

Steering into the Analytic Turn: a Caution Regarding the Use of Quantitative Data to Measure Library Performance

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Metric Fixation

“If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it”

“Anything that can be measured can be improved”

“What gets measured, gets done”

(Muller 2018, 17)

Metric Fixation

- Replace judgment based on experience & talent w/ standardized performance measurements
- Transparency ensures accountability
- Motivation tied to pay-for-performance
- Persisting believing despite negative consequences

Recurring Flaws

- Measure what is most easily measured
- Measure simple when desired outcome is complex
- Measure inputs rather than outcomes
- Degrade info quality by standardization
- Gaming: creaming, lowering standards, omission/distortion of data, cheating

(Muller 2018, 23–25)

Obstacles to Transparency and Accountability

- Subjectivity of number usage
- Nature of organizations (that don't produce objective product)

(Gilsinan 2012)

Subjectivity of Number Usage

- Decision to count one thing rather than another
- What counts as a phenomenon
- What counts as one
- No understanding w/out context
- Objectification of evaluative criteria
- Reactive effect on counter & counted

Nature of Organizations

Public/Non-profit (no objective product)

- Decision making: legitimacy—cultural demands and beliefs
- Institutional environment: isomorphic pressure
 - Coercive
 - Normative
 - Mimetic

Muller's Checklist

1. What kind of info are you thinking of measuring?
2. How useful is the info?
3. How useful are more metrics?
4. What are the costs of not relying upon standardized measurement?
5. To what purposes will the measurement be put?

Muller's Checklist (cont'd)

6. What are the costs of acquiring the metrics?
7. Ask why people at the top want the performance metrics.
8. How and by whom are the performance measurements developed?
9. Remember that even the best measures are subject to corruption.

Muller's Checklist (cont'd)

10. “Remember that sometimes, recognizing the limits of the possible is the beginning of wisdom. Not all problems are soluble, and even fewer are soluble by metrics. It's not true that everything can be improved by measurement, or that everything that can be measured can be improved.”

(Muller 2018, 182–183)

My “Checklist”

- Play the legitimization game
- Identify decisions & judgment involved in measurement
- Guard against isomorphic & mimetic tendencies
- Trust professional experience/practical wisdom
- Socratic wisdom

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