



March 3, 2011

Dear colleagues,

In the nearly nine months since the draft core indicators document was circulated to academic departments for comment at the suggestion of the Senate Academic Planning and Priorities Committee, I have received a good deal of feedback on the types of indicators included in the document and on the use of indicators more generally. In December, I promised to respond to this feedback in a number of different ways, including issuing a revised document and establishing some principles for the use of indicators. Please consider this message, suggested by colleagues at recent open meetings, a down payment on that promise.

Let me begin by making perfectly clear that I abhor the kind of highly managerial indicator-driven accountability regime that we see in operation in the UK through the Research Assessment Exercise (the "RAE"), and that Simon Head has effectively documented in a recent *New York Review of Books* article that several colleagues have forwarded to me. It has never been my intention to move in the pernicious direction of what Head calls "the bureaucracy of command and control", and I have no wish whatsoever to see any such system implemented at Concordia. Let me emphasize as well that I harbor no secret desire to see Concordia "measure excellence only in terms of output," as was recently implied in the CUFA newsletter, and that I repudiate the conclusion drawn by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology that the indicators initiative is "an attempt to achieve managerial control of a normatively and ethically self-directed professional activity."

Given our considerable expenditure of public funds, accountability and transparency about our performance are by no means unimportant, and we face rising expectations from the public, from governments, and from the media in this regard. The recent report of the *Commission parlementaire de la culture et de l'éducation* makes the expectations of Quebec legislators quite clear in this regard (see the note below). Internally, however, my view has been and remains that indicators are primarily tools for gauging our standing and progress in activities that are essential to our function as a university. They work best if they provide meaningful input that we can act on to improve what we do, without burdening us with time-consuming data analysis and reporting, and without diminishing our institutional *raison d'être*. This is why deliberation on our indicators is so important, and why I am proposing to establish principles to govern the use of indicators in our collegial decision-making processes.

On this key matter of the use of indicators, my thinking has evolved in recent months based on discussions I have engaged in with you. In May, I wrote that the core indicators were "intended to be used in part to assist in the objective adjudication of competing requests for scarce resources." What I have come to realize is that the core indicator set, as a group of very high-level institutional metrics, is simply not appropriate for this purpose. While we continue to need sound data to support our operational recommendations and decisions—as scholars, surely we will all admit that this is very much preferable to decisions made on an ad hoc basis and unsupported by consistent evidence available to all of us—the core indicator set in itself is not what we need for this purpose.

As for the timing of the conversation, I continue to believe that we cannot delay indefinitely our decisions on core indicators, but I agree with the suggestion made by colleagues in Accountancy that it would be preferable to have our academic plan in place before we finalize our indicator sets. I have therefore decided to make development of the academic plan our first priority and to defer the conversation on core indicators until the fall of 2011. That said, we will need to continue the work of developing gauges of our progress on the objectives identified in the academic plan, though

we have considerably more leeway in identifying indicators that are specific to our purposes and that capture in more satisfactory ways the full array of our academic activities.

I continue to hope for a conversation on indicators that is free of misunderstanding and polemic, while remaining open, frank, and spirited. I understand the concerns of some of our colleagues about the implied directions of university administration signaled by the use of indicators, but I want to be certain that we don't let the passion of our convictions override our capacities to engage in constructive dialogue and dialectic. I believe we can refocus our discussion by agreeing in principle with the proposition, reiterated in numerous points of feedback I have received in recent months, that indicators have the potential to help us measure our progress over time and stay on course with respect to meeting their declared objectives. Although work clearly remains to be done on how best to use them in the Concordia context, I trust we can build from this shared understanding and work together to develop meaningful measures of our progress, and of our performance, that we believe are right for us.

Yours sincerely,



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N.B. The members of the *commission* recommend that CREPUQ “développe des indicateurs axés sur une meilleure appréciation de la performance des établissements d’enseignement de niveau universitaire et qu’elle transmette au ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport les résultats de ses travaux” (*Rapport sur les auditions des dirigeants des établissements d’enseignement de niveau universitaire*, p. 6). See the full text of the report online at <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/fr/document/43775.html>.

In addition, see *L’avenir des universités et leur contribution au développement du Québec*, distributed to participants in the “Rencontre des partenaires en éducation” held 6 December 2010 in Quebec City (pp. 64-65; see the full report online at http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/sections/publications/publications/Ens_Sup/rencontres_partenaies_avenir_universites.pdf); the press releases issued by CREPUQ and by MELS following the “Rencontre” also articulate the respective expectations with regard to accountability. See <http://www.crepuq.qc.ca/spip.php?article1281> and <http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/ministere/info/index.asp?page=communiqués&id=983>.