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### Wrong Kind of Accountability?

May 10, 2011

Faculty and administrators at public universities in Texas said Monday they don't want to shrink from efforts to make public higher education more accountable -- they just don't want to do it this way.

In this case, "this way" refers to efforts by the University of Texas System Board of Regents to measure the productivity of faculty members in strictly numerical terms. The efforts are reflected in 821 pages of raw data that have been collected by the UT system (which can be downloaded [here](#)). The data have not been vetted. Each page contains the disclaimer that the information is "incomplete and has not yet been fully verified or cross referenced [and] [i]n its present raw form ... cannot yield accurate analysis, interpretations or conclusions." Originally planned for release after more thorough review later this year, the data [reached the public last week](#) through open records requests filed by several Texas newspapers. The information lists the salary, teaching load and number of students of each faculty member, as well as his or her external research funding.

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Resistance to the effort has already led to the [ouster](#) last month of Rick O'Donnell, an adviser to the regents who was seen as promoting the ideas of Governor Rick Perry, a Republican. O'Donnell, who worked at the Texas Public Policy Foundation (which has been something of the nerve center of Perry's higher education reform agenda), has blamed senior officials in the University of Texas System and at the university's flagship campus in Austin for resisting efforts to compile data on whether faculty teach enough.

But on Monday, the resistance to the productivity measures took a more public turn. In a speech, William Powers Jr., the president of UT-Austin, critiqued some of the assumptions underlying the analysis -- though he never cited it or the regents directly. And, strikingly, he based his critique on the grounds that the analysis failed to adequately capture the output, productivity and relevance of research (typically, teaching is the aspect of a professor's job that is thought to be the more difficult to accurately measure).

In addition to citing the contributions of two professors (one in the humanities and the other in physics), [Powers described](#) the experience of a student at the university: a senior in chemical engineering named Katie Maass. As an assistant at a campus laboratory, Maass worked on nanoparticles that can release medicine in the small intestine instead of the stomach, Powers said, which helped her land a five-year, \$250,000 research grant as she plans to enter the doctoral program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

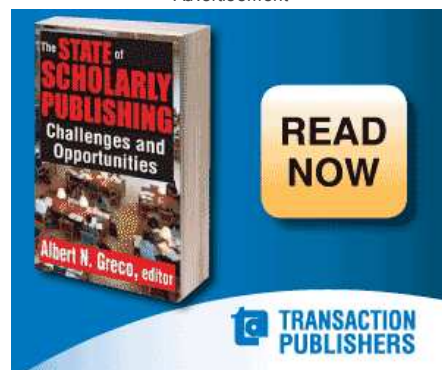
"The kind of research experience that Katie received as an undergraduate at UT is not factored into the metrics some would use to evaluate Tier 1 research universities," Powers said. "The kind of faculty mentoring and interaction that Katie received cannot be captured in a faculty profit-and-loss statement."

The reference to a "profit-and-loss statement" was interpreted by some as a swipe at a previously released version of the data regarding faculty at Texas A&M University, which depicted individual faculty members as being in the red (costing more than they produce) or the black (generating revenue). That version has since been replaced, and the faculty productivity effort at UT should not be characterized in terms of profit and loss, said Anthony P. de Bruyn, a spokesman for the UT system.

In addition, said de Bruyn, the goal of gathering the data was not to assess individual faculty members, but to review university departments at each institution. When asked why, then, the information listed each faculty member by name and didn't include tallies of these measurements by department, de Bruyn said that the institutional research divisions for each university had supplied the data that way.

Powers's comments Monday were his first since last week's release of the faculty productivity data at UT, and professors at Austin hailed their president's words. Dean Neikirk, Cullen Trust for Higher Education Endowed Professor in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering (and president of UT-Austin's Faculty Council), said Powers had expressed the difficulty of adequately measuring the impact that research -- and individual professors -- can have on the

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wider institution.

"It's an ecosystem, and trying to reduce the contribution of a single individual to a set of simple numbers is never going to be easy," Neikirk told *Inside Higher Ed*. "A lot of that is not reducible to a simple number the way an engineer will reduce things."

On Monday, the Faculty Council at UT-Austin agreed. It unanimously passed [a vote of confidence](#) in Powers and his administration. Saying that the university's mission, core purpose and core values are in jeopardy, the approximately 40 members of the faculty at the council's meeting added that they believe Powers and his team "have tirelessly and effectively advocated for the university while valuing academic research and excellent teaching and adhering to the highest standards of professionalism and ethical conduct."

The Texas Public Policy Foundation -- a think tank whose trustee, Brenda Pejovich, is also a regent and the chair of the UT board's [task force](#) on faculty productivity -- added that it, too, was pleased with one aspect of the president's comments: his acknowledgment of the need for reform in an environment in which universities must do more with less. (Powers said that -- as state support for UT-Austin has dropped from 52 percent of the university's budget in 1981 to a projected 13 percent, according to a version of the 2012 budget proposed by the House -- the university will need to change how it does business and to chart a new, more sustainable path. "We can't just long for the old days," he said. "We need to be on the leading edge of change.")

David Guenther, senior communications director for the foundation, said the group's interest in higher education is based in a belief that student learning and teaching have been neglected in recent years. "There needs to be an evaluation of where resources are going between research and education so we can set a proper balance," he said.

He also acknowledged that the information compiled by the regents was incomplete in its current form (some faculty members with whom *Inside Higher Ed* spoke said that their salaries were listed in the raw data at levels that were higher than they actually were, or that the document underrepresented the quantity of their research). And Guenther predicted that there would be "significant categories of research where we agree with universities that it's worth the time and expense and the staff, and the release time from the classroom."

But he added, "There will also be, I presume, a category of research where, not just us, but members of the public at large will look at it and say, 'Is it really worth us giving release time from the classroom for a professor to put out that particular article? Instead, would it be a better use of time to have that teacher or professor in a classroom providing their knowledge to students?'"

In theory, such goals are fine, said Peter Hugill, professor of geography at Texas A&M, and president of the state conference of the American Association of University Professors. "Although I really am in favor of accountability, I just think we have to be cautious of overly simplistic measures," he said. "Numbers are helpful, but they're not by any means the sole arbiter of performance." Hugill said department chairs typically evaluate the research of their own faculty members by using more nuanced methods: they don't simply count the dollar amount of grants, but also consider the source; they don't just tally the number of journal articles, but they also evaluate the impact of the scholarship and where it was published.

The numbers gathered by the regents are also already available, said Murray Leaf, speaker of the Academic Senate, and professor of anthropology and political economy at UT-Dallas. The problem, he said, is the way information is organized and assembled. "What this does is provide information that's not normally juxtaposed," Leaf said in an interview. Leaf, who said that the salary listed for him was overstated by 50 percent, described as "intrusive" the effort to use a snapshot from one point in time to paint a larger picture of productivity -- because it will fail to reflect the ebbs and flows of academic life. "It's intended, I think, to be intimidating in that regents can arrange the information this way and propose to evaluate on this basis," he said. "That attitude on the part of the regents is worrisome."

Some also have been critical of the larger assumption that is embedded in the task force's work -- a hard distinction between teaching and research. Terri E. Givens, associate professor of government at UT-Austin (and author of the [Running 'Round the Ivory Tower](#) blog for *Inside Higher Ed*), said that the data failed to reflect seven research trips she recently took -- and that it was impossible to distinguish her research (with three undergraduate and four graduate

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students) from her instructional and service duties. "I spend half of my week doing writing and research," she said, "It's directly related to teaching."

The Association of American Universities also weighed in, though privately. In a letter to the chancellor of the Texas A&M system, Robert M. Berdahl, AAU's president, [observed](#) that "the key to the success of the American research university is the close alliance between research and teaching, especially the teaching of graduate students."

Berdahl criticized [related proposals](#) that were advanced by the Texas Public Policy Foundation for further severing the connection between research and education. "Separating research from teaching and oversimplifying the evaluation of faculty does violence to the values that have produced the American universities that are envied and emulated across the globe," he wrote.

But such a critique assumes the melding of research and teaching is the natural state of things when it really shouldn't be, said Charles Miller, a former UT regent chairman who said the task force's efforts to look at productivity (as well as another panel's work on blended learning) were to be commended. Community colleges and non-flagships, as well as private liberal arts institutions, do very little research, said Miller.

"The real issues at 'research universities' revolve around about how teaching is undervalued relative to research or, most important, how effective the use of resources are in research -- or in teaching," Miller wrote in an e-mail to *Inside Higher Ed*. Miller used UT-Austin as an example, criticizing its graduation rates of approximately 50 percent (four years) and 80 percent (six years) among those who were top students in high school and hail from families with average incomes far above the median in Texas. "[This is] strong evidence of a place where teaching and learning is not conducted productively," he said. "These graduation rates for a top 'research university' should be considered totally unacceptable by the UT System Board of Regents."

And they are, at least by Powers. In his comments, he ascribed poor problems in the graduation rate to several factors, including poor choices, sometimes by students, but also on the part of the university. These poor decisions come, he said, "in choosing a major, in course selection, in matching their talents to their degree plan, or in our own failure to provide enough available course sequences."

— Dan Berrett

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### Comments on [Wrong Kind of Accountability?](#)

#### Hypocrites!

Posted by [Double Dog Diogenes](#) on May 10, 2011 at 7:30am EDT

Hmmmm. I think Texas Republibaggers can "make education accountable" as soon as they make their pals running things like Wall Street do the same with 24% raises executive took since the recession began! Or their pals in the oil companies that now pull the highest profits in history off high gas price misery and still want more tax breaks as they gouge us! Then they can look at their host of flying carpet bagger private contractors running ponzi schemes in Iraq and Afghnaistan (who now out number US forces significantly) and make them accountable! We'll be happy to account for our pennies when they are willing to account for their billions of wasted tax dollars. A professor with a few fewer students in a class does not compare to the massive fraud and waste their friends flush down the ole privatizing/deregulation toilet every day! If they pull the log our their blind-on-purpose eyes, we'll let them look at the splinter in ours! But not touch it. We prefer real doctors.

#### Let's Have Rational Reform

Posted by [Garrison Walters](#) on May 10, 2011 at 8:00am EDT

Among the many flaws with the strategy of the Texas Public Policy Foundation and similar critics nationally is the fact that they are seeking to homogenize higher education. Right now, there's a lot of choice. If students don't want to attend a university where faculty spend a good deal of their time on research, scholarship, participation in national and international debate on important topics, and

other hard to quantify activities, they have a variety of excellent choices. Those other choices usually cost a lot less. A good deal for consumers, you would think. But not to the critics, who want to decide what others want. What's next? Even if the University of Phoenix at Austin continues to be a football power, will well-prepared students want to go there? Will top researchers want to stay on the faculty? Will the microelectronics cluster that gives the area much of its prosperity migrate with the researchers?

Complex systems are regularly confronted with new circumstances and need to adapt, and in that context continuing reconsideration of processes and policies in higher education is certainly required. But the current "reform" movement has been hijacked by people who seem not to have thought deeply about the consequences of their proposals. It's time for \*that\* to change.

### Performance Management 101

Posted by **Christoph Knoess** at Engaged Minds on May 10, 2011 at 8:00am EDT

The UT System's attempt at implementing a performance management system is of fundamental importance for higher ed. If institutions have any chance to stay in control of the changes ahead, they will need to follow suit.

The problem with performance management in higher ed are not the dual missions of education and research. It is the lack of a comprehensive framework. Proper performance management starts with the definition of a set of comprehensive quantitative and qualitative success metrics for the institution through its board (incl. teaching, research, financial, etc.). These metrics must then cascade down from the president's level to admin departments, colleges, academic departments and finally faculty.

Designing and implementing such a system is not any harder than performance management for a large professional services company or a diversified corporation. There are 1000's of successful examples in the U.S. Performance management is a prerequisite for building a high performing organization. Of course, president's prefer to review their performance themselves and in hindsight. As long as boards let them get away with that, rather than holding presidents accountable for the achievement of goals defined by the board, holding faculty accountable will be an arbitrary process.

The failure of higher education starts with boards and their interactions with presidents. The fix needs to be a top-down performance management process. Until that process starts, costs will continue to explode, graduation rates will continue to hover around 50%, presidents will continue to congratulate themselves and faculty will continue to point to "seven research trips" as proof that they are doing their jobs.

Posted by **Ellen Schrecker** on May 10, 2011 at 9:15am EDT

Kudos to President Powers. At last, we're seeing a high-level administration articulately defending the educational mission of his institution. Let us hope that his colleagues at other colleges and universities follow suit and begin to explain to their trustees, politicians, and the general public exactly what goes on at the campuses and why it is so important for us all.

### Cui bono?

Posted by **Michael McIntyre**, Associate Professor and Director, International Studies Program at DePaul University on May 10, 2011 at 9:45am EDT

Christopher Knoess of Engaged Minds writes: "Proper performance management starts with the definition of a set of comprehensive quantitative and qualitative success metrics for the institution through its board (incl. teaching, research, financial, etc.). These metrics must then cascade down from the president's level to admin departments, colleges, academic departments and finally faculty."

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### Evaluating performance in universities

Posted by **John M. Hill**, Professor, English at U.S. Naval Academy on May 10, 2011 at 10:15am EDT

"Performance management" may work somewhat for service firms and for corporations, although my limited experience in the corporate world suggests otherwise. But to suppose that is how we should structure evaluations in colleges and universities simply mistakes the huge differences involved -- or else is a demolition plan. Demolishing what? Well, whatever significant intellectual and pedagogical independence still exists in our colleges and research institutions, those special places of higher learning where eccentricity, maverick approaches, sudden insights always trouble whatever passes for the norm of the moment.

And by the way state support for higher education has not dwindled in Texas from some high percentage to 14% because God willed as much. Similar declines in many states simply tell me that legislatures no longer value their institutions of higher learning and don't deserve them. Moreover, higher education is a soft target for clowns seeking votes.

### Who is to be the judge?

Posted by **Sandy Thatcher** on May 10, 2011 at 10:30am EDT

David Guenther suggests that "the public at large" is going to be able to pass judgment on the value of research done in universities. Really? And just how does the general public know enough

to make such judgments, say, on the value of the research project in which Katie Maass was involved? Or on some high-level math research? Or on string theory in theoretical physics?

On performance management, how about assessing the performance of the Board of Regents? It's packed with Perry's political cronies--not exactly a qualification that puts them in a position to pass judgment.

On poor graduation rates, has it occurred to anyone that the students coming out of Texas high schools are not well prepared for college? Could this be because Perry has underfunded K-12 education for many years? How about assessing Perry on his record of support for education?

Evaluating teaching in Tier 1 universities as though it could be assessed completely independent of research is nonsense. Teaching without research to advance the basis of knowledge on which good teaching depends is teaching that is stagnant and ill serves students.

--Sandy Thatcher, Frisco, TX

**Posted by David on May 10, 2011 at 1:30pm EDT**

How is it that nobody understands the issue? Back when good universities were run by the faculty and administrators knew their place (i.e., as 'failed academics' they were expected, at least, to facilitate the academic activities of professors), there was no discussion about 'performance metrics'. Now that states foot less of the bill than ever, after having wasted resources on growing an ever-more bloated university administration, they now want to impose these jingoistic 'metrics' in an obvious effort to convey to their ultra-right constituents that that actually care about education. What a laugh! As for the person who believes that US universities are a model for the world to envy, get with it: that was then, this is now. Furthermore, back 'then', when the claim had merit, the fact of the supremacy of US universities was due to exactly one, and only one, thing: the massive influx of scientist refugees from post-war Europe. Anyone heard of Einstein, or Werner von Braun, for example, without whom there would have been no modern physics and no US space program, respectively? Do you imagine that this kind of talent was home grown in the USA? Unfortunately, what we are now witnessing in the era of state withdrawal from universities (attended, predictably, by calls for 'accountability') is the inevitable return of the US to the 2nd or 3rd rate status it had prior to The War. The reason we enjoyed any post-war dominance at all is simply that we were the only industrialized country left standing. So, how about a little bit of somber reality check? Regarding American science, there was exactly one American scientist of the stature of the European Greats who gave us modern science. His name was J. Willard Gibbs, and his employer, Yale University, treated him with utter indifference. This is the simple fact of American anti-intellectualism, which is stronger today than ever, and which will succeed fully in terminating the American University system. Perhaps our 'culture' is simply ill-suited to the idea of a university. Can anyone really be surprised by this, in an era when the super-rich purchase politicians to do their bidding, like so many bananas per dime? Why would they need an educated workforce, when they can get the same services from the so-called 3rd world for less money, while they and their appointees work at whittling away the standard of living of the domestic servant population?

**More than just Gibbs**

**Posted by Joe Schmoie on May 10, 2011 at 2:15pm EDT**

David, I agree with some of your rant, but you are selling the history of science in America way, way short, laughably short, in suggesting that the only great scientist who measures up to his European counterparts is J.W. Gibbs. I'll give you another American name, a scientist who it could plausibly be argued was 2nd only to Einstein in the 20th century: Claude Shannon. Look him up. You might even be impressed.



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