

Extending the Academic Sector Core Indicator Set Position of the Sociology and Anthropology Department

(Unanimously approved at the Department Meeting on November 15, 2010)

It appears to us that, in some quarters, ever-higher activity levels, ever-growing output, bigger and bigger grants and contracts, more and more equipment and facilities, higher and higher graduate enrolments, have become ends in themselves. Worse yet, they have become ends which are sometimes used to justify means which are highly questionable. As a result, practices have developed relating to the acquisition and deployment of funding, equipment and personnel –the factors of research “production”, as they seem to be regarded– which are inconsistent not only with high standards of academic behaviour, but also with explicit University policies and with generally accepted standards of honesty and integrity. And, frankly, they are unworthy of the distinguished individuals who have become involved in such practices. There are serious problems, which the University will have to address, but they are not unique to Concordia. They have their origins not in the intrinsic wickedness of any of the persons involved or in particular defects of the University’s administrative structures. Rather, they are the almost inescapable pathology of the surrounding research culture, of systems of scholarly assessment, research funding and industry-university-government cooperation which has developed in Canada over the past 25 years, and ultimately of developments in scholarship which, if not universal, are certainly widespread.

H.W. Arthur (Chair), Roger A. Blais and Jon Thompson: *Integrity in scholarship. A Report to Concordia University* (by the “Independent Committee of Inquiry into Academic and Scientific Integrity”), April 1994.¹

1. Introduction

The Office of the Provost and Vice-President, Academic Affairs, has asked Departments to respond to the Core Indicator Set meant to implement some of the principles included in the *Reaching Up, Reaching Out* document, adopted by the University Senate and Board of Governors. It is our understanding that this document seeks to elaborate on the strategies included in the above mentioned strategic plan, namely, “to Build Concordia’s reputation accordingly, in verifiable, measurable ways” (ref: *Reaching Up, Reaching Out, A Strategic Framework for Concordia University 2009-2014*, p.17). The document having been circulated to the University Academic Units for consultation makes it clear that amendments are not permitted, save in a marginal way.

The faculty members of our Department discussed these issues on Oct. 18, 27 and Nov. 8 and 15, and resolved unanimously to come up with this common position. We share the aforementioned principle, not least because it is mainly out of our professional activity that the thing called “Concordia’s reputation” can exist. For the same reason, we are extremely invested in the outcomes that will result from the use of performance indicator measures. The Department is concerned that the current set of indicators if implemented

¹ The epigraph is taken from the report issued by one of three committees that Concordia’s Board of Governors struck to investigate the underpinnings of the Valery Fabrikant incident in 1992.

will structurally handicap the Humanities and the Social Sciences generally and our Department specifically. One major issue is the Department's "open" admission policy, which makes several of the indicators structurally invalid. We accept students who have been rejected by other units such as Business, Psychology or Communications, and who then transfer to these at some point during their program when and if they are able. This handicap should be reinterpreted as a valuable service we are performing for the University.

However, while we have particular reasons to disagree with some aspects of this document, we also have questions about the grounds on which it is based. These are broader and of concern to all Departments. Moreover, since many universities in Canada are going through similar 'consultations', the wider context needs to be addressed.

2. The Spirit of Indicators

Several Canadian Universities have a document similar to Concordia's RURO.² What singles out Concordia's documents is the spirit of managerial control with which it is infused. Illustrative of this, Concordia's definition of "Strategy as goals" is taken from something written by Tecker and O'Neal. The quotation is not fully referenced but internet searches return thousands of sites that quote the same passage, for example the websites of the Carnegie Foundation, the American Physical Therapy Association, *Quality in Business Education*, and Laurentian University. We were unable to locate the original source but we did learn that Charles O'Neal is the author of *Developing a winning J.I.T* ("just-in-time") *Marketing Strategy: The Industrial Marketer's Guide* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1991), and Harry E. Tecker of *Marketing for small business: What it is and why you need it* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1980). In addition, the "working definitions of strategy" in the RURO document (p. 2) is attributed to "Bain and Company." The quote was also not fully referenced but we did discover that this is a self-described "leading global business and strategy consulting firm", who boasts clients that "outperform the market 4/1."

This context is significant. The *Key Performance Indicators* approach has been developed and expanded in Business schools, initially designed for organizations stemming from a corporate culture. In educational contexts KPIs are the object of *internal* criticisms, notably because the Departmental specificities are currently ignored for teaching and funding targets, these criticisms having led to new approaches such as the "Balanced Scorecard Measures".³

Speaking of balances, the energy, time and money that have clearly gone into producing the Core Indicator Set document are impressive. We think it would benefit the process if the costs of developing the Core Indicator Set be made available to Departments. In addition, we would like to see the projected costs of implementing the Core Indicator Set.

² See for instance *Realizing Our Dreams As Canada's Capital University* (Carleton, June 2010); *The SFU Academic Plan 2010-2013*; or UQAM's *Plan stratégique 2009-2014*.

³ See for instance Kaplan and Norton (1992): "The Balanced-Scorecard Measures that Drive Performance", in *Harvard Business Review* (January-February): 71.

It takes a lot of resources to operationalize such a system. It is important to ensure that the priorities of the University—including policy development, teaching and research—not be overstrained.

We would also like a breakdown of the changing costs of administration versus faculty over the years, and also an accounting of the costs of each Department as well as the income generated by each Department; this in the interests of fairness and equity.

Finally, Concordia's documents are drawing on the disciplinary norms of Business.⁴ As members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, we consider that the Core Indicator Set constitutes an attempt to achieve managerial control of a normatively and ethically self-directed professional activity. Indicators are to organizations what norms and laws are to societies: devices to bend the action of their members.

3. Discussing Indicators

We have organised our comments on the individual indicators into three groups, depending on whether the indicator relates to teaching, research, or other student issues. Each section begins with a general conclusion that applies to all of the indicators in the category and then goes on to make comments on individual indicators or sub-indicators.

i. Teaching

Let us start with the issue of student evaluation of teaching. It needs to be emphasized that as professors we are all extremely concerned with getting feedback from our students. For learning takes place from within a pedagogical *relation*. This is the reason why we have always sought ways and means to get feedback on teaching and learning from students. Our concern for our students rests on the art of balancing, on the one hand, the real and inescapably demanding dimensions of learning that students must adopt as their own, and on the other, the necessity for us as teachers to take into consideration the actual difficulty and context of this requirement. The problem with the enforcement of any student evaluation of teaching is that it takes into consideration only one dimension of the pedagogical *relation*, and it does so precisely because it is inscribed in a client-approach to education. However, teaching does not amount to delivering a service to students, the nature of which they would be supposedly in full possession of. The first lesson we teach is the *importance* or *value* of knowledge, prior to and actually orienting, any implementation of it. This relation to the acquisition of knowledge cannot be adequately represented by a student evaluation and this is the reason why it should remain as it is: indicative, for internal use only.

Indicator 2A (“Level of Academic Challenge”) is problematic because none of the proposed indicators of “academic challenge” measures academic value in and of itself. The thickness of course packs, essay questions versus summaries, implementation of the theory learned in class, the number of pages written, these are all technical devices we use or not. They are effective or not depending on the *wider teaching framework* in which

⁴ But we are a University and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences is the largest Faculty.

they are deployed and from which they cannot be detached. It is our experience as former students—experience confirmed by comparing our teaching methods with our colleagues’—that equally excellent professors can have opposite methods. The worst sub-indicator in this category asks about students’ level of preparation for class. Whatever the way students prepare themselves for class, the test is the exam.

Indicator 2B (“Engaged learning practices”) does not measure student engagement but rather conformity to a certain ‘interactive’ teaching philosophy. The sub-indicators (question asking, team work, class presentations, tutoring of other students, etc.) are not objective qualities of good teaching; they are part of an implicit but specific approach to teaching. There is no reason why this particular philosophy should override others by being raised to the status of Indicator. It must be concretely shown that there is a relationship between the proposed Indicators and improved learning outcomes. None of the sub-indicators provides any guarantee of measuring quality teaching. This indicator might manifest something to the taste of (some) students but it is not clear if this is good for education or the reputation of the university.

The emphasis on preparing for class is in line with an approach to learning whose goal would be to acquire *formal* qualifications (see the rationale for indicator 2A, on p. 3).⁵ It is important to appreciate that in our Department we are not teaching communication or analytical skills *through* sociology and anthropology. We are teaching the substance of sociology and anthropology. And if our students improve their critical thinking skills when they try to understand what a kinship society is, for example, it is not because we teach formal skills or devote precious teaching time to assessing formal competencies. It simply happens that this takes place.⁶

ii. Research (external research funding/awards; research outcomes and dissemination)

These indicators pose several problems: the difficulty of applying them across the university with any validity; their reliance on productivity measures based on funding agencies’ criteria; their failure to differentiate external factors (the performance of the economy, for instance); and their failure to count free research. Let us address a few of these issues with specificity.

Indicator 5 (“Faculty research outcomes and dissemination”): Research is identified with funded research. Those who do free research receive no funding. For example, someone who does theoretical or historical analysis does research that requires incredible amounts of reading. The indicator also fails to take proper account of external factors, such as:

⁵ This *approche par compétences* is the main thread of another document: *Core Competencies Working Group Report* issued by the Office of the Provost and Vice-President, Academic Affairs, October 8, 2010. The little revolution this document feels like introducing is revealed by the prose filled with “hard decisions”, necessary “triggers” towards a “fundamental shift” and similar musts to “refocus intently on the learning process”. Question: which documented failure calls for such “fundamental shift”?

⁶ Our argument here is not unique. In 1958, Hannah Arendt targeted the formal approach to learning in “The Crisis in Education”, a criticism that resonates through the books of both Bill Readings *The University in Ruins* or Michel Freitag’s *Le naufrage de l’université* (Governor General Award, 1996).

- different levels of available funding between disciplines;
- short-term priority shifts by funding agencies;
- increases and decreases in funds allocated to granting councils;
- fiscal and political factors that affect the number of journals and presses that may publish results.

An actual indicator or measurement of valuable research production amongst faculty would incorporate a measurement of the *amount of time that faculty are able to devote to research*. For faculty who undertake fieldwork, it would mean measuring the amount of time they spend in the field, and so on. For an historian, it may entail measuring the amount of time they have to access to the required archives, for instance.

If free research is being discouraged, the long and patient research towards the *synthesis* of knowledge is also discouraged. Such research is intrinsically related to teaching. For example, the late Hubert Guindon, who spent most of his career in our Department, is now recognized as one of the keenest and most lucid sociological analysts of Québec society, especially the important social and political transformations that have taken place during and after the Quiet revolution. Hubert Guindon published one book in his life, and he did so (much like in the case of George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society*) because his students urged him to publish his scattered papers and reflections in a book form.⁷

iii. Retention, Graduation Rates and Admissions Policy

A major issue with these indicators is their blindness to differences in admissions policies among Departments, which makes several structurally invalid. As it stands, our performance on this indicator will remain importantly determined by the nature of the Concordia student body. It is obvious the students of the various departments do not compare. Our Department has an “open” admissions policy. This no doubt impacts on our own retention and graduation rates. Equally, Concordia University benefits from an open admissions policy in Departments such as ours. Therefore, our “open” admissions should be reinterpreted as a valuable service we are performing for the University, not to mention the community, and should be recognized as a heavy burden on our faculty.⁸

Indicator 1: External student award

We think that our department would fare well in a comparison with many other departments based on this indicator. However, it needs to be demonstrated how such an

⁷ All the big names of our respective disciplines have worked in that perspective. Giddens with his *Introduction to Sociology*, revisiting the entire history of the discipline, something similarly accomplished in Québec by Guy Rocher in *Introduction à la sociologie*.

⁸ Our status as an “open” department has not served the Department of Sociology and Anthropology well. According to the *Report of the External Consultants on the Department of Sociology and Anthropology* (M. Cooper & B. Singer, April 18, 2006), it has meant that the Department has served as a “dumping ground” for many poor, unprepared and unmotivated students. The result has been an increasingly difficult environment in which to teach, one that has also undermined the learning efforts of more motivated and well prepared students.

indicator is tied to increased positive educational outcomes, given that 95% of graduate students do not bring their own funds with them (scholarships). This type of performance assessment is likely to incite adaptation practices we are not willing to embark on. Consider: each of us writes recommendation letters for students who, the same way we ourselves did during our student-days, see themselves studying at Lancaster, or in Chicago, or in Paris. Supporting them strongly, we are pushing them away from our “statistics”. Should we stop writing such letters?

Indicator 6: Graduation Rates of Full-Time Bachelor’s Degree-Seeking Students.

The open admission policy means that our department accepts students who have lower grade point averages, have been rejected by other departments, may work more slowly than is average, and struggle with course material and the demands of an academic environment and academic pursuits. These students will inevitably require more time to successfully complete their programs.

Indicator 7: Retention Rates of Full-Time Bachelor’s Degree-Seeking Students

Again, given our open admission policy, we accept students who have been rejected by other departments and who then transfer to these departments at some point during their program if they are able. This situation invalidates indicator 7 as a means of comparing the “success” of our department to other departments.

Indicator 10: Graduate employment success

What is odd about indicator 10 is that, while the vast majority of Concordia students will live and work in Québec, and while every second year the MELS conducts a survey on the success of university students in the job market (including representative sample of respondents of all Québec universities: *La Relance à l’Université*), “the Director of Institutional Planning has suggested that *Relance* data” is not an appropriate benchmark.

Missing Indicators: The Department of Economics has pointed out that there is currently no indicator for institutional efficiency in regard to administration costs (Department of Economics, Concordia University 2010). The inclusion of such an indicator is prudent. Administration costs are a readily-measurable statistic, and in addition to institutional and instructional expenditures per FTE, administrative costs are one of the five most commonly used performance measures for administrative efficiency in higher education in the United States and Europe.⁹ For example, are the costs of administrating Concordia in line with the costs of those universities in our benchmark group, including administrator salaries and bonus incentives?¹⁰ An indicator that measures such elements would better enable the determination of the ratio of administrative cost (one of several inputs) to educational outcomes. Such an indicator of efficiency will help ensure the overall excellence of the institution; therefore, one should be adapted and included in the Core Indicator Set.

⁹ Mandl, Ulrike, Adriaan Dierx, and Fabienne Ilzkovitz. *The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Public Spending*. Economic Papers 301, Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General of Economic and Financial Matters, 2008.

¹⁰ In the latest CAUT *Almanac of Post-Secondary Education in Canada (2010-2011)*, table 4.7 (p. 43) shows that while 80% of the University Presidents’ salary is known, it is not the case with Concordia’s.

Additionally, while *Measuring Excellence* presents most of its indicators in a comparative perspective, it is not the case for the indicator assessing the ratio of administrative staff to full-time faculty members. It is likely that the Office of Institutional Planning has comparative data on this that would be useful, in the interests of transparency, for Departments to see.

4. Of Governance

Let us turn to more general remarks about the governance of the university. The Core Indicator Set originated from a much longer list of indicators, documented in 2005 and compiled in *Measuring Excellence at Concordia*, issued in 2006. It is interesting to note the indicators that have been left aside since these documents were issued.

- Annual level of donation or endowments;
- class size;
- CEGEP grade point average (cote R) of incoming students;
- number of FTE students per full-time professor;
- full-time administrative and support staff per full-time professor;
- registration rate of students actually accepted;
- internal expenditures for student aid;
- service expenditures (library, computers, etc.) per FTE student.¹¹

These seem very useful, important and relevant indicators. It must be demonstrated that the indicators that have been included in the Core Indicator Set are superior to those that were not. Moreover, can the ones that have been selected be clearly linked to improved educational practice and increased student learning?

Turning to issues pertaining to what the administrators of Concordia should consider as a top priority, we think that Donors and Endowment should be considered. We should be trying to lift Concordia University to the level of other universities in terms of Donors and Endowment. Concordia University's performance in regard to internal funding of graduate students is amongst the lowest.¹² Several of our top B.A. students wish to pursue graduate studies in our Department, but are not so foolish as to refuse the money other universities offer them. They are excellent students, and other universities recognise this. Funding for graduate students is our first and foremost challenge. We need money to keep the excellent students who *want to stay or come here*. Ignoring this reality by trying to focus on recruiting students who bring funds with them will not work. These students are also recruited by other universities.

Similar remarks can be made on the issue of hiring. It is our view that the university administrators should improve our ratio of FTE students to Full-time faculty members. On this indicator Concordia ranks lower than all Québec universities and lower than most

¹¹ The document actually includes 43 indicators.

¹² See *Measuring Excellence at Concordia*, 2007, p. 34.

Canadian universities. Rereading the **first** *Measuring Excellence at Concordia* (issued in 2006), it is possible to observe that the top priority of Concordia Strategic Plan at the time was to increase the number of full time faculty members, so that our ratio of FTE/full time faculty members would catch up with other universities. What happened to this priority?

Secondly, *our situation has worsened* in terms of our ratio of FTE students / full-time professors. While the situation steadily improved between 2002 and 2006, it has worsened over the last years: we have gone back to the 2005 situation. In short, we are regressing. This is an urgent issue that must be addressed.

It seems to us that the administration is more concerned with trying to control hiring priorities, spinning and branding the university, and dividing and ruling within the university rather than to substantially improve our performance and help faculty in their teaching and research responsibilities. This will constrain the growth of departments, who are required to fit in the marketable signature areas. It is imperative that all departments, and in particular those in its core Faculty of Arts and Sciences, should be enhanced. For it is through these departments that the university is possible, devoted as it is to the uninterrupted transmission and creation of knowledge, something impossible to achieve while constrained by short-term politics. And it is through Departments that any university is but the franchise of a universal University, something Concordia cannot be alone and independently.

5. Conclusion

It is our view that university administrators should do whatever they can to facilitate our intellectual activity as professors, as it relates both to teaching and research. This responsibility is especially important in the current context of competition between universities. Concordia also needs to match what other universities are doing in terms of expenditures on services for student aid, class size and study conditions, ratio FTE students / full-time faculty, funding of graduate students, etc. Rather than meeting these conditions, the various documents produced by the office of institutional planning seem more concerned to curtail our professional activity. This is misguided, bureaucratic and, on top of this, infused with a managerial spirit alien to university.

Our Department is ready to collaborate with this administration on whatever initiatives towards improving Concordia's position among universities are decided upon by the university community after due consultation. However, having thoroughly discussed the *Academic Sector Core Indicator Set* document, we have reached the conclusion that, in its current shape, this document is more a problem than a solution. The Deans and the Provost shall meet in December to put together the positions adopted by the Academic units of our university. Having this in mind, we have decided to come up with this collective position. We hope to inspire a more thoughtful discussion on this important issue.¹³

November 15, 2010

¹³ See the Appendix for a list of *Action Items* implicit in this position.

APPENDIX *Action Items*

1. Taken as a whole, the proposals put forward in the document call for a global and manifold cost-evaluation:

- Our Department would like to have an accurate estimate of the money spent on such “planning”. The time and energy we ourselves have had to spend simply to assess this document is a weak indicator of the resources devoted to its deliverance: what is the cost of this endeavour?
- Second, the control system implied in these proposals is not financially assessed: has it been estimated? This needs to be done and made public.
- Finally, the increasing importance of administrative *function* at Concordia as compared to other universities should be addressed. The usual indicator for this is the ratio of administrative staff/full-time professors (as mentioned earlier, this makes sense in comparison with other universities).

2. Looked at in a historical perspective, the proposals offered to our appraisal seem to imply a shift in priorities. When and why was the top priority of improving our ratio of FTE students to full-time faculty abandoned? When and why was the top priority of bettering the funding of graduate students abandoned? The improvement of our ratio of FTE students to Full-time faculty members should become a top priority again. While the situation steadily improved between 2002 and 2006, it has worsened over the last years: we have gone back to the 2005 situation.

3. We are still waiting for a convincing justification of the relation between the measurable outcome of the indicators *and* the postulated positive result ensued. This is especially, but not exclusively, the case for indicators related to teaching. Has the value of “engaged learning practices” ever been evaluated, save on *marketing* ground based on clients expectations?

4. The Core Indicator Set originated from a list of 43 indicators (compiled in *Measuring Excellence at Concordia* (2006)). Can it be empirically demonstrated that the indicators that have been included in the Core Indicator Set are superior to those that were not? Which indicators can be clearly linked to improved research practice and increased student learning?

5. Finally, how is a Department’s peculiarity, in the overall fabric of our university, taken into consideration? That is, how is the Sociology and Anthropology Department’s peculiarity taken into consideration?