

at the undergraduate level has been closed. It might be that we should be looking closely at the elements of the policy structures that led to these reforms as we search for the means to make a 'true' liberal education available to all regardless of gender, ethnicity, language and social class.

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Birnbaum, Robert. (2000). *Management fads in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Pages: 320. Price: \$34.00 (USD).

Reviewed by Ken Snowdon, Queen's University.

Robert Birnbaum brings four decades of experience to bear on this examination of *Management Fads in Higher Education*. Birnbaum is currently professor of higher education at the University of Maryland, College Park. He was previously vice-chancellor of the City University of New York, and chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.

The book is an interesting read with Birnbaum providing observations and commentary with wit and a little bit of cynicism about the value of ‘management fads.’ Generally, it is an excellent review of the major budgeting/planning/quality practices of the past forty years or so, and their impact on higher education. The author argues that these practices fit a set of criteria that lead to the label ‘fads’ and it is clear that he does not believe that such ‘fads’ belong in higher education nor does he believe they have been very successful in the business arena. From the outset, Birnbaum asserts that universities are quite different than businesses, but the argument needs to be better developed and articulated. Birnbaum makes no distinction between the management of academic units and non-academic units where, arguably, management tools from the corporate world may have more applicability and success. Nevertheless, the book provides some thoughtful observations about higher education and the evolution of management in academe. Moreover, Birnbaum recognizes the underlying reasons for the prolonged and continuing interest in ‘management fads’ and, faced with that reality, he offers a set of suggestions on how institutions can ‘manage’ management fads (Chapter 9). As an added bonus, Birnbaum provides an extensive set of references on the topic of management in higher education

Reviewers offering positive comments about the book,<sup>1</sup> tend to like Birnbaum’s basic thesis that ‘management fads’ are not applicable to higher education and they regard *Management Fads in Higher Education* as one example of the negative impacts of the drift towards the ‘corporatization’ of higher education. The author confesses to past sins — having attempted to introduce management fads in his previous higher education roles — and that confession may endear him to those who believe that business practices are anathema to academe and/or simply look on administrators in higher education as necessary evils. Having made the confession however, Birnbaum expresses some support for the administrators who have to deal with the reality of ‘management fads; “Although now an apostate, I empathize with my colleagues who worship at the altar of false gods. I was once myself a votary” (p. xv). The religious overtones are not accidental. Part of the argument about the differences between business and academe, is based on certain

beliefs in values, ethos, and traditions in higher education that defy rational, logical scientific management. Birnbaum touches on those differences but this is a particular area that deserves more extensive treatment. A reviewer offering a negative review<sup>2</sup> suggests that Birnbaum's work is based more on opinion than research and takes exception to Birnbaum's declaration that, in effect, 'he has seen the light' for it biases comments from that point onwards. Depending on where one sits in academe, will heavily influence the reader's perception of this book. Birnbaum recognizes the value and necessity of good management. Many of his suggestions for managing 'management fads' would strengthen management practices in academe and heighten awareness of the importance of treating managers as professionals with appropriate opportunities for professional development and input into major decisions like adopting a 'management fad.'

Birnbaum recognizes that the focus on delivering product/services that customers desire, at the lowest cost — the drive for efficiency — is the key business measure that critics of higher education emphasize when demanding that higher education be more like business. Yet, as he notes:

the American higher education system is considered to be the best in the world, even by business leaders...enjoys a favorable balance of trade, is a successful growth industry, has a strong record of fiscal stewardship, offers its customers a bargain, and provides high returns on investment... (p xiii)

This is a book that attempts to blunt the wholesale adoption of business practices in higher education by casting significant doubt on the validity and value of 'management fad' techniques. Birnbaum does an admirable job of casting doubt, but he could do the higher education community a favour by also highlighting the fact that higher education has an interest in and does practice 'good management.' The higher education sector has a pretty good story to tell and needs story-tellers of Birnbaum's stature to restore some balance in the age old question 'why can't universities be more like business?'

In my view two quotes from the book, drive to the heart of the matter:

The essential elements of most fads are commonsensical to most experienced managers in business, education or any

other setting: ‘Decentralization of authority, producing quality products, providing responsive customer service, formulating strategy in a way that takes into account distinctive internal capabilities, rewarding performance fairly, and running a socially responsible enterprise. Who could argue with such advice!’ (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 5), (p. 241)

Higher education does not need more management techniques. It needs more good managers. (p. 239)

## Chapter Review

### Chapter 1—Seeking the Grail The Never-Ending Quest.

Universities are always in crisis and thus, by definition, looking for solutions. At the same time Birnbaum argues that the development of scientific management at the turn of the 20th century was the beginning of a series of attempts to bring rational management practices to the higher education setting. He notes that in 1910 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching commissioned Morris Cooke, a mechanical engineer and businessman, to examine efficiencies in American universities. His findings, published in a report entitled, *Academic and Industrial Efficiency*, marked the beginning of considerable and what one might characterize as continuing concern about the management of higher education.

Cooke was shocked by the absence of uniformity among the institutions and he suggested standards should be set by experts who were familiar with the best way of doing things. Decisions by committees, department autonomy, and lack of functional management came under particular attack. (p. 16)

Cooke’s report led to the first widespread attempt to improve efficiency by measuring everything (the application of scientific management to higher education) and ultimately led to a long period of regularizing procedures, setting standards, and more systematic recordkeeping. This management era, Birnbaum characterizes as *Ur-management: Doing It the Old-Fashioned Way* and he uses it as the benchmark against future changes in higher education management. The phrase “Ur-management” is meant to refer to the “original, proto-typical, or foundational

management system,” a product of both the first attempt at scientific management and major expansionary forces after World War II. Birnbaum’s characterization of Ur-management focused on (1) line-item budgeting and (2) ‘planning’ with the latter almost wholly emphasizing the planning associated with enrolment expansion.

As higher education moved through the 1950s, Ur-management was the existing state of play; most institutions engaged in line-item budgeting with varying degrees of sophistication, and some attempts to plan beyond a single year based on an evaluation of the past performance and a little bit of future scanning. There were many factors that heavily influenced the move to more elaborate budgeting and planning systems in the 50s and early 60s. The ‘baby boom’ was rapidly approaching higher education age, Sputnik fuelled greater interest in advanced education, and the emergence of the ‘computer’ for processing purposes combined to create an environment that was ripe for change.

Managing information, or more specifically Management Information Systems (MIS), led to increased centralization of authority and increased uniformity in language and definition; sometimes educational practices had to be altered because they could not be accommodated by the computer (p. 25). Ultimately the advent of MIS led to sophisticated, complex comprehensive computer models for resource projections (i.e., CAMPUS Comprehensive Analytic Methods for Planning in University/College Systems) “...too complicated to be operated, maintained or understood” (p. 27). However the collection and parsing of data:

made it possible for the first time to consider an institution as a collection of interchangeable parts. In theory, one could deconstruct the university, analyze and optimize each of its components, and then put it back together... The development of MIS and computer modeling paved the way for the management fads that are the subject of this book. (p. 27)

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide a brief history of several ‘management fads.’ Under the Chapter heading, **We’re from the Government and We’re Here to Help, (Chapter 2)** the author reviews the origins and fate of Planning Programming Budgeting System (PPBS), Management

by Objectives (MBO) and Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB). With a little historical review of each ‘fad’ Birnbaum makes it clear that government played a major role in the development and adoption of those particular ‘fads.’ **Chapter 3, Survival in a Changing Environment** focuses on Strategic Planning and, Benchmarking, including the use of performance indicators. The author notes the role of higher education associations such as the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) and the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) as advocates and champions of certain management ‘fads’ and the impact that has on the adoption of such ‘fads’ in higher education. At the same time he acknowledges the importance of George Keller’s (1983), *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in Higher Education*, as a key reference that heavily influenced the adoption of the strategic planning ‘fad’ in higher education.

**Chapter 4, Higher Education as a Commodity**, is focused on the 1990s and specifically Total Quality Management/Continual Quality Improvement (TQM/CQI) and Business Process Re-engineering (BPR). Birnbaum sees this era as one where business practices are the solution to gaining efficiencies and higher education is looked at, by some, as just another business with a production function. If you can improve the production function using business principles, and if at the same time you are improving quality, the case for the adoption of the management ‘fad’ is a ‘no-brainer.’ Needless to say, he decries the use of measurement techniques that do not bother to validate the importance and relevance of what is supposed to be measured.

**Chapter 5 The Life Cycle of Academic Management Fads.** Birnbaum develops his own theory about the life cycle of management fads described as:

- Creation - sparked by a crisis of some sort (economic, loss of students, etc.)
- Narrative evolution — claims of success elsewhere, consultants, books, articles, mass media. Opponents are characterized in a negative light “resistant to change, wasteful, self-interested.” (p. 130)

- Time Lag — as implementation proceeds, stories of success continue BUT no evaluation at this point. Media is losing interest (implementation does not capture media attention). Those most likely to introduce it will have begun the process or explored it — maximum saturation.
- Narrative Devolution — as implementation results begin to filter out the optimistic claims are replaced with more pessimistic stories. Dashed expectations lead to a swing towards very negative evaluations.
- Resolution of Dissonance — Birnbaum notes that there is significant overlap between the preceding phase and the final phase. As the ‘fad’ fades, it is important to somehow reconcile the time and effort despite, generally, poor results. He notes the most common rationalizations: “poor quality of leadership, intransigence of followers, improper implementation, and lack of resources.” (p.132) He also notes that by developing such rationalizations organizations set themselves up for the next ‘fad’...if only... it would have been a success.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on the movement of the ‘fad’ between organizational sectors and basically argues that the academic sector is a late comer to the ‘fad’ and usually enters Stage 1 as other sectors are well engaged in implementation. The time lag continues throughout — ‘fads’ that are still being implemented in higher education will have been finished in other sectors.

**Organizations and Fads, Chapter 6**, looks at the question *Why do academic institutions adopt fads?* Birnbaum harkens back to Chapter 1 and emphasizes the impact of crisis on the willingness of institutions to adopt some of the ‘fads’. However he quickly moves to the impact of organizational networks and the reality that once one institution adopts a particular approach or policy or direction, it does not take long for other institutions (and institutional leaders) to pick up on the idea. Government suasion and/or legislation sometimes explains the ‘why’, but the impact of business contacts, higher education associations, and consultants all play a part in convincing institutions to move in a specific direction. There are a host of other reasons why institutions may either

voluntarily or not, adopt management 'fads' and Birnbaum spends some time dealing with the powerful influence of 'imitation', and the need for 'institutional legitimacy' as possible contributors to the rationale for adopting such 'fads.'

He then moves to explaining some basic differences in structure and management between business and universities. The business structure is characterized (drawing on Mintzberg) as "the machine form of organization which is bureaucratized, formalized, hierarchical..." while universities are described as "professional organizations — loosely coupled systems in which managers with limited authority provide support for relatively autonomous specialists performing complex tasks within relatively stable structures" (p. 150). That very difference in structure is often cited as a weakness of academe and thus provides the rationale for individuals and organizations outside the academy to suggest that business practices should be adopted. Unfortunately Birnbaum does not take the opportunity to launch an argument about WHY the current academic organization is not, in fact, a weakness.

**Chapter 7** explores some of the reasons (posited by Birnbaum) why academic managers adopt such 'fads.' He notes that in some cases the 'fad' is adopted by the institution and the academic manager is simply faced with the prospect of implementing. But, Birnbaum also argues that there are 'Role Biases' that also speak to the willingness of some academic managers to embrace such 'fads.' Expectations of leadership may result in academic managers grabbing a 'fad' to address the current higher education crisis. At the same time, Birnbaum argues that a 'fad' may provide a tool that helps the academic manager feel more "in control."

The final two chapters of the book — fall under a section entitled "Working with Academic Management Fads." He begins **Chapter 8, The Legacy of Fads**, by arguing that all fads have been failures and the implementation always leaves some residual impacts. In the case of negative impacts he devotes some time to the 'Tyranny of Numbers' and asserts that "Measurement mania can be particularly disruptive to educational organizations" (p. 196). By attempting to quantify activities that do not lend themselves easily to quantification, decisions may be made that may not be in the best interest of the organization. He cites, among



others, the case of South Carolina where in recent times a benchmarking process based on 37 legislated indicators of quality led to irrational results comparable to “the ancient practice of spilling the entrails of goats on the ground and reading messages from the patterns” (Trombley, 1998, p. 15 in Birnbaum, p. 198) Birnbaum suggests that such a practice is “tough on the goat, but in the hands of skilled shaman probably no less accurate or useful than many current practices based on today’s technologies” (p. 200).

Quoting from a study on *Managing Traditionality and Strategic Change in Non-Profit Organizations*, Birnbaum suggests that the emphasis on, and apparent clamour for, change, may “inhibit reliable performance as it diminishes an organization’s sense of its competencies, history and continuity” (p. 200). He goes on to argue that the adoption of ‘fads’ actually reduces managerial competence by potentially limiting managerial discretion. He cites another study that argues “Fads are a symptom of a more fundamental problem — the loss of respect for management and for professional managers”. (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996, p. x, in Birnbaum p. 201)

Finally, from a negative perspective, he speaks to: (a) the centralizing of bureaucracy that inevitably accompanies the implementation of the newest ‘fad’ and; (b) the weakening of a commitment to education by adopting jargon from the business community. The former tends to be facilitated by technology and the apparent need to establish an office to co-ordinate the implementation of the ‘fad.’ The latter is mentioned because, to the extent that business jargon replaces university jargon, it may have a powerful impact on how people view the organization and values it holds dear.

Having outlined some of the negative residual effects, the author then turns to the positive and suggests that the ‘fad’ movement has helped recognize the importance of data and thus led to the collection of some useful information. He also argues that having an external stimulus like a ‘fad,’ may lead to a useful review of organizational values and help organizations explore various solutions to existing problems. The process of examining and review can be very useful. Finally the author suggests that the adoption of fads can be rewarding to managers

themselves and the very introduction of a 'fad' will likely lead to altering existing institutional structures — seen as a positive development. For example, TQM/CQI and the introduction of cross-functional teams broke down traditional organizational silos and provided the opportunity for more interaction among individuals. Such an environment is conducive to generating new ideas and new understandings that benefit the institution.

The **final chapter, Managing Fads**, provides some messages to those who will continue to be subject to calls for more efficiency and the adoption of the latest 'fad.' Speaking initially to the question "Why can't a university be more like a business?" the author uses his own personal example about dogs and cats.

They all have fur, four legs and tails. The physiology and biochemistry of both species are quite similar and they share much of their genetic structure. But they behave differently. The dogs come when they are called, seek attention and affection and warn when strangers approach. The cats come when they feel like it and hide under beds when strangers lurk. Why can't a cat be more like a dog? (p. 215)

Birnbaum attempts to explain the differences, by asserting that "Universities and businesses are different kinds of organizations" (p. 215). This is another area that deserves more extensive treatment. Simple assertions and statements about differences in faith, ethos and traditions sound more like dogma than rational argument.

While the author is clear about the effectiveness of 'management fads,' he recognizes that there are a host of reasons why such fads will simply not go away. Having reviewed several of the fads over the past forty years, he notes that there are always more on the horizon (p. 229) and thus it is important to 'manage' the inevitable. His suggestions are based on several headings — that in many ways are self-explanatory:

- Consider with Skeptical Interest
- Invest in Knowledge
- Avoid the Bandwagon
- Anticipate Resistance
- Do Not Overpromise
- Culturally Customize

- Adopt Experimentally
- Do Not Relax Commitment or Support
- Build in Assessment

There is no need to dwell on each of the suggestions but it is clear that Birnbaum sees some value in the exercise as long as managers use a good dose of common sense in how they go about evaluating, implementing and assessing the feasibility, practicality and potential effectiveness of adopting a ‘management fad.’ Moreover, the author — by virtue of the list of suggestions — hints at the importance of good managers to the success of these endeavors and the value of good managers and management to the achievement of higher education goals. As he notes near the end of the book: “Higher education does not need more management techniques. It needs more good managers” (p. 239).

### Final Comments

The reference section is extensive and, by itself, is a terrific resource for individuals interested in higher education management.

Birnbaum’s book is a recommended read. The author could devote more time and attention to the many positive developments in higher education management. And, there is a real need for him (and other higher education practitioners) to deal with differences in business and higher education in a more concrete fashion. But, he accomplishes his goal of casting some doubt on the management fad solutions to complex problems, and, along the way, does so in a manner that is both informative and entertaining.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Ryan, Is this Any Way to Run a Railroad? *The NEA Higher Education Journal*, [www.nea.org/he/heta01/s01p135.pdf](http://www.nea.org/he/heta01/s01p135.pdf).

Bob Barnetson, [www.ed.asu.edu/edrev/reviews/rev112.htm](http://www.ed.asu.edu/edrev/reviews/rev112.htm)

T. Faulkner, [www.caut.ca/english/bulletin/2001\\_may/bookshelf/risefall.asp](http://www.caut.ca/english/bulletin/2001_may/bookshelf/risefall.asp)

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Hughey, Book based on opinion, not fact, <http://www.edtech.tph.wku.edu/~counsel/sa/birnbaum.htm>

