



The Death of Merit:

How Metrics Replaced Judgment in Higher Education

Dr. Jonathan Price & Ashby Neterer



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Author: Dr. Jonathan Price & Ashby Neterer

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Contents

About the Danube Institute	iv
About the Authors.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Asking the Wrong Question	3
Conclusion: Imagining a Post-Metric University	6
Bibliography.....	9



About the Danube Institute

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About the Authors



Dr. Jonathan Price MA (Oxon) is the Director of the Centre for Theology, Law, and Culture in Oxford, where he is Matraszek Fellow of Pusey House and St Cross College. His writing has appeared in *First Things*, the *Hungarian Conservative*, and the *Journal of Regulatory Compliance*. His research interests comprise the origins of legal rights, the expansion of rights language in modern jurisprudence, and the effects of this expansion on higher education. His forthcoming book is on the theological origin of modern liberty in the writings of the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius.



Ashby Neterer is the Torrance Scholar of Theology at Oriel College, Oxford. He is completing a D.Phil. (submission: April 2026) under Mark Edwards on the spiritual and literary formation of the early Christian imagination, with a focus on classical typologies in the Greek drama *Christus Patiens*. He teaches Classical literature, Patristic Theology, and Ecclesiastical History, with a particular interest in helping students integrate historical study with questions of spirituality, community, and the moral life. His broader research engages post-secondary pedagogy and the cultural pressures shaping contemporary higher education, especially the formation of the whole person in an age of massification and metrics. He is preparing a new translation of *Christus Patiens* for Oxford University Press.

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Abstract

This essay argues that the crisis of meritocracy in late modern academia is not simply a matter of rising grades or changing metrics, but the consequence of a deeper structural transformation: the replacement of *paideia*—the formation of judgment and character—with a bureaucratic epistemology built on quantification, efficiency, and scale. Drawing on empirical research on grade inflation, departmental incentive structures, and the dynamics identified by the classic Sabot studies, the article shows how students and professors rationally adapt their behaviour to a metric-driven environment, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of inflation and diminished standards. Yet the central question is not whether grades have risen, but what grades—and academic standards more broadly—are meant to measure. Against the dominance of procedural metrics such as rankings, impact factors, and standardized outputs, the essay recovers an older vision of education grounded in virtue, discernment, and (self-)knowledge. It acknowledges the sociological difficulty of restoring *paideia* within massified and technologized institutions shaped by institutional isomorphism, yet argues that renewal remains possible through communities of learning oriented toward wisdom rather than production. Drawing on the Mercy tradition and its commitment to spirituality, community, and the dignity of the person, the essay proposes a post-metric university in which judgment, mentorship, and formation—not quantification—serve as the true standards of academic excellence.



Bridge of Sighs (Hertford bridge), Oxford. (Shutterstock).

Introduction

A nauseating number of studies demonstrate that average university grades have increased in the last half century. Indeed, the alarm bells about grade inflation have been ringing since at least 1894, when a report from Harvard University stated that “Grades A and B are sometimes given too readily—Grade A for work of no very high merit, and Grade B for work not far above mediocrity.”¹ Grades have continued to inflate ever since. One report in *Teachers College Record* shows that the ‘A’ grade (the highest) now constitutes the most common grade in American undergraduate institutions.² Studies on UK institutions of higher learning find an analogous trend with ‘honours’ being awarded in increasingly higher proportions even when ‘controlling for changes in university efficiency in improving degree outcome and factors associated with degree performance’.³ A twenty-year longitudinal study on Turkish universities found a Grade Point Average change from 2.83 to 3.34.⁴

The classic Sabot–Wakeman studies of the 1980s and early 1990s demonstrated that grading policies create a collective-action problem.⁵ STEM subjects have more objective measures to tally grades: problem sets, labs, proofs, standardized exams. Humanities, by contrast, usually assess writing, discussion, and creative projects, which retain an element of subjectivity. Students respond to grade incentives by avoiding courses and departments perceived as hard graders. Because most universities use student credit hours, enrollment numbers, and numbers of subject majors to allocate funds, departments are incentivized to inflate grades at the margin to retain enrollments. The STEM fields, however,

must maintain certain measurable standards to retain accreditation and employer trust. This dichotomy exacerbates animosity between departments, among both faculty and students, with the humanities students seen as less capable than their STEM peers.

The collective-action problem of grade inflation results from the incentive structure called ‘the prisoner’s dilemma’. Each actor has an individual incentive to choose a strategy that harms the group (inflate grades, choose higher-graded courses). Everyone—both faculty and students—knows this fact, yet the system rewards defection even if everyone would be better off cooperating. Moreover, no one can trust the others enough to choose the cooperative strategy first. Thus, students migrate toward departments with higher average grades, lower perceived risk, and greater predictability in evaluation. This ‘grade-seeking enrollment behaviour’ incentivizes departments to raise grades to retain students and, therefore, funding. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: behaviours change in response to incentives, and those altered behaviours then accelerate the very grade inflation that made them rational in the first place.

Today, grades appear to reflect institutions’ reputations rather than educational outcomes, with higher tier organisations—and their humanities departments in particular—offering the highest grades, and lower tier institutions giving lower average grades.⁶ A modern emphasis on empirical metrics might exacerbate the issue, as some studies find links between teaching evaluation and grade inflation, including one study specific to Hungary.⁷ To improve educational

¹ Report of the Committee on Raising the Standard,” Harvard University, 1894.

² Rojstaczer, Stuart, and Christopher Healy. “Where A Is Ordinary: The Evolution of American College and University Grading, 1940–2009.” *Teachers College Record* 114, no. 7 (2012).

³ Bachan, Ray. “Grade Inflation in UK Higher Education.” *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 8 (2017): 1580–1600.

⁴ Ciftci, Serkan K. “Grade Inflation Effects of Capacity Expansion in Higher Education.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11 (2024).

⁵ Sabot, Richard, and John Wakeman-Linn. “Grade Inflation and Course Choice.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (1991): 159–70.

⁶ Belasco, Andrew S., Kelly O. Rosinger, and James C. Hearn. “The Test-Optional Movement at America’s Selective Liberal Arts Colleges: A Boon for Equity or Something Else?” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 37, no. 2 (2015): 206–23.

⁷ Eiszler, Charles F. “College Students’ Evaluations of Teaching and Grade Inflation.” *Research in Higher Education* 43, no. 4 (2002): 483–501. Stroebe, Wolfgang. “Student Evaluations of Teaching Encourage Poor Teaching and Contribute to Grade Inflation: A Theoretical and Empirical Review.” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 42, no. 4 (2020): 276–94. Berezvai, Zoltán. “Can professors buy better evaluation with lenient grading? Evidence from Hungary.” *Studies in Higher Education* (2021).

outcomes, many institutions have introduced increasing numbers of remedial courses, but these courses, with their Procrustean pedagogy, harm more academically prepared students by reducing their overall educational attainment during their degrees.⁸

The focus on empirical outcomes has also led many institutions to rectify historical grievances by lowering admission

standards to increase minority admissions. Ironically, these institutions have not even achieved the goal of increased diversity. Both simulation studies and institutional studies show mixed results in achieving diversity outcomes, and they also demonstrate lower graduation rates for universities which achieved them.⁹ Changing metrics have also affected how publications are assessed, moving the goalposts from academic achievement to the echoing of received dogmas.¹⁰

⁸ Boatman, Angela, and Bridget Terry Long. “Does Remediation Work for All Students? How the Effects of Postsecondary Remedial and Developmental Courses Vary by Level of Academic Preparation.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 40, no. 1 (2018): 29–58. Martorell, Paco, and Isaac McFarlin. “Help or Hindrance? The Effects of College Remediation on Academic and Labor Market Outcomes.” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 93, no. 2 (2011): 436–54. Sanabria, T., et al. “Failing at Remediation? College Remedial Coursetaking and Its Association with Degree Completion and Wages.” *Socius* 6 (2020). Scott-Clayton, Judith, and Olga Rodriguez. “Development, Discouragement, or Diversion? New Evidence on the Effects of College Remediation.” *Education Finance and Policy* 10, no. 4 (2015): 422–49.

⁹ “Both simulation studies (e.g., Carnevale and Rose 2003; Espenshade and Radford 2009) and institutional studies (Flores and Horn 2015; Horn 2012; Kidder and Gándara 2015; Marin and Lee 2003; Perna et al. 2010) have cast doubt on the effectiveness of percent plans in increasing ethnic diversity.”

¹⁰ Csomós, György. “A critical review of the proposed reforms of the academic performance indicators applied in the assessment of researchers’ performance in Hungary.” (Preprint, 2021).

Asking the Wrong Question

The central question, however, is not whether grades have empirically increased or academia changed in some ways for the worse—both claims are certainly true. Instead, we must ask ‘What is education’s telos, its purpose, and what do grades aim to measure?’ Do grades aim to measure one’s intelligence, merit or worth? Or do they aim at signalling one’s capacity for post-university employment, marriage, and capacity for sticking to a task? One study has suggested that grades aim chiefly to signal one’s employability and compellingly demonstrates that they have not failed this metric.¹¹ If grades, despite their metrical changes, have continued to signal what they ought to, while the metrics themselves have shifted drastically, then we must begin to question the need for these metrics at all. We must begin to envision what the world of academia would look like if trends continue in the current fashion, away from standardized testing and toward pass-fail grading. Within such a world, how can we continue to educate pupils and form good people and good citizens?

This deeper question is not simply one of academic design but of moral imagination. Late modern academia mirrors the society that sustains it: quantitative, massified, and governed by the values of efficiency, scale, and visibility. These values have produced wonders, to be sure. Penicillin, telemetry, satellite navigation could not exist without empirical metrics and the disciplined quantification that underwrites modern science. But, as quantitative logics colonize education, the university forgets its ancient vocation as a place for the cultivation of wisdom, friendship, and self-knowledge. A humane pedagogy, whether in a monastery or a modern campus, begins by asking what kind of person education is meant to form. It is this formative dimension—the shaping of the soul rather than the production of data—that our culture, and our universities with it, have neglected.

Standards without Metrics?

Modern higher education prides itself on its devotion to standards, yet few pause to ask what those standards measure—or whether measurement itself is the right mode of judgment. We have come to equate excellence with quantifiability: the journal impact factor, the citation index, the “top” ranking, the h-index, the REF score. Even our language betrays this obsession. A good scholar is “produc-

tive,” not wise; their work has “impact,” not depth. We trust the scale more than the soul. But the curious fact is that many of the instruments by which we now weigh intellectual worth are very recent inventions. Peer review, for instance, only became a formalized mechanism in the mid-twentieth century, and at its inception was a modest technical safeguard in STEM subjects—checking proofs, verifying sums, catching plagiarism—not a universal arbiter of value. It was a quantifiable check for quantifiable subjects. Somehow, within two academic lifetimes, it became a surrogate for judgment itself.

The question, then, is whether standards can remain high without the scaffolding of these numerical and procedural metrics. Can a university cultivate excellence without counting? What would it mean to maintain intellectual quality if we could not appeal to prestige of venue or statistical validation of “impact”? One might begin by noting that for most of human intellectual history, evaluation was qualitative, not quantitative. Plato’s Academy, Aquinas’s Paris, Erasmus’s Leuven—none of these knew the journal article, the referee’s report, or the departmental KPI. Yet their standards were not low. They were, if anything, crushingly high: rigorous, communal, and moral as much as intellectual. The measure of the scholar was not where he published, but whether his thought showed integrity, coherence, and self-knowledge. The criterion was excellence of mind, not compliance with method.

If we could imagine a higher education freed from empiricist merit—the relentless need to weigh and rank—it might look more like an apprenticeship than a bureaucracy. Students and scholars alike would be judged by the clarity of their thought and engagement with subject matter, not merely by their numerical outputs and ideological adherence. This latter metric is often the unnamed measure of many peer reviews. The general tendency of reviews notwithstanding, the finest peer reviews frequently attend to such qualities as clarity of thought and even truth. But reviewers rarely have the time or institutional support to exercise that level of discernment, or when they dare, encounter resistance from peers. If peer review took truth seriously, its emphasis could shift from quantity to quality, from accumulation to understanding. Care of the soul might even return to the center of scholarly pursuits. The question would not be “What have you published?” but “What have you taught

¹¹ Pattison, Evangeleen, Eric Grodsky, and Chandra Muller. “Is the Sky Falling? Grade Inflation and the Signaling Power of Grades.” *Educational Researcher* 42, no. 5 (2013): 259–65.

us?” or even “Who have you become?” Self-knowledge might become, paradoxically, the highest metric: a qualitative measure that resists quantification precisely because it concerns the formation of judgment, not the production of data.

Yet any call to recover *paideia* must face its sociological challenge. Late modern universities operate within vast bureaucratic systems—funding bodies, ranking agencies, global markets—that reward uniformity and scale. Sociologists call this *institutional isomorphism*: the tendency of institutions to mirror the industrial and technological structures of their age. To reintroduce virtue and personal judgment into such an environment is no easy task. It demands not nostalgia but courage: the creation of small, intentional communities of learning that resist the flattening logic of massification. The work of renewal, in this sense, must begin locally—in the classroom, the tutorial, the community of trust that forms between teacher and student. To be sure, the danger in abolishing traditional metrics is not chaos but mediocrity. Without external benchmarks, self-deception flourishes. We must still have standards—but perhaps they should be philosophical rather than statistical. The real crisis of modern scholarship is not that we have no standards, but that we have mistaken measurement for meaning. Weighing is easier than judging; numbers spare us from the risk of (mis-)discernment. Yet intellectual life, at its best, is precisely the exercise of judgment—the art of discriminating the true from the false, the profound from the merely novel. If universities could recover that art, they might again deserve the name of *studium generale*: a place where the pursuit of knowledge is not an industry, but a discipline of the soul.

From Virtue to Verification

In Aristotle’s world, excellence was a hexis—a cultivated disposition of the soul to act and think rightly. Intellectual virtue, like moral virtue, was a matter of character, not compliance. The good thinker was not simply clever or prolific; he was someone whose reasoning reflected a well-formed intellect and a rightly ordered desire for truth.

Sophia and *phronēsis*—the wisdom of first principles and the prudence of applied reasoning—were the twin poles of intellectual life. Both required discernment, patience, and a willingness to be corrected by reality.

Modern academia has largely replaced this moral-intellectual formation with systems of verification. Instead of *virtue epistemology*, we practise *bureaucratic epistemology*: knowledge as a product certified by procedure. The peer-review process, the ranking system, the algorithmic citation count—all purport to ensure quality by “removing subjectivity.” In reality, they outsource judgment to mechanisms that cannot, by nature, judge. The ideal scholar becomes not the wise person, but the compliant producer—someone who performs the ritual of objectivity to achieve legitimacy. This substitution has profound consequences. Aristotle’s *spoudaios*, the mature and serious man of judgment, finds his modern counterpart in the “principal investigator.” The former was trained to see what is good; the latter is trained to produce what is fundable. Under such a regime, inquiry becomes self-referential: we measure ourselves by what our system rewards, and our system rewards what it can measure. The very qualities that made thought noble—imagination, insight, discernment—are treated as inefficiencies.

Virtue epistemology reminds us that knowing is not merely a matter of possessing justified beliefs, but of being the kind of person who knows well. Intellectual integrity, humility, courage, and open-mindedness are all virtues of inquiry that no metric can capture. They are qualitative habits formed over time, in conversation, in error, in solitude. Yet they are precisely what allow a community of scholars to sustain genuine standards without reliance on numerical proxies, which might be called academic friendship. If we were to rebuild higher education on the foundation of such virtues (and such friendships), its evaluative structure would have to change. Instead of anonymous referees enforcing procedural neutrality, we might cultivate visible mentors exercising discernment; instead of ranking departments, we might assess the seriousness of their pursuit; instead of counting citations, we might attend to influence as it is lived—in the classroom, the seminar, the moral life of the institution.

*The great hall of Oxford University, Oxford.
(Shutterstock).*



Conclusion: Imagining a Post-Metric University

If the current university is an engine of verification, a post-metric university would be a school of discernment. Its task would not be to produce measurable outputs but to cultivate judgment—both in the teacher and in the taught. The problem, of course, is that judgment cannot be automated, and discernment cannot be delegated. They require time, relationship, and a community of trust: precisely the things our managerial institutions tend to erode and deconstruct.

A post-metric university would therefore have to recover the ancient idea of *paideia*: education as the formation of the whole person. Assessment would focus less on publication and more on presence—the capacity to think with others, to question one’s own assumptions, to integrate knowledge across disciplines (and, of course, to master those disciplines first, preferably by committing much to memory). Excellence would not mean exceeding a norm, but exemplifying a virtue. A brilliant student might be one who asks a clarifying question that re-orientates a seminar, not one who produces the most footnoted pages of “research”. A good scholar might be one whose writing changes how others see the world, even if it never appears in a top-ranked journal. Something clearly has gone wrong with top-ranked journals if they do not appreciate contributions which change how others see the world, whilst maintaining a preferred ideology and accepting only those papers which support it, even on questionable evidence.

In the post-metric university, mentorship would replace metrics as the chief form of quality control. Instead of anonymous peer review, scholars would be publicly accountable to the judgment of their peers and students, as in the older republic of letters. Letters of recommendation—long disparaged as subjective—would regain their dignity as acts of discernment, articulating in prose what numbers cannot: the texture of a mind, the quality of a character.

Departments would be evaluated not by productivity statistics but by their culture of inquiry. Do they foster genuine conversation? Do they produce minds that can reason clearly and live wisely? A philosophy department that turns out a few careful, original thinkers might be deemed stronger than one that generates a hundred technically perfect but lifeless papers. In this sense, the highest mark of academic excellence would be fecundity of spirit rather than volume of output.

Such a university would, paradoxically, be both more humane and more demanding. To judge without metrics requires genuine intellectual courage. Numbers give the illusion of fairness; judgment exposes us to error and to the charge of partiality. But perhaps that vulnerability is the very condition of true standards. To evaluate another’s work—without hiding behind a rubric—is an act of conscience. It calls for honesty, humility, and taste: virtues that cannot be audited but can certainly be learned. Virtues that take time. A slower-paced university would also result.

In a post-metric academy, knowledge itself would again become personal. The question would not be “Is it publishable?” but “Is it true, and do you understand why?” That subtle shift—from performance to possession—might be enough to rescue the university from the despair of bureaucracy and restore to it something like a living soul. This is the vision that theology and religious-studies departments, in particular, can champion: a liberal arts education where breadth meets depth, where the great traditions of human religious experience are explored and where students engage their spiritual, communal, and vocational callings. In doing so, they serve not only knowledge but also mercy, community, and the enduring good of the human person.

If modern academia has made measurement its god, the recovery of self-knowledge would be its conversion. For self-knowledge, unlike citation, cannot be faked. It is the standard that evades the spreadsheet, the form of knowledge that begins and ends in humility. “Know thyself,” inscribed at Delphi, was not an invitation to introspection for its own sake but a warning against presumption. Nor was it, as in Heidegger’s interpretation, a declaration of human weakness: ‘know that you are human, not gods.’

To know oneself is to know one’s limits—to see the boundaries of one’s ignorance, the biases of one’s temperament, and the fragility of one’s understanding. Such awareness is the condition of both moral integrity and intellectual honesty. A scholar who knows himself is not one who has ceased to err, but one who recognizes the terms of his error. He understands the provisional character of his insight. He learns not only what to think, but how to think again. In this sense, self-knowledge is not a sentimental alternative to merit but its purification. It anchors standards in conscience rather than in metrics. It asks whether one’s work is true, not whether it is successful; whether it is faithful to the subject, not merely fashionable in the field.

Measured by such a criterion, the life of the mind regains its dignity. The goal is not solely to be productive, but to be *formed*: to order the intellect toward truth, and the will toward understanding. The paradox is that this kind of formation tends to produce work of far higher quality than the anxious race for outputs ever can. When the scholar becomes the measure of his own rigor—when he can see clearly what he does and does not know—the work itself acquires coherence. Perhaps, then, the problem is not that our standards are too high, but that they are too mechanical. We have mistaken objectivity for honesty, neutrality for virtue, and quantification for truth. The ancient ideal—of knowledge as a moral good, of intellect as a virtue of the soul—offers a better way. If we could recover that vision, we might discover that standards need no metrics to endure. For the truly educated person is the standard: his clarity of thought, his refinement of judgment, his willingness to be corrected. A university built on such foundations would not be measurable in the usual sense, but it would be unmistakable in spirit. It would be a place where learning refines character, where truth is pursued for its own sake, and where the highest metric is the simplest: the formation of minds capable of knowing themselves, and thus capable of knowing the world.

In a university that measures by production, the recovery of self-knowledge constitutes resistance. It reminds us that the goal of education is not efficiency but transformation. The classical virtue of *sōphrosynē*—self-knowledge and self-mastery—finds its Christian counterpart in humility, the beginning of wisdom. To know oneself is to recognize dependence on truth, on others, and, ultimately, on God. A truly humane education therefore teaches not only how to reason but how to live in communion. Some institutions still hold space for this older vision. In an age obsessed with data and prestige, they invite students to attend to relationships, community, and the deeper meanings of life. They remind us that education is not a contest of metrics but a formation of the soul. A virtue-based pedagogy does not reject knowledge; it reorders it, binding intellectual inquiry to moral and spiritual growth. Such an education is demanding precisely because it calls us to become what we know—to live truthfully, to discern wisely, and to measure success by wisdom rather than acclaim. In that calling, the university can still be what it was meant to be: a school of humanity in the light of truth.



Magdalen College, Oxford University, Oxford. (Shutterstock).

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