How Academic Organizational Systems and Culture Undermine Scholarship and Quality Research

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I used to believe in academic truth and beauty, thinking that was all I needed to know. That was over 30 years ago when I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois protected from the politics, plays for power, and scramble for resources and rewards that often characterize life in a research university. Back then, literature and film were my “religion” and academic life, although hectic and demanding, was very good.

FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE

After 4 years as a sheltered Illinois graduate student, I landed my first academic job in the English Department at the University of Arizona. That’s where I lost my religion and belief in an academic Arcadian world. After 2 years of being hopelessly naïve about what was important at Arizona (I was very young, a product of the 1960s, and had a tin ear for organizational dynamics), my quest for academic truth and beauty took a back seat to understanding organizational power, politics, and the publishing games that some faculty played. Not to do so would have been professional suicide.

What I was beginning to realize was that universities are not intellectual utopias but organizations—similar in some respects to business organizations—composed of complex systems: reward, resource, measurement, and control. Furthermore, those administrators—provosts, deans, and department chairs—who controlled the system levers had goals and interests different from mine. In short, it was time I left my Arcadian world of innocence and figured out who would influence my academic
career, determine what was actually important to them, and decide if I wanted to play in the research university sandbox.

But determining what was important turned out to be tricky. I soon learned there were differences between leadership’s espoused academic values—scholarship; research; quality instruction; and service to students, the school, my academic discipline, and the community—and the outputs that were valued and rewarded—publications in “A-level” journals.

So the vantage point from which I’m responding to Ron’s talk—his two “goat getters”—is a bit different from his. That vantage point—a Blakean world of experience—exists from within the complex set of organizational systems—particularly reward, control, and resource—that characterize life in a research university. Although my research university life has been split between English departments and business schools, most of my examples come from my 27 years of business school experience. I believe, though, that my experiences are not business school specific; faculty in other research university disciplines suffer from the same system misalignments I’ll discuss next.

**REWARD SYSTEMS’ INFLUENCE ON FACULTY RESEARCH BEHAVIOR**

Clearly, some of Ron’s examples of academic gamesmanship are unethical—water boarding or other forms of torture are kind treatment to dissertation advisors who use their power to have their names placed on papers when they have done little or none of the work. But I’m much more sympathetic toward academics who play the research “bean counting” game and, to mix a metaphor, do “salami” research—cut narrow slices from research data to get as many articles as possible out of their work. Although I believe I understand what causes this behavior, I still find myself asking the following questions:

- What causes faculty to see research as a game and to play it the way that they do?
- Why do fundamentally good people do shady things in an effort to publish?
- Why are we obsessed with rankings and metrics?
- Is there anything we can do to change what Ron calls “metric mania?”

Steve Kerr’s (1975) classic article, “The Folly of Rewarding A and Hoping for B,” provides a starting point to answers these questions. What Kerr points out is that whether we’re dealing with hyenas, gazelles, sea
otters, or people, “most organisms seek information about which activities are rewarded and then seek to do (or at least pretend to do) those things, often to the virtual exclusion of activities not rewarded” (p. 769). Kerr’s concept is simple and uncontroversial. However, research university reward systems regularly foul up behavior, rewarding activity that they actually should be discouraging, for example, salami research. That foul-up occurs when the reward system is not aligned with the quality measurement system and with the research university’s mission: developing new knowledge that has value, disseminating that knowledge so that it serves the larger community, and bringing that knowledge back into the classroom.

So the real problem implicit in Ron’s “goats” is the kind of reward and quality measurement systems research universities create and their lack of alignment with their avowed mission and goals. That’s clearly demonstrated when faculty who publish not only get to teach less but also are praised, admired, and even envied for having to spend less time in class, particularly with undergraduates.

These system misalignments can cause faculty to see university work as a complex game that initially requires them to learn the real rules—publications (the more the better) in “A-quality” journals are what really matters—rather than those often espoused by administrators at various levels: good teaching and good research go hand-in-hand. Playing that game well may cause faculty to see scholarship through the narrow lens of refereed journal publications that add lines on their vitae. Even worse, I’ve seen junior faculty quickly become cynical about research and even scholarship. So if a job candidate, for example, gets signals that publications are what really count, it makes perfect sense for him or her to be insistent on what kind of research is expected, the kinds of places that research needs to be placed, and some guidance on the approximate number of articles needed to get tenure. That’s also true of tenured faculty who want to be promoted to full professor. In short, a job candidate needs to know the rules of the game before determining if he or she wants to play. I’d call that due diligence and a rational response to his or her interpretation of the university reward and measurement systems.

But let’s say you’re still an innocent and your heart is pure—you’re interested in scholarship, research, teaching, and service—and you don’t ask tough questions about reward and measurement systems. There’s nothing worse than accepting a job unaware of the real publishing expectations—the reward system imperatives—and then finding out that you don’t have the talent, drive, stamina, and perhaps even the unwavering belief in the
value of publishing the number of articles required in the journals seen as important “hits” to meet the school’s expectations. That lack of awareness creates a misalignment of people with rewards, and from my experience that happens far too often. Rather than finding a different place to work, chances are a number of us will do everything in our power—even sketchy, unethical things that make us feel bad about ourselves—to prove we can play the publishing game. Academics are a proud lot with healthy egos. It’s hard for us to admit that we don’t have the talent or drive to play the publishing game well enough to avoid being cut from the team.

Combined with this pride and self-deception is fear—the fear that we’re not smart, that we don’t measure up to our colleagues who are publishing in top-level journals, and that we’ll be let go, resulting in “loss of face” with our colleagues, families, and friends. Fear can make good people do bad things.

QUALITY AND METRIC MANIA

The larger question is, Why do we have this obsession with number of articles published, number of times our research is cited, and the ranking and impact factor of journals? Impact factor, used frequently in Europe and Asia and increasingly so in the United States to determine article quality, measures the extent to which articles in one journal are cited in other journals (Rogers, Campbell, Louhiala-Salminen, Rentz, & Suchan, 2007). The higher a journal’s impact factor, the greater the journal’s, and presumably the articles published in that journal, influence on knowledge generation in that field. This obsession with journal rankings has become so extreme that a dean of one prominent U.S. business school recognized and supported only research that appeared on lists of “influential business journals.”

One reason administrators and faculty rely on simple metrics is that assessing and making fine distinctions in quality is difficult. That requires faculty and administrators to carefully read publications, think about them, debate the publications’ merits, and perhaps learn a bit about someone else’s field. In other words, assessing quality requires us to act as scholars rather than publishers who believe they must carefully manage their time, not devoting it to activities that aren’t rewarded. Furthermore, as Ron can attest given his 17 years as a department chair, administrators are constantly searching for ways to save time because they have so little
of it. Consequently, it’s much easier to use surrogate measures of quality: journal rankings, leading journal lists, impact factors, and citations counts. Also, it’s easier and quicker to judge someone a “good researcher” who deserves promotion, tenure, summer support, conference funding, reduced teaching loads, and other rewards. Clear, simple metrics give a ring of objectivity and scientific truth to those reward decisions, making them (particularly promotion and tenure) easier to justify to others, particularly those colleagues in engineering and the physical sciences who tend to see the world through a quantitative lens.

THE LARGER CULTURAL CONTEXT OF METRIC MANIA

I also believe that there’s a larger cultural academic context, particularly in business schools, that accounts for this focus on counting and metrics. Business schools are increasingly being run as businesses. A number of these schools are attempting to separate themselves financially from their universities and raise their own resources to fund operations, including the purchase of new buildings. As a result of this business strategy, PhD programs are being scaled back because they lose money. Undergraduate programs are seen as a nuisance because they don’t generate significant revenue; consequently, many courses are increasingly staffed by graduate student assistants (GSAs) and adjunct faculty. Business school moneymakers—their “cash cows”—are MBA, executive MBA, executive and management development programs, and alumni. Significant resources—faculty, marketing, support staff, and facilities—are devoted to these moneymakers. Most important, the expenditure of these resources must lead to results.

As every senior private-sector manager realizes, “making the numbers” each quarter is imperative; otherwise, Wall Street will punish the company. Business school administrators are increasingly compelled to “make the numbers.” As one dean told me at a recent AACSB meeting, his job is very simple: “resources, resources, resources.” The 20 to 25 other deans at the session strongly agreed. Deans who don’t make the numbers—aren’t successful in fundraising through business grants, alumni donations, and profit-making graduate programs—find themselves looking for new work. The crucial point is that this metric-driven, objectified, mechanical view of organizational life seeps into all aspects of business school work. What Ron calls scholarship—the financial support to read Postman’s The End of Education, Taleb’s The Black Swan, and even Posnanski’s The Soul of
Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O’Neill’s America—must lead to outputs: publications in leading journals. In other words, deans and department chairs expect faculty to “make the numbers”—x number of articles per year every year, low journal acceptance rates, high journal impact factors, high article citation counts—to demonstrate quality performance and to justify the resources spent to support them.

Another academic cultural factor that contributes to metric mania is undergraduate, graduate, and professional school rankings. Each year BusinessWeek, US News and World Report, Forbes, The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times, and a handful of other publications rank business school undergraduate, MBA, and EMBA programs. These rankings are so important to alumni, current and potential students (particularly for high-priced MBA and EMBA programs), faculty, recruiters, board of advisors, and university senior leadership that deans are often rewarded for achieving a higher ranking in a key publication and chastised or even fired if their rankings slip significantly. In fact, achieving higher rankings is part of a number of business schools’ strategic plans. I’ve seen large banners prominently displayed in the lobbies of several business schools proudly proclaiming that school’s high ranking. And, as expected, high rankings are part of business schools’ promotional materials. As a dean of a top-20 ranked MBA program told me, “Alumni giving increases when Business Week and US News rankings come out and they go up a lot if our ranking improves. We’re competing for top MBA students; good rankings help us win students and justify our tuition.” Reputation among peers is one important factor that determines several key publications’ rankings. Faculty visibility, which is linked to reputation, results from a steady stream of publications in top journals.

We even see this metric mania in ways AACSB-accredited schools must demonstrate to this powerful accrediting organization that they are carefully measuring learning and making changes in their courses and programs where there are learning gaps. Assessing learning, particularly higher-level capabilities such as critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis that are cornerstones of graduate programs, is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Demonstrating learning achievement by assessing through direct observation the behaviors students have exhibited and the products they have produced is even more difficult. Many schools don’t have the resources to do this work well. More important, in research-focused business schools, faculty are not rewarded for doing the very hard work required to demonstrate to AACSB that students have learned.
To cope with this burden to measure learning, many schools are using easy-to-collect measures of learning obtained from multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tests and easy-to-quantify grading rubrics. As colleagues at a number of schools have pointed out, this measurement language is beginning to change the conversation in their schools in disturbing ways. Talk about instructional measurement—“getting the instructional numbers”—is crowding out talk about instructional quality and even pedagogical scholarship.

This focus on business schools operating as a business and thus having to make their financial numbers, the obsession with business school rankings, and the AACSB drive to measure student learning create an environment or climate that reinforces the reduction of scholarship and research into number of articles published, journal rating systems, and journal impact factors. Furthermore, reward and measurement systems reinforce that thinking and behavior. Consequently, I don’t think we should be surprised if job candidates ask how many articles are needed to get tenure; if faculty members do “salami” research; if faculty expect, indeed often demand, to teach less to focus on research; or if faculty make dubious or unethical decisions to get another line on the resume.

**FINAL OBSERVATIONS:**

**CAN WE CHANGE THESE TRENDS?**

I’m not quite sure what we can do to change these trends. However, I do have several suggestions, although they’re merely speculative. One obvious alternative is to “retire” to a university that values and rewards scholarship, research, teaching, and service—the kind of life that Ron describes in his section on what gives meaning to research. But I believe that’s a form of avoidance.

Another possibility is to be brave and strong enough to play the game with integrity and passion so that it ceases to be a game. That takes talent, stamina, a well-calibrated moral compass, and a strong psyche. After receiving tenure and, perhaps, being promoted to a full professor, the next step—and this is the important one—is to actively pursue an administrative career or, although difficult, one that balances administration, research, and instruction. The combination of academic credibility and administrative influence provides leverage to alter or recalibrate the reward and control systems that so heavily influence faculty thinking and behavior. I now believe that the architects of a university’s systems have extraordinary
power and leverage to shape academic life in ways faculty often are only dimly aware of.

Finally, we can help change the talk or narrative in our organizations about publications and reshape it to discussions about rewarding a blend of scholarship, research, publication, teaching, and service. Changing organizational talk is extremely difficult. Determining leverage points or openings for new language is hard to determine. Also, it’s a challenge to determine ways to make that different language contagious, to make it stick. But I believe the challenge is worth pursuing, and it’s work we should be good at. As Malcolm Gladwell (2000) points out in *The Tipping Point*, new language can be contagious, small actions can have big effects, and change can occur fast. In fact, if I were to step back into my Arcadian world of innocence where truth and beauty reigned, I might even believe that our colleagues and even our academic administrators have grown tired of the research bean-counting game and would welcome a new language, a different conversation, and a more growth-inducing set of values about the work we do.

REFERENCES


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