The Functions of Higher Education Organizations: Examining and Understanding Organizational Responses to Environmental Influences in American Society

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December 20, 2012

Why are there so many types of organization? How do we characterize the structure of American higher education? In this new century, many colleges and universities in the United States often pursue multiple and contradictory goals (Warner, 1967; Perrow, 1970; Hall, 1972, 1978; Dubin, 1976). Most academic organizations have different ecological environments and are linked to both national and international corporate systems (Scott, 1998, 129). Occasionally, higher education institutions must deal with an increasingly inhospitable environment in which colleges and universities must treat goals as hypothesis and operate much like a pigeon hole (Cameron, 1998, 65). Moreover, leaders in higher education must make rational decisions in response to environmental influences and structural changes. Most environments in educational organizations are commonly segmented, genetically determined (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 39), and are often tied by social and political forces that can be compared to magnetism in the physical world (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 74). Normally, there are seven environmental conditions: 1) technological, 2) legal, 3) political, 4) economic, 5) demographic, 6) ecological, and 7) cultural. These dimensions are molded by how well leaders think of themselves, how well they take care of their responsibilities to others, and how well they achieve what they want in the long run (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 38). Despite the fact that most leaders and managers would identify American higher education system as the envy of the world (Cameron, 1998, 67), many colleges and universities still experience vast challenges when assessing institutional effectiveness and promoting institutional change to meet current environmental conditions.

So the question arises: how can colleges and universities respond to environmental influence? And in what ways have societal demands on higher education cause more complex structural responses and functions of different higher educational organizations? Since the turn of the new century, many academic organizations are forced to change their environments to meet

population growth, to address economy downturn, and to overcome the intensity of competition within college admissions. More specifically, higher education organizations are now often required to adjust with the variability of their environment (Whetten & Cameron, 1985, 44). Normally, there are three ways organization and institution responds to environmental changes: 1) strategic adaptation, 2) isomorphism, and 3) inter-organization adaptation. Most changes that inhabit colleges and universities are initiated by the U.S. federal government to aid in the solution of certain societal problems. Although most colleges and universities are becoming far more active to formulate new strategies for both the government and the business sector, many still undergo numerous challenges when adapting to structural changes and executing new ideas within their own ecological environments (Hannan & Freemann, 1977, 930).

Generally speaking, adaptation allows for more managerial discretion. Organizational adaptation is defined as the "modifications and alterations in the organization or its components in order to adjust to changes in the external environments" (Cameron, 1984, 123). It is a process in which an organization must follow a life-cycle pattern of development (Cameron, 1984, 127). Any changes done to an environment are often considered to be formal acts of adaptiveness, or as Cameron (1984) once coined, "a symbolic action" (p. 129). Normally, there are two types of "niche" that lead to organizational adaptation: 1) change in the size of the niche, and 2) change in the shape of the niche (Cameron, 1984, 125). It is common for organizational environments to be shaped by: 1) institutional (symbolic, cultural factors affecting organizations) and 2) technical (materialist, resource-based features) (Scott, 1998, 131). Institutional environment emphasizes how organizations are conforming to the norms of formal rationality and rules that govern market behavior while technical environment, on the other hand, are stocks of resources and sources of information that shape institutional behavior (Scott, 1998, 138). Both institutional and

technical environments shape organizational forms and influence organizational behavior in many ways (Scott, 1998, 139). They require institutions to adapt to the evolutionary development of characteristics that are compatible with the environment (Cameron, 1984, 126). In other words, most colleges and universities are never keen to be immutable environments; rather, they must act and influence their internal and external environments according to ways in which leaders and presidents formulate their strategies on higher education.

Aside from organizational adaptation, the missions and functions of higher education organizations also must deal with institutional isomorphism. Isomorphism occurs when colleges and universities follow a certain model and mimic another institution in order to achieve greater success. Generally, there are two types of isomorphism: 1) competitive and 2) institutional. Isomorphism is defined as "the process that forces one unit to resemble other units in the same set of environmental conditions" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 152). Most higher education organizations compete for resources, customers, political power, and institutional legitimacy. They respond to external pressures by quickly mimicking their peers and only change after a long period of resistance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 154). The three most common mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change are: 1) coercive, 2) mimetic, and 3) normative (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 152). These elements are often used to help colleges and universities increase their chances of survival and assure "confidence and good faith" in performance (Youn & Price, 2009, 210). Moreover, these mechanisms often reward organizations for being similar to other organizations in their field. In other words, organizational fields generate the process of homogenization. It has the power and capability to make organization very similar and force homogeneity where organization mimics other organization. As a result, isomorphic change in colleges and universities can produce similarity in institutional structure and behavior.

In addition to isomorphism, higher education leaders are also under intense competition from innovators and reformers to promote organizational effectiveness (Cameron, 1984, 122). Organizational effectiveness is often described as "static views of inputs, processes, or outcomes" (Mahoney, 1967; Seashore & Yuchtman, 1967; Negandhi & Reimann, 1973; Hall, 1978) in which an institution embraces innovation, reform, and adaptation. Weick (1977) highlights eight types of descriptive models of effective organizations: 1) garrulous, 2) clumsy, 3) superstitious, 4) hypocritical, 5) monstrous, 6) octopoid, 7) wandering, and 8) grouchy (p. 194). Although there are many kinds of descriptive models of effective organizations, the process of measuring organizational effectiveness have often become a conundrum for many colleges and universities (Cameron, 1998, 69). The two most common challenges when gauging organizational effectiveness are: 1) the type of criteria indicating effectiveness and 2) the sources of the criteria (Cameron, 1978, 605). Often, most managers have trouble measuring institutional effectiveness because top administrators or university presidents have narrow and biased perceptions of higher education (Pfiffner & Sherwood, 1960; Steers, 1975; Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Historically, numerous past studies have claimed that the relationship between various effectiveness dimensions is often difficult to measure (Seashore, Indik, & Georgopolous, 1960; Mahoney & Weitzel, 1969; Kirchoff, 1975), especially when an institution lacks persistence. Normally, there are several conflicting opinions about who should determine effectiveness criteria and who should provide data for their measurement. Surprisingly, the four most common problems of assessing institutional effectiveness criteria are: 1) aspect of the organization being considered 2) the universality or specificity of criteria, 3) the normative or descriptive character of criteria, and 4) the static quality of criteria (Cameron, 1978, 605). Generally speaking, the effectiveness of an institution differs among separate constituencies because each constituency

perpetuates criteria in its own self-interest (Cameron, 1978, 607). Measuring effectiveness

criteria requires organizations to become both knowledgeable and adept at instituting

organization. Usually, there are nine dimensions of organizational effectiveness : a) *Moral* – 1)

educational satisfaction, 2) faculty satisfaction, and 3) organizational health; b) *Academic* – 4)

student academic development, 5) faculty development, and 6) student personal development; c)

External – 7) student career development, 8) system openness to community, and 9) ability to

acquire resources (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 70). It is important to emphasize that no institution

can operate on all nine dimensions; however, each higher education organizations can possibly

measure all nine dimensions by asking knowledgeable administrators and faculty members to

describe their overall functions of institutional performance (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 71).

In essence, the functions of higher education vary on a continuum from being organized

anarchies to being relatively homogeneous. Colleges and universities are curious institutional

anachronism (Coleman, 1973, 368) of which leaders and presidents must overcome several

conflicts and constraints. These constraints can encompass many factors, such as, the current

information they receive, the internal political constraints, as well as the constraints generated by

their own history. Higher education institutions should continue to adapt to hostile environments

by encouraging structural inertia. Structural inertia can inhibit organizational adaptability during

times of great ecological change (Youn & Price, 2009, 209). Moreover, academic organizations

should recruit leaders and managers who fully embrace and understand how to promote

institutional effectiveness, such as, shared responsibility, leadership capacity, and even reflective

learning (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009, 101). Hiring leaders who can effectively identify

and tackle societal problems is essential to better promote large transformation efforts in higher

education, regardless of the condition of the external environment (Cameron & Smart, 1998, 83).

Chan, Roy (2012). "The functions of higher education organizations: Examining and understanding organizational responses to environmental influences in American society". Unpublished Paper, December 20, 2012.

<div align="center">References</div>

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