

The Tyranny of Metrics: An Overview

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Muller, J. (2018). *The tyranny of metrics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 978-0-691-174952, 240 pp, <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/11218.html>

We live at a time in which measuring outcomes is as regular a topic of conversation as what sounds good for dinner. While it might be nice to think that this is true only in academia, the truth is that the drive to quantify everything is equally prevalent in health care, government, and many other fields. As much as I find those other areas interesting, what I most want to know is what they mean to me in the academic world and how do I put this zeal for measurement in perspective. Within that light, *The Tyranny of Metrics* excels. Jerry Muller makes a compelling argument over the course of the first six chapters that too much of a focus on numbers leads us to emphasize what we can measure and diminish the importance of what we cannot quantify. This can lead to such ethical violations as “teaching to the test” and “gaming the stats.”

Ten additional chapters look at various fields and the trends, issues, and problems this myopia runs the risk of causing with them. The seventh chapter is on colleges and universities and is most relevant to this discussion. Throughout the book, the writing is crisp, clear, and concise and sure to give you pause and cause you to ponder whether we need to change our fixation\obsession with metrics.

The author of a number of books, Muller is a professor of history at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He has also written articles that have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, and a number of other publications. While he backs his discussion with a plethora of examples, he is quick to point out that it is not an either/or situation; metrics can and should be used as a complement to judgment based on experience rather than as a replacement for it.

Rather than blather on from the viewpoint of a reader on why the book is meaningful and worthy of spending some time with, the following sources recapitulate the words of the author discussing the topic through various venues.

EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK'S INTRODUCTION

...I was drawn into the subject through my experience as the chair of my department at a private university. There are many facets to such a job: mentoring faculty members to help them develop as scholars and teachers; hiring new faculty; trying to ensure that necessary courses get taught; maintaining relations with deans and others in the university administration. Those responsibilities were on top of my roles as a faculty member: teaching, researching, and keeping up with my professional fields. With all those roles, I was quite satisfied. Time devoted to thinking about and working with faculty members contributed to making them better teachers and scholars. I was proud of the range and quality of the courses that we were teaching, and relations with other departments were fine. Teaching, researching, and writing were demanding, but satisfying.

Then, things began to change. Like all colleges and universities, our institution gets evaluated every decade by an accrediting body, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. It issued a report that included demands for more metrics on which to base future “assessment”—a buzzword in higher education that usually means more measurement of performance. Soon, I found my time increasingly devoted to answering queries for more and more statistical information about the activities of the department, which diverted my time from tasks such as research, teaching, and mentoring faculty. There were new scales for evaluating the achievements of our graduating majors—scales that added no useful insights to our previous measuring instrument, namely grades. I worked out a way of doing this speedily, without taking up much time of the faculty, simply by translating the grades the faculty had awarded into the four-category scale created for purposes of assessment. Over time, gathering and processing the information, in turn, required

the university to hire ever more data specialists. (It has since gone so far as to appoint a vice-president for assessment.) Some of their reports were genuinely useful: for example, in producing spreadsheets that showed the average grade awarded in each course. But much of the information was of no real use, and indeed, was read by no one. Yet once the culture of performance documentation caught on, department chairs found themselves in a sort of data arms race. I led the department through a required year-long departmental self-assessment—a useful exercise, as it turned out. But before sending it up the bureaucratic chain, I was urged to add more statistical appendices—because if I didn't, the report would look less rigorous than that of other departments. One fellow chair—a solid senior scholar—devoted most of one summer to compiling a binder full of data, complete with colored charts, to try to convince the dean of the need to fill a faculty slot in his department.

My experience was irritating, not shattering: a pin-prick not a blow. But it stimulated me to inquire more deeply into the forces leading to this wasteful diversion of time and effort. The Middle States Commission, from which the stimulus for more data originated, operates with a mandate from the U.S. Department of Education. That department, under the leadership of Margaret Spellings, had convened a Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which published its report in 2006 emphasizing the need for greater accountability and the gathering of more data, and directing the regional accrediting agencies to make “performance outcomes” the core of their assessment. That mode of evaluation, in turn, filtered down to the Middle States Commission, and from there to the administration of my university, and eventually down to me. Spellings had been the director of the Domestic Policy Council under President George W. Bush at the time of the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. At first, I had thought that legislation—which expanded the evaluation of teachers and schools based on the scores of their students on standardized tests—was a positive step. But in time I came to hear searing critiques of it by erstwhile supporters, such as the former assistant secretary of education, Diane Ravitch. And classroom teachers of my acquaintance told me that while they loved teaching, they found that the increasing regimentation of the curriculum, intended to maximize performance on the tests, was sucking away their enthusiasm.

...I proceeded to consult a wide range of scholarly literatures, in fields from economics and politics, to history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, public administration, and organizational behavior. I made extensive use of social

scientific studies of the actual behavior of teachers, professors, doctors, and policemen in the real world.

In surveying the scholarship on the topic from a variety of fields, I was struck by the degree to which academic disciplines tend to be walled off from one another, and by the gap between academic research and real world practice. I found remarkable, for example, how much of recent economic literature on incentives and motivation was a formalization of what psychologists had already discovered. But much of what psychologists had discovered was long known by managers with judgment. Yet although there is a large body of scholarship in the fields of psychology and economics that call into question the premises and effectiveness of pay for measured performance, that literature seems to have done little to halt the spread of metric fixation.

EXCERPTS FROM THE FIRST INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

(<https://press.princeton.edu/interviews/qa-11218>)

What's the main idea?

We increasingly live in a culture of metric fixation: the belief in so many organizations that scientific management means replacing judgment based upon experience and talent with standardized measures of performance, and then rewarding or punishing individuals and organizations based upon those measures. The buzzwords of metric fixation are all around us: “metrics,” “accountability,” “assessment,” and “transparency.” Though often characterized as “best practice,” metric fixation is in fact often counterproductive, with costs to individual satisfaction with work, organizational effectiveness, and economic growth.

The *Tyranny of Metrics* treats metric fixation as the organizational equivalent of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” It helps explain why metric fixation has become so popular, why it is so often counterproductive, and why some people have an interest in pushing it. It is a book that analyzes and critiques a dominant fashion in contemporary organizational culture, with an eye to making life in organizations more satisfying and productive.

Why is the book called *The Tyranny of Metrics*?

Because it helps explain and articulate the sense of frustration and oppression that people in a wide range of organizations feel at the diversion of their time and energy to performance measurement that is wasteful and counterproductive.

What sort of a book is it? Does it belong to any particular discipline or political ideology?

It's a work of synthesis, drawing on a wide range of studies and analyses from psychology, sociology, economics, political science, philosophy, organizational behavior, history, and other fields. But it's written in jargon-free prose that doesn't require prior knowledge of any of these fields. Princeton University Press has it classified under "Business," "Public Policy," and "Current Affairs." That's accurate enough, but it only begins to suggest the ubiquity of the cultural pattern that the book depicts, analyzes, and critiques. The book makes use of conservative, liberal, Marxist, and anarchist authors—some of whom have surprising areas of analytic convergence.

Is the book simply a manifesto against performance measurement?

By no means. Drawing on a wide range of case studies from education to medicine to the military, the book shows how measured performance can be developed and used in positive ways.

Who do you hope will read the book?

Everyone who works in an organization, manages an organization, or supervises an organization, whether in the for-profit, non-profit, or government sector. Or anyone who wants to understand this dominant organizational culture and its intrinsic weaknesses.

**EXCERPTS FROM A SECOND
INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR**

(<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/02/07/author-discusses-new-book-which-he-criticizes-use-metrics-higher-education>)

Q: You close your section on higher education by saying that metrics send a message that higher education is about making money. Why do you believe this to be the case?

A: I'm referring here to ratings and ranking systems such as the Department of Education's College Scorecard, which in turn is used, with some further refinements, to try to account for "value added" (the difference between the actual outcomes and what would be expected based on the background of admitted students), by the Brookings Institution's rankings, and by commercial rankings such as those of *Money* magazine.

For all of these, the major criterion is return on investment (ROI), understood as the relationship between the costs of college and the impact of college attendance on future earnings. They take into account graduation rates, faculty-student ratios, etc., but always with a view to ROI. So the message could hardly be more explicit.

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