

OPINION

Performance-based metrics don't help education

By: Bruce Strang

The Manitoba government's Skills, Talent and Knowledge Strategy report says it will introduce outcomes-based metrics to control funding over the province's public universities.

Universities should work to ensure that students succeed, connect with jobs and enjoy a good quality of life. Universities should promote student mobility so each student can pursue their educational and life goals. Universities and government should co-operate to make the system better.

Faculty work with students daily and share these goals, and more. We want students not simply to learn specific skills and knowledge to enable them to earn a job today, but to develop lifelong learning skills that will enable them to adapt and compete for jobs in a rapidly changing job market.

The premier has said the province will establish outcomes-based funding based on a model introduced in Tennessee more than 40 years ago to compel universities to reach these goals. It seems reasonable; shouldn't we all aim to reach goals? Shouldn't the province assess how we meet those goals as it provides substantial funding from the provincial purse?

The devil is in the details. Empirical research shows overwhelmingly that performance-based funding doesn't work; in fact, it does the opposite, inflicting serious damage. It doesn't improve student learning, but it does make universities less accessible, less diverse and less affordable.

It doesn't work, because these failed metrics reward institutions for doing the wrong things.

Performance-based funding usually rewards universities for retaining and graduating students. That seems reasonable on the surface, but part of my job as a teacher is to determine that some students don't succeed. I do everything I can in my classroom to inspire students, to show I love the subject, to show students why it creates useful job skills and helps them to become more-informed citizens: to help them not only pass, but to excel.

Sometimes, though, a student doesn't do the work or doesn't have an aptitude to learn the skills. My job is to maintain academic standards.

In outcomes-based funding systems, governments punish universities for maintaining academic standards. So administrators game the system: lower the standards, fail fewer students, and secure more funding. Students won't learn the necessary skills, but it's money, not quality, that matters under outcomes-based funding.

It gets worse. Performance-based funding encourages universities to become more selective. They only take students with a high probability of graduating, a tactic known as "creaming." Money is diverted from needs-based scholarships for low-income students to merit-based scholarships that ensure only the very best get in and get funding.

Who loses? Students of colour, students from low-income backgrounds, all those traditionally disadvantaged and languishing in cycles of poverty and ill health. In short, those who would benefit most from a university education.

How will these perverse "incentives" help Manitoba students meet their dreams?

Performance-based models typically make arbitrary distinctions about students' employment six months or two years after graduation. But the data already show that Manitoba universities work: graduates, whether in the arts, or sciences, or in professional schools, make more money, are more likely to be employed and have better health outcomes than non-graduates.

And why look to Tennessee, anyway? Tennessee performs poorly on nearly every measure of educational success: it ranks near the bottom in participation in higher education; it's near the bottom of state funding for higher education; Tennesseans are poorly paid, suffer more inequality, higher levels of crime and poorer health outcomes than the vast majority of Americans.

Monitoring outcomes-based funding adds an enormous bureaucratic burden, as universities will divert resources away from the front lines of teaching and toward the back rooms of data processing, to supply more government bureaucrats who spend their time processing this data. There is a certain irony that a Progressive Conservative government that takes pride in reducing "red tape" is busy creating it.

If performance-based funding doesn't work, then why bother? If it is not really about improving student performance, what is it about? Given this government's appetite for downsizing the public sector, it is not a stretch to suggest it is to provide cover for Pallister to slash provincial funding for university students, using government rhetoric about efficiency to conceal the real agenda.

Manitobans need to make it clear that they will not stand for the premier's attempts to race states like Tennessee to the bottom by removing stable, effective funding from Manitoban's public university system.

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