

# Michael Barber's "Deliverology" in the UK and in the CSU: A Cautionary Tale

## BOOKS REVIEWED

Michael Barber. *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to Transform Britain's Public Services*. (Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2008; Originally published: London: Politico's, 2007.)

John Seddon. *Systems Thinking in the Public Sector: The Failure of the Reform Regime and a Manifesto for a Better Way*. (Triarchy Press Ltd, 2008)

*By Susan Meisenhelder*  
*English, Professor Emeritus, San Bernardino*

Last November, CSU Chancellor Charles Reed announced to the CSU Trustees that he, the campus Presidents, and other administrators had met the previous month with a new face on the California scene, Michael Barber. Reed was delighted to point out that Barber is a "sir," having been knighted in his homeland.

Their goal, he said, was to develop a plan that would improve graduation rates and cut achievement gaps between students from under-represented groups and other students in the CSU. A more detailed plan was rolled out at the January CSU Trustees meeting and now administrators are working on it at the campus level throughout the university system.

Since this new plan, dubbed "The CSU Graduation Initiative," bears the clear stamp of Michael Barber and his approach to "improving" public services in the United Kingdom during Tony Blair's second term as Prime Minister, understanding the UK experience is an important first step in assessing the CSU plan.

In fact, the UK experience is a cautionary tale for us, showing how deliverology's approach to "reform" produces very negative consequences for the quality of public services.

### **Who is Michael Barber and what is "Deliverology"?**

Michael Barber has worked in various levels of education in the United Kingdom but is certainly most well-known for his role as head of the "Delivery Unit," a small arm of government established under Blair for the sole purpose of improving public services.

Telling his version of the UK history of "deliverology" in his book *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to Transform Britain's Public Services*, Barber spells out the elements he sees as central to it.

Deliverology, he writes, "is a systematic process through which system leaders can drive progress and deliver results."

By necessity, the process of change is driven from the very top since public servants or “producers” (as he calls them) are motivated solely by self-interest and are incapable of change.

Deliverology also requires a sharp focus on a very limited set of priorities in order to succeed. Top-level managers drive this change by developing an even narrower set of numerical targets, by holding those under them accountable for progress towards those targets, and by providing incentives to shape behaviors that will help achieve the targets.

The whole process is extraordinarily data-driven, grounded in trajectories that show the steps towards the goal, and tracked through numerous meetings and reports.

On the surface, deliverology seems a very familiar approach to management and, for many perhaps, even a commonsense way to make change in large institutions.

The reality of deliverology—what it actually produced in the UK, however—is another story.

### **John Seddon: The Failure of Deliverology**

In his book, *Systems Thinking in the Public Sector: The Failure of the Reform Regime and a Manifesto for a Better Way*, John Seddon, a British occupational psychologist and management consultant, argues that “deliverology” actually made public services in the UK worse from a user’s point of view. In fact, even after three years of deliverology and improved government numbers, public satisfaction with services was not improving.

In a nutshell, he argues, “deliverology” failed to deliver in ways that really matter, and this was its greatest weakness. Seddon discusses numerous problems with Barber’s “deliverology,” problems that doom it as an effective management strategy for improving public services.

One major problem is its top-down approach to driving change, what Seddon calls its “Mickey Mouse command and control.” That basic mindset produces several counter-productive consequences for truly improving public services. It fails to take advantage of the knowledge people who actually deliver the service have; and it ultimately destroys the sense of public duty that most effectively inspires those people to provide quality service.

While Seddon points to several other fundamental shortcomings of deliverology as a method, he gives special attention to problems that result from Barber’s almost obsessive emphasis on very narrow, rigid targets as the sole measure of improvement in public services. In fact, he argues this use of targets in public service, buttressed by strong punishments and rewards for meeting them, can actually make services worse because the purpose is bent to reaching the chosen targets rather than to improving the service for the public.

This is often what happened, he argues, as a result of deliverology in the United Kingdom.

### **Examples of “gaming” the system to meet targets, not mission**

One example will suffice to illustrate this weakness in deliverology’s method. To bring about improvement in the national healthcare system, one of the government’s chosen priorities, the Delivery Unit chose decreasing waiting times in hospitals as one narrow numerical target. The Delivery Unit

collected mounds of data on waiting times; managers doled out rewards and punishments; and...not surprisingly, reported waiting times decreased.

But as Seddon points out, the “numbers” improved and the targets were met, not because patients were getting better care, but because people working in hospitals figured out what mattered—how to give their superiors the decreased waiting times they were demanding by any means they could.

In this case, patients were being left waiting in ambulances rather than in the emergency room itself. Since the official government clock did not start ticking on “waiting time” until the patient was actually in the ER, hospitals made their targets even though, surely, those patients waiting in the ambulances did not feel health service had been improved.

As this example suggests, deliverology as a method invites various kinds of cheating and gimmicks — and produces perverse consequences.

When the quality of service is defined by a few very narrow numerical markers and when everyone is either punished or rewarded based on whether the goals are met in terms of those markers, the larger public value of that service gets lost and the quality of the service suffers.

As numerous UK examples in Seddon’s book suggest, targets can, in fact, be met; and service still decline.

This is exactly what happened with attempts to “improve” policing in the UK. The target chosen was number of arrests; and the predictable happened when everyone in policing learned that that was what mattered. The number of arrests went up through various gimmicks such as booking for minor offenses and multiple bookings for one event; but again, the public opinion did not improve.

Why? In Seddon’s analysis, everyone involved in police work had forgotten that the **purpose** of police work wasn’t to arrest people but rather to prevent crime and disorder. The “reform” had achieved its targets but taken the public value out of policing. Police workers at every level forgot the larger purpose of their service.

### **The CSU may be heading down a similar path**

These examples provide a warning for us. The same principles of deliverology have shaped the CSU’s graduation initiative. We must be concerned that our own top-down initiative with its very narrow targets may produce the same problems that deliverology created in the UK.

As that experience suggests, we also must be alert to “gimmicks” that may help campuses achieve very narrow targets but not improve the service the CSU is supposed to provide—a quality education for our students.

And finally, we must ensure that attempts to improve graduation rates do not undermine the purpose and public value of the CSU—to provide broad access to a quality education at an affordable price. (For more in depth discussion of problems with proposals to increase graduation rates, see the CFA White Paper beginning on page [25](#).)

We certainly haven't "improved" higher education if we make our campus graduation targets but fail to deliver on our purpose—to produce a larger, more diverse, and better educated set of graduates for our state.

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*This article will appear in the spring 2010 issue of California Faculty magazine.*

### **OTHER RECOMMENDED READING**

#### **Diane Ravitch. The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education (Basic Books, 2010)**

<http://www.dianeravitch.com>

An expert on K-12 curriculum and standards who served as Assistant Secretary of Education under the first President Bush, Ravitch favored corporate-style accountability, measurement and targets—until she saw what it produced. She explains in this book what led her to change her mind, arguing this so-called reform movement has replaced education with data. In instance after instance, she discusses how careful examination of the facts reveals that many celebrated successes of the accountability movement in K-12 are not educational successes at all. She found cheating and gimmicks at work in much of No Child Left Behind and other conservative accountability-driven "reforms."

#### **The Quality Imperative: Match Ambitious Goals for College Attainment with an Ambitious Vision for Learning. A Statement from the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2010.**

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#### **Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn. A Report from the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2010.**

The statement and report from AACU makes an urgent appeal to university leaders not to abandon the broad liberal arts foundation of a quality college education in the rush to cut costs due to funding pressure. AACU argues this is not only a concern for educators, but also for the very business community that leaders claim they are trying to serve by implementing "efficiency" measures. Both business and our democracy need people who can think, read and write well.

#### **The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism. Naomi Klein. (Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt & Co., 2008)**

Klein tells an unsettling story of how the implementation of the most extreme of free-market policies depended on taking advantage of financial crises, natural disasters and military coups —what she terms "shocks"—to nations and communities. One example is Hurricane Katrina, which opened New Orleans to privatization of its public schools. In the process, she shows how some big money interests imposed neo-conservative policies that diverted public resources away from public services for the majority.