

**Teaching and Education Commentaries****Moneyball in the Academy: Whiffing on the Quality of Education?**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, corporate-like resource management tools have become commonplace on many university campuses with the goal of improving economic efficiency at the organizational level. Administrative initiatives that calculate faculty and department value with a limited number of metrics jeopardize the relational and hence the learning environment of higher education, particularly at the undergraduate level. Mutual faculty-student engagement remains a critical component of a quality education.

Moneyball, using data analytics to forecast player performance and hence player value to a team, is now mainstream in professional team sports, particularly baseball (Lewis 2003).<sup>1</sup> Moneyball or sabermetrics-like tools have also invaded higher education in the form of resource allocation and data management systems (e.g. responsibility-centered management). Over the last decade, higher education invested millions of dollars on new software, consultants, administrators, and staff to make these systems operational. The implied goals of these systems are to minimize cost for a given level of education, maximize revenue per credit hour, and/or maximize credit hours. Generally, data-based decision making should be encouraged and expected in any organization; an exception occurs when data systems drive the learning process. Leroy Dubeck (1997) warned the academy over two decades ago that students can be disadvantaged in an academic environment where an implicit goal is to minimize cost per student without maintaining quality education (Deering and Sá 2018).<sup>2</sup>

State-supported universities experienced two decades of nearly annual budget cuts that accelerated at the onset of the Great Recession. Only 10–20 percent of many state universities' budgets now are state tax dollars. New and existing revenue sources expanded to keep our multimillion dollar educational "cities" in operation. Average college tuition increased by nearly 400 percent over the last two decades, twice the rate of inflation (Vedder 2019).<sup>3</sup> Students (sometimes seen as "students as ATMs") and the federal government paid an increasing share of efforts to maintain and expand our academic enterprises. In this fiscally challenging academic environment, moneyball has emerged as a prominent resource management tool for many universities.

Academic units, including colleges and departments, along with individual faculty members now see their academic value or performance measured by a select group of money-centric metrics: number of majors, class size, and indirect cost recovery from research projects. These metrics are continuing to play a more dominant role. As a result, student-recruiting efforts resemble Division I recruiting for college athletes with universities, colleges, and departments competing for larger student enrollments each year

<sup>1</sup> Remember the movie *Moneyball* (2011), starring Brad Pitt? Refresh your memory with one or more of the movie's film clips at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

<sup>2</sup> Deering and Sá's recent evaluation complements and updates Dubeck's prophetic warning concerning responsibility-centered management.

<sup>3</sup> Beth Akers (Manhattan Institute), Preston Cooper (Forbes), Jason Delisle (National Affairs), and William Massy (American Enterprise Institute) are other examples of analysts who have written consistently over the last decade on the changing costs and benefits of higher education.

via amenities. Examples are luxury housing; entertaining classes; financial incentive “contracts” including diverse packages of scholarships, loans, grants, and work study; new senior administrative positions and recruitment programs to ensure we get “butts in the seats”; lower admission requirements; an ever increasing number of majors and classes to meet every student’s interests; and more student support staff (Ginsburg 2013).<sup>4</sup> Departments do their best to keep their student majors in departmental courses where the department earns the student credit hours, not allowing their students to “escape” to a relevant course in another department. Poaching another department’s majors goes on every day on our campuses.

Meanwhile, big-dollar researchers play the role of franchise academic players. Their successful federal and private grantsmanship is critical for overall team performance and reputation, particularly on the national and international stages. However, during private moments, research administrators will often confess that tuition dollars clearly subsidize research on nearly every state-supported campus.

Not surprisingly, many faculty dislike the sabermetric-like approach to productivity because the metrics reduce their professional value to the university to primarily two factors: (1) how many students they teach, and (2) how many grant dollars (with high levels of indirect cost recovery) they bring to the university. What about their research contributions? What about their value in the “locker room” as a team player? Incentivizing teaching larger and more classes or spending more hours in the laboratory thins the level of social capital in universities. This jeopardizes the quality of undergraduate education received by the majority of our students, particularly those who are at risk of not completing their degree (e.g. first-generation college students). So, has the on-field performance of our universities improved with these impersonal moneyball metrics? Are our young people now being better prepared for the personal, political, social, and economic realities of the twenty-first century?

Moneyball in the academy can whiff on improving the quality of higher education. I was once asked by a skeptical, high-level university administrator, in a disparagingly manner, “so what is a quality education anyway?” Well, a quality education happens when the passion and competence of the professor is combined with well-designed student-faculty and student-student interactions that prepare an engaged student for a productive and meaningful life. Unfortunately, moneyball in the academy can sacrifice the relational component of a quality education on the altar of the academy’s corporatization and its ever-present cost-minimizing focus.

If you think about it, we have all had one or more key mentors in our academic lives who influenced our learning and career trajectories. These life-changing mentors may be a kindergarten teacher, a middle school science teacher, a high school math teacher, a coach, or a dynamic university professor: a person who knew your name, challenged and encouraged you, believed in you, and taught you life skills with hands-on learning experiences. They left their mark on you.

Unfortunately, our continued drive for even greater student numbers and class size jeopardizes the role these positive and critical learning relationships play between students and instructors. We quickly depersonalize undergraduate instruction as we direct students into larger classes and more online instruction largely to minimize cost and enhance revenue (“students have a dollar sign on their foreheads”) but at a reduction, in most cases, in educational quality. Educational quality suffers with fewer, smaller face-to-face experiences where a student can apprentice in the subject matter under the instructor’s watchful guidance.

Moneyball in the academy degrades an academic environment by not engaging the whole person, so the educational experience fails to become part of the student’s identity. We are thinning rather than thickening the relational bonds in higher education when larger, “more efficient” classes substitute for small class experiences.

So how can the academy hit a home run by a return to emphasizing student development rather than student dollars in a moneyball environment? For starters, change the lineup. All PhDs on campus should be expected to have the responsibility of teaching one, regularly scheduled three-unit

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Ginsberg (2013) provides a disturbing insider’s analysis of the growing number of administrative and staff positions in U.S. universities.

undergraduate or graduate class each year. That's right, all classroom competent administrators below the Provost level should be actively engaged in teaching. The result: fewer unproductive meetings and programs, smaller classes because there are more teachers, and an improved, firsthand understanding of student learning issues by administrators who are not currently engaged in the classroom.

Second, adopt a small ball strategy where all student-friendly PhD-level instructors are encouraged (required?) to annually teach one 1-unit workshop or colloquium (15 to 20 students) on a disciplinary topic of their choice. All students would be encouraged, or possibly even required, to complete one of these workshops each academic year. The result: a thickening of the relational bond between students and faculty who know students' names.

Long term we should expect universities to (1) work on their farm system by formally training their future faculty members on the art and science of teaching, learning, and caring; and (2) provide the moneyball incentives in career development (promotion and tenure), which properly elevates and aligns student-faculty engagement with the research responsibilities of the organization.

All students matter; students matter most of all.

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