organization, they must satisfy three criteria: (a) they must be accepted by everyone as being relevant; (b) it must be accepted that the data is properly gathered and the measure properly calculated; and (c) it must be accepted that the measures used in making a decision are appropriate for that decision. That is, that the numbers being collected really reflect the factor under consideration, that the factor is relevant to the decision being made, and the data behind the numbers is accurate and consistently collected so that time periods, people, and divisions of an organization are compared faithfully.

Central to their use is a recognition that the set of measures is a simplification of all the issues that might affect the decision-making, and that the numbers measuring different things cannot be meaningfully combined or compared. That is, you cannot compare apples with oranges!

When faced with a multitude of indicators to measure every aspect of our activity, progress, and performance, it is difficult to see the appropriateness of them all with regard to the three criteria: their relevance, their accuracy, and their role in decision-making. Those based on surveys are always suspect. Those supposedly measuring ill-defined concepts such as reputation, satisfaction, perception, impact, and excellence are also suspect. Furthermore, having so many indicators does not simplify decision-making. Since they cannot be combined into a single "score" in a meaningful way, they can turn decision-making into a debate of one set of numbers versus other sets of numbers in a battle to get one's way. Worse, once a decision is reached, the set of numbers (of the winning side in the debate) are used to justify the decision as if it were truly determined in a transparent, objective way by the numbers.

So why not simplify matters?

Here is a proposal for a simple set of three numbers which should be collected and published that hopefully everyone can accept as indicators for determining how well a university is doing in its primary academic mission, or at least accept that the numbers reflect the importance that a university places on its

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primary academic mission.

In terms of the existing Strategic Plan, the measures are extremely relevant to all three Strategic Directions: Strategic Direction I of High Academic Quality for Academic Standards, Teaching and Learning, and Research and Creative Activity; Strategic Direction II of Outstanding Student Experience and Student Engagement; and Strategic Direction III of Community Engagement and Social Responsibility. The measures require Supporting Strategy I: Becoming a Superbly Managed University and are clear indicators of success in achieving this goal. The measures would clearly and simply communicate the achievement of the university in supporting the three Strategic Directions, thus aiding in Supporting Strategy II: Communicating our Success.

The Action Plan to follow is simple in its essence:

- i) Agree that the primary mission of the university is the academic mission of teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and creative work.
- ii) Determine a definition of each number; establish a transparent, accurate, and consistent way to collect the data and calculate the number; publish the number regularly.
- iii) Establish goals: set a timeline and targets to achieve according to the timeline.
- iv) Plan how to achieve targets.
- v) Implement plan.
- vi) Achieve targets.

The devil is in the detail, of course.

So here are the three numbers, with proposed targets, that are well-established, simple, direct measures of the importance to a university of its primary academic mission:

1) Number: Percentage of the budget directly spent on academic activities of teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and creative work.

Target: 85%

2) Number: Student to Staff Ratio.

Target: 22:1

3) Number: Class Size.

Target: 15

The proposed targets are indeed challenges! Challenges worth taking up. Challenges that will take time, effort, ingenuity, and changes. Challenges that will focus the university intently on its primary academic mission. Challenges that we will be proud to have set and met, because attaining the targets will (*insert your own lofty goals here*)....

But wait! I hear a murmur; indeed a roar arise from certain quarters: *What about quality? What about excellence?*

Quality is extremely subjective. Even within a discipline there are great personal differences as to whether a work is important or not, of high quality or not, even correct or not! These assessments of quality are often hotly debated and may take decades to resolve! This makes quality extremely difficult to quantify and impossible to compare within disciplines and across disciplines.

I think for those involved in the pursuit of knowledge and its dissemination, there is a natural desire to produce quality work. People in academia critically weigh what they will pursue as topics, projects, publications and creative output. Their time is precious and limited, so they choose to work on those things that are important to them; and academic freedom says they are in a situation that allows them to make that determination personally.

The accepted wisdom on how to achieve quality is a simple three-step plan:

1. Get good people!
2. Give them time and facilities to do good work!
3. Recognize their achievements!

A key requirement of point (2) is to leave people alone to do good work. Do not bother people with the administria of reports, evaluations, reviews, etc. Just let them get on with their primary academic function of teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and creative work. Support them in this.

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And ... if you still cannot let go of the idea of micro-management of quality as it relates to creative intellectual work, then at least focus on the three numbers that matter first. You can always come back to deal with quality and excellence, *if there is a need*, once the targets for those three numbers have been achieved.

Academic Budget Percentage

Information on the decline in expenditure on academic services, and the rise in expenditure on administration over the period of 1987 to 2006 [Draimin 2007] indicates that this percentage dropped from 68% to 58% in that period. So turning this trend around, and achieving the target will not be easy.

With the shift in budget, there has been an accompanying corporatization of control away from the grass roots to a large, centralized, non-academic administration. We need facilitators that provide a path for smooth operation of the academic aspects, which is the core of the university, rather than controllers, managers, administrators. The emphasis needs to return to the academic matters, and this needs to be clearly reflected in the budget.

Establishing a target percentage of the budget for academic matters would ensure fiscal responsibility across the university, including the Board of Governors. If the 85:15 ratio was a mandated principle for the budget then any severance payout by the Board of say \$1M to an administrator would require the Board to fund an additional \$5.67M ($5.67 = 85/15$) on the academic side of the budget.

A target of 70% within 3-5 years, a target of 80% in 7-10 years, and a target of 85% within 12-15 years would show real commitment to the primary academic mission. Achieving those targets would absolutely require a superbly managed university. Furthermore, these targets are essential if one is to achieve the goals for the other two numbers: student-to-staff ratio, and class size.

Student to Staff Ratio

Data contained in the reports on Measuring Excellence [ME 2006] and [ME 2010] show the Student-

to-Staff ratio increasing from 22.0:1 in the 1995-1996 academic year to a high of 32.3:1 in the 2003-2004 academic year and then leveling at about 30.5:1 from the 2005-2006 academic year until now.

A target of 25:1 had been set as goals by several administrators in the past: Martin Singer as Provost, and Nabil Esmail as Dean of ENCS come to mind.

Targets of 25.0:1 within 3-5 years and 22.0:1 within 7-10 years are very achievable provided there is the commitment to increase expenditure on the primary academic mission.

The number as currently defined is the ratio across the whole University. Hence it is an average figure. Once a target is achieved for the average Student-to-Staff ratio, we should push ahead to achieve the target as the maximum Student-to-Staff ratio of any unit within the University.

Class Size

Now that the number 15 has grabbed your attention, let me reassure you that I do not think that every class at Concordia should have a maximum of 15 students. I do think this target size makes sense for tutorials, labs, and for graduate courses.

I accept that no one size fits all for all classes, and that no single instructional format works for all classes nor for all students. However, the notion of small to medium class size and close contact of students with faculty has been (and should remain) an important characteristic of Concordia. Ideally, within a semester, the instructor should have enough time and contact to be able to know each student (their knowledge, skills, and modes of learning) and work with the student to improve. If there are large lecture classes then they must be supported by tutorials. Tutorials and labs *should* have a target class size of 15.

The target class size of 15 was given to indicate the level of interaction between students and instructors that we should be aiming for if we truly believe in the historic culture of Concordia that emphasized accessibility and small classes.

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When expenditure on the primary academic mission reaches 85% of the total budget of the University, we could certainly sustain close interaction with students during tutorials, labs, graduate courses, and senior undergraduate courses. Maybe, we could afford such close interaction with all students in all courses. Maybe not. Still, we should aim high! (Or aim low in this case.)

Class size should be based on academic considerations, as should the format of delivery of instruction. Units should set goals on class size for each class based on academic concerns, and then devise a timeline of intermediate targets for achieving the class size goals.

The Turnaround

Planning, and spending, should predominantly be about the primary academic function of teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and creative work. This planning and spending needs to be driven by academic considerations as determined by academics.

There needs to be a shift back to academics. There needs to be an alternative out there for consideration other than the direction in which we are currently heading. There needs to be a strong voice in support of the primary academic function of teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and creative work.

A campaign in support of the targets “85-22-15” would rally all people who want the academic activities of teaching, learning, research, scholarship, and creative work to be at the heart of Concordia. The campaign would turn the focus back onto academic matters. The targets would ensure fiscal responsibility, build a strong faculty complement, and promote vibrant student engagement.

I ask you to use the focus on the three simple numbers and their targets of “85-22-15” to come together with a common goal, to signify a focus on the primary academic mission, to signify a call for a strong Senate in the governance of Concordia, and to signify a call for grass roots driven decision making at Concordia.

References

[Draimin 2007] Charles Draimin, “The Rising Cost of Administration”, CUFA Report Winter 2007, Number 2, May 2007, pages 8-11.

[ME 2006] Institutional Planning Office, “Measuring Excellence at Concordia University”, Concordia University, May 2006.

[ME 2010] Institutional Planning Office, “Measuring Excellence at Concordia University”, Concordia University, July 2010.

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Mark your calendar

Upcoming Council and General Meetings

October 1, 2012 - Council

November 5, 2012 - Council

December 6, 2012 - Council & General

Times and locations to be announced

The October and November Council Meetings will take place in the morning

The December Council & General Meeting will take place in the afternoon

*CUFA extends
its gratitude to
June Chaikelson
& William Sims
who are leaving
the Executive
on May 31, 2012*

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