

# Management's Control Panel

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## Management's Dashboard: William Massy's "Virtual U"

“Who among us hasn’t longed to be in charge for just one day? Oh, the things we would change! Virtual U gives you that chance — the chance to be a university president and run the show.” — William Massy, *Virtual U* “Strategy Guide”

William Massy’s *Virtual U* is a “computer simulation of university management in game form” (Sawyer 28). Designed by a former Stanford vice president with a \$1 million grant from the Sloan Foundation, the game models the range of powers, attitudes, and commitments of university administration.

In short, it provides a window into one of the more widespread versions of administrative consciousness and worldview — the ideal administrator in the world of “resource allocation theory,” “cybernetic leadership,” and “revenue center management.” The use of such simulations, models, and games is widespread in bureaucratic, professional, service, and manufacturing training environments.

The “serious gaming” trend has seen the emergence of games designed to promote environmental awareness, armed forces recruitment, white supremacy, religious tolerance, better eating habits, approaches to living with chronic diseases, and so on: wherever there is real-world rhetorical and practical purpose, institutions and activist organizations have commissioned games to propagandize, train, inform and recruit. Both the U.S.

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armed forces and Hezbollah recruit through downloadable PC-based games. Even public budgeting has resulted in at least two gaming simulations designed to influence voters by shaping attitudes toward spending, in New York City and the Massachusetts state legislature.

Massy's game is a budgeting simulation. It draws upon two prominent strains of thought in contemporary university management, the "cybernetic systems" model of university leadership developed by Robert Birnbaum and resource allocation theory, specifically the principles of Revenue Center Management (RCM), of which Massy is a leading proponent.

It is also signally influenced by the Hong Kong design team selected by Massy and the Sloan Foundation, Hong Kong's Trevor Chan. Massy and the Sloan Foundation specifically selected Chan for his prior success with the PC game *Capitalism* ("The Ultimate Strategy Game of Money, Power, and Wealth," reviewed by PC Gamer as "good enough to make a convert out of Karl Marx himself"). Massy and Sloane felt Chan's game represented a "good match" with their "similar" vision of management strategy, and the code underlying Chan's *Capitalism 2* serves as the base for many of the modules in Massy's game.

There is only one viewpoint possible in Massy's *Virtual U*. Players can choose to be the president of several different kinds of institutions, but presidency is the only possible relationship to the campus.

One cannot choose to play Massy's budget game as a student, faculty member, taxpayer, employer, parent, alumnus, or nonacademic staff. The reasons for this design decision are abundantly clear and profoundly ideological. To the audience Massy addresses, only administrators are "decision makers." Only the presidency offers a viewpoint from which to "view the whole institution." As a result, every other standpoint in the game has reality only insofar as it represents a "challenge" to presidential leadership.

Faculty, students, staff, and all other constituents are treated in the game as "inputs" to the managerial perspective. The players have the power to "adjust the mix" of tenure-track and nontenurable faculty, as part of their overall powers to "allocate resources as they see fit."

The ease with which nontenurable faculty can be dismissed is accurately modeled. Storing hundreds of faculty "performance profiles," the simulation permits university presidents to troll through the records — including photographs — of faculty in all ranks in every department. As in real life, presidents may terminate the employment of the nontenurable with a keystroke — advancing a great variety of their presidential policy goals with relative ease.

What is actually being taught here? Players have to fire adjunct faculty while looking at their photographs. One thing that's being taught is the exercise of power in the face of sentiment: players quickly learn that you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.

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By contrast, the tenured faculty are represented as a much more difficult “leadership challenge.” They cannot be easily dismissed — so many leadership priorities could be swiftly reached if only all of the funds tied up in tenurable faculty were released! But the tenured have to be offered expensive retirement packages to free money for other “strategic purposes.” And as in so many other ways, the faculty tend to act irrationally in response to retirement incentives.

While the tenured faculty may represent a headache for the player-president, they do not represent any real opposition in the world of the game. There are no unions. In fact, as bored game players frequently reported, the game is almost impossible for the player-president to “lose,” because no one else has any meaningful power.

This is particularly significant because it successfully models the virtually unchallengeable legal-political-financial-cultural supremacy underwriting contemporary management domination (in the U.S. model). The only question is: How much victory can one administrator stomach over ten years?

Admittedly, Massy’s ambition is to train a leadership cadre in the habits of benevolence. Underlying the game’s approach to the relationship of administrators to faculty is Robert Birnbaum’s “cybernetic systems” model, which synthesizes much of the new organization and management theory of the 1980s into a moderately more faculty-friendly form.

Birnbaum amounts to a “left wing” of the university management discourse. The extent to which this is a “left” wing is highly relative. On the one hand, Birnbaum genuinely feels that education required a different kind of organizational management than business corporations.

Within limits, he defends the sometimes anarchic and unpredictable nature of “loosely coupled” academic organizations, through which administrative subunits retain conflicting missions and identities at least partially independent of organizational mission. Birnbaum correctly notes that the corporate wing of the leadership discourse decries his moderately more faculty-friendly posture as “as a slick way to describe waste, inefficiency, or indecisive leadership and as a convenient rationale for the crawling pace of organizational change.”

Recalling the current popular trope for faculty managers of “herding cats,” he sums up his own view of “effective leadership” by quoting Clark Kerr’s ambition to keep the institution’s “lawlessness within reasonable bounds.”

The book with which Birnbaum launched his retirement was an effort to debunk three decades of “management fads” in higher education, including TQM (discussed in Chapter Two), and Massy’s own RCM.

On the other hand, Birnbaum, together with many in his discipline, is the author of an approving portrait of management’s strategic deployment of faculty committees and faculty institutions as the “garbage cans” of governance. Drawing on a trope circulated by Cohen and March and enthusiastically adopted by the lead-

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ership discourse a decade earlier, Birnbaum notes the utility to “leadership” of establishing “permanent structural garbage cans such as the academic senate.”

He observes that task forces, committees and other receptacles of faculty garbage are “highly visible, they confer status on those participating, and they are instrumentally unimportant to the institution.” Their real function is to “act like buffers or ‘energy sinks’ that absorb problems, solutions, and participants like a sponge and prevent them from sloshing around and disturbing arenas in which people wish to act.”

As in Massy’s model, for Birnbaum the term “people” ultimately means administrative “decisionmakers.” “People” should keep the faculty garbage “away from decision arenas.” Serving as co-editor of the ASHE reader on organization and governance in higher education throughout the 1990s, Birnbaum’s views on the “cybernetics of academic organization” were widely influential, at least among those who were committed to models of university governance as leadership by strong management qua benevolent indulgence of one’s “followers.”

Essentially the cybernetic model is about managing feedback loops in an awareness of systematic interconnectedness. Viewing management as a “social exchange,” Birnbaum emphasizes the extent to which management enters a preexisting environment “in which there are many ‘givens’ that restrict to a great extent what can be done,” and that while it is possible for a president to transform a “Neil Simon comedy... into Shakespeare,” it requires incrementalism and the willingness to provide others with at least the sense of agency, so that, as Birnbaum cynically notes, “in future years, they can reminisce about how they transformed themselves.”

He concludes that leaders have to listen to the organizational environment — or more accurately, monitor it — and cannot simply command: “leaders are as dependent on followers as followers are on leaders,” and “presidents should encourage dissensus.”

This promotion of dissent is not to encourage organizational democracy. It’s to provide more accurate information to “decision arenas” and reduce “leader error” in the larger service of more effectively inducing changes in the behavior and value of organization members.

At its core, the cybernetic management model isn’t about enabling speech per se on the part of non-leadership constituencies, it’s about harvesting information. While faculty or student speech can be a source of information, speech isn’t the only or even the primary mode through which presidential “data are collected.” (Hence the “assessment movement” sweeping administrations across the country.)

By contrast, Birnbaum often models the administrator as a speaker, often a very creative one, the author, director, or impresario of organizational saga and myth, with the power to “interpret organizational meaning.” Rather than “in-

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ducing the alienation that may arise from giving orders,” presidents should “try to get people to pay attention to matters of interest to the administrator.”

This isn’t about faculty democracy; it’s about the usefulness to administrations wishing to create “organizational change” of a sense of democracy. Where propaganda and the creation of organizational myth or mission fails, leadership can always induce “organizational learning” with funding. Over time, units that fulfill institutional mission receive funding increases; units that don’t, decrease. “[T]he subunit ‘learns’ through trial and error in a process akin to natural selection.”

Both Massy and the Sloane Foundation are explicit in their intention to promote a managerial model of systems theory in *Virtual U*. As in Birnbaum’s vision, the arc of the game is fundamentally incremental. Player-presidents get results slowly over time by tinkering with the environment in which other constituencies act, rewarding certain behaviors and punishing others, primarily with funding: “many of the decisions don’t produce explicit reactions, but instead initiate trends and behaviors that evolve toward a desired result by the manager.”

If Birnbaum might be called an “organizational Darwinist,” Massy is a managerial Malthus. In his essay, “Lessons From Health Care,” Massy praises the system of managed care for insurers’ capacity to intervene in the doctor-patient relationship. Because an insurer’s “denial of payment triggers organizational learning,” hospitals, clinics, and practices “will be less likely to perform the procedure again in similar circumstances.”

The same principle, of feeding those who collaborate with management’s vision of “institutional mission,” and starving out the opposition, governs every dimension of Massy’s management training game. The game’s organizing concept is the representation over a ten-year period of the consequences of presidential adjustments in annual budgeting.

As Massy’s collaborator at the Sloan Foundation has it, “money” is the “yarn” that knits this vision together: “Every decision translates, directly or indirectly, into revenue or expense. In considering how to convey the university as a system, we concluded that there was no better way than the annual budgeting process. The way the player, or the president, finally sees the whole institution synoptically is through financial flows.” Primarily employed in education schools (Columbia, NYU, U Kansas, etc.) as a teaching aid in graduate classes in educational leadership, the game’s scenarios are generally introduced with a version of the driving fiscal imperative: “Your task... is to maintain steady revenue, at minimum, and preferably grow revenue and spend it in ways that advance the institution.”

The game is meant to bring forth a particular administrative subjectivity. One dimension of the administrative personality it successfully evokes is information overload. The managerial desktop is full of data. But each

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datum represents a competing claim on resources. These resources can be translated into livelihoods and potential good deeds, or as Massy has it, “the diversity of values that abounds within any higher education institution.” The overall effect is of fatigue, including moral fatigue: “Each group argues for its view in terms of high principles, often reinforced by the fact that success also furthers self-interest.”

The reduction of reality to revenue flows becomes a solution for the chief feelings of the administrative standpoint, information overload and something that might be called “value fatigue.” As one USC administrator quipped to David Kirp, “if you don’t have a vision, RCM becomes your vision.” The game teaches a very specific set of feelings and values to potential future administrators. It teaches the utility of maintaining a large disposable faculty both for meeting financial targets and for quick restructuring to meet new presidential priorities. It teaches what I call a “management theory of agency,” in which managerial decisions appear to drive history.

It even teaches what can be called a “management theory of value,” in which the labor of “decision makers” (a la George W. Bush, “I’m the decider!”), and not the strenuous efforts of a vast workforce, appears to be responsible for the accumulation of private and public good in the university labor process. As one community college president using the game puts it to his students at Columbia University: “Senior administrators are the engines that push an institution forward — and like a big train, the larger the institution the more engines must be strung together to drive the institution forward.” (Hankin)

In the down-is-up world of education administration, it becomes possible for a group NYU students playing Massy’s game to conclude that the game’s “Improve Teaching” scenario would be best served by a massive acceleration in the hiring of adjunct lecturers.

Ultimately, the game teaches these future administrators the pedagogy that Paul Lauter sees is already immanent in the institutions that it models:

Universities teach by what they are. When a great university with an \$11 billion endowment helps impoverish an already indigent city by using outsourcing to push down dining hall wages, it teaches who counts, and who decides in today’s urban world. When a great university stiffes its retirees at \$7450 a year while setting up its CEO for a \$42,000 a month pension, it teaches who is important and who is not. When the American city in which a great university carries out its medical research has a higher infant mortality rate than Costa Rica, lessons about priorities are being delivered. When 60–

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70% of the teaching hours at a great university — and at many not at all great universities — are carried out by a transient faculty, many of them paid below the poverty line and provided with no benefits, offices, or job security, a redefinition of teaching as a “service industry” is being implemented.

There are really two distinct worlds of faculty experience being modeled in *Virtual U*. There is the world of the tenured faculty who must be more ponderously influenced, involving a fairly strenuous effort by administrators.

Relatively speaking, it takes a lot of administrator sweat and frustration to surmount the obstacles represented by the tenured — who ultimately must be provided their retirement incentives to get out of the way, and require the constant creation of new forums/garbage receptacles for their opinions. Subject to the Malthusian financial discipline and organizational mythmaking of the leadership cadre, as extensively theorized by Birnbaum, Massy and others, the world of the tenure stream is certainly no picnic for most faculty occupying it.

The world that the game models for the “other” faculty, our non-tenurable majority, is rather different. These folks can be dismissed quickly and cleanly. Despite representing the majority of the faculty, they require a minimal fraction of management time and attention. The extensive use of them permits game players to advance most dimensions of the institutional mission with greater speed.

And in this dimension of the game-play, the premium on management’s capacity to swiftly “adjust the mix” of labor to its own changing sense of “mission,” is where we find Massy and the Sloane Foundation’s vision of the future.

At a University of Pennsylvania meeting full of administrators, game engineers and potential users of the game, Sloane project director Jesse Ausubel described his own background in modeling systems used for real-time command and control of complex energy-industry operations (such as an oil refinery). Somewhat wistfully, he observed that the current release of *Virtual U* is for “teaching and learning, not real-time operational control.”

However, he continued: “It would not surprise if some of the people in this meeting help advance the state of the art in university simulation, so that in 10 years, we have models that serve for control, for decisive management. For the present, and it is a huge step forward, we have a game.”

In the future, the Sloane Foundation promises us, all labor will act informationally, in the interests of real-time control by a yet more decisive management. There’ll be no more noodling around with even the trappings of faculty democracy.

