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Institutional Culture in Higher Education

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Synonyms

Institutional viewpoints; Organizational culture

Introduction

In recent years, colleges and universities throughout the world have engaged in an impressive number of institutional initiatives and activities that complicate the notion of a single, unified culture in higher education. To promote research and cultivate ties with business communities, universities have courted private donors, forged alliances with dissimilar institutions, and cemented entrepreneurial partnerships with a variety of corporate entities (Eckel and Hartley 2008). To nurture global networks and recruit talented students, many prominent universities have explored the viability of building branch campuses in foreign countries (Lanford and Tierney 2016). Online education has transformed what many institutions think of as their traditional constituency or who teach their courses. Meanwhile, national governments focused on improving the skillsets of workers to meet the challenges of a knowledge economy have encouraged tertiary institutions to create new degree programs and expand access to students from previously underrepresented ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Jongbloed et al. 2008). Hence, the identity of a university campus is not often easily definable, especially since the culture of an institution is both subjective – depending on the perspectives and motivations of different individuals – and complex – moving beyond the descriptive clarity offered by organizational charts and quantitative measurements of institutional progress.

As faculty and staff endeavor to ascribe meaning to their work and students attempt to decide which college or university is the best fit for their career goals, the topic of institutional culture has taken on special relevance in higher education studies. This entry explores institutional culture by first defining culture writ large and explaining its utility in deciphering the complex nature of higher education institutions. Afterward, six important terms that establish a framework for examining institutional culture are provided and discussed in detail. Subsequently, the import of an institutional culture framework for administrators and researchers is delineated. The paper concludes with a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of a cultural perspective, along with a brief prospectus for future research on institutional culture in higher education.

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Defining Institutional Culture

Until the 1980s, the study of culture was thought to reside in the discipline of anthropology, where researchers studied "exotic" tribes. Modern organizational studies, conversely, presumed that rational decision-making and strategic planning could be fostered by a clarification of lines of authority (Chaffee and Tierney 1988). Through such a hierarchical structure, a select group of leaders would chart a path for the institution, setting necessary rules and guidelines, while lower-level staff and faculty assiduously followed. The environment of an institution consisted of a fixed number of identifiable elements. To the extent that an organization might undergo substantive change, it was perceived as a necessary response to consumer preferences.

Over the past couple of decades, however, the field of cultural studies has become a mature, active area of academic research. Concurrently, linear and formalized decision-making arrangements have been displaced by flatter, more collaborative structures. Insomuch as they encourage diversity, intrinsic motivation, and autonomy, such environments are often better incubators for the cultivation of innovative ideas (Tierney and Lanford 2016). Hence, a deeper understanding of culture has become vital for those who wish to encourage an innovative climate that can enable higher education to positively impact diverse societies and nations.

The topic of culture is most conspicuous when people transcend their home culture and recognize that their assumptions, beliefs, and practices are at odds with the norms of a new cultural environment. Likewise, institutional culture in higher education is perhaps most apparent when individuals move to a new campus environment after spending a significant amount of time at a single college or university. In such instances, the relationships between faculty and administrators, the expectations concerning office hours, the procedures concerning student grading and plagiarism, and the implicit, yet axiomatic, practices guiding dozens of daily interactions may be quite different, if not alienating. It is important to emphasize that these practices are only seldom codified, they are rarely static. Therefore, it takes considerable time for an individual to comprehend the intricate web of relationships and routines that constitute institutional culture. Moreover, one's understanding of institutional culture is subject to reinterpretation as new individuals instigate change through the unique perspectives and ideas they introduce and propagate (Austin and McDaniels 2006).

For these reasons, most contemporary discussions of institutional culture proceed from the epistemological stipulation that the organizational environment of higher education is "socially constructed." This view is different from some, like Peterson and Spencer (1990), who define culture as "the deeply embedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies that members have about their organization or its work" (p. 142). While it is true that every institution depends on a certain level of fidelity to shared values, assumptions, beliefs, and ideologies, a socially constructed view of institutional culture does not rely entirely on agreement among individuals. It acknowledges the pluralistic, occasionally cacophonous, landscape of the contemporary university, where experts are brought together from a wide range of backgrounds and disciplines. These individuals are likely to perceive vigorous debate as a necessary activity for deeper understanding, rather than as a barrier to progress.

According a perspective grounded in social construction, individuals within an institution also rely on a wealth of organizational data – including information gleaned from their orientation events, peer advice, and their knowledge of campus traditions – to comprehend their institutional activities, construct their own identities within their institutions, and supply meaning to contemporary events. Early studies by Weick, as well as Nystrom and Starbuck, explored the implications of conducting organizational research from a socially constructed perspective. Weick (1979) argued that "boundaries between organizations and environment are never quite as clear-cut or stable as many organizational theorists think… these boundaries shift, disappear, and are arbitrarily drawn" (p. 133). Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) contended that understanding

this delicate interplay between organizations and the environment was vital in a dynamic world where organizations must respond in real-time to broader crises.

In reading these authors (as well as subsequent writers on institutional culture), the influence of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) is omnipresent. According to Geertz, the definition of culture concerns the following:

> Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (p. 5)

Two implications follow from Geertz's definition of culture. First, a comprehensive understanding of any higher education institution requires analysis beyond the structural elements and established procedures (i.e., the web) of the institution. An understanding of how individuals interpret their place within that web is equally vital. Second, one cannot expect that an objective history of any given institution, combined with established organizational norms, will result in a limited set of immutable outcomes for any given situation. Instead, a broad array of factors – including changes in the greater environment, the unanticipated actions of individual actors, and the constructed understanding of an institution's history – are more likely to inform contemporary events.

The task of coming to terms with each of the disparate elements in Geertz's web to construct an embryonic picture of institutional culture is admittedly daunting. However, one might argue that it is essential in today's competitive higher education environment. Many crises in higher education can be attributed to instances in which an actor or group of actors, such as an administrator or a board of trustees, transgress the boundaries of institutional culture, resulting in strained relationships, general confusion about shared values and goals, and conflict. Unfortunately, introspective ruminations concerning the cultural values of an institution often become a priority only during such moments of crisis, once individuals find it necessary to assert their significance within the organizational web.

In summary, one could reasonably contend that administrators and researchers need to have more than an intuitive understanding of institutional culture. By consciously interrogating and understanding the codes, symbols, and interpretations that inform institutional culture, leaders can appraise likely outcomes before charting a course of action. The next section outlines a conceptual language that can be utilized to depict and examine institutions across various national higher education systems, thus delineating a useful framework for the consideration of institutional culture.

Key Terms: Assembling a Conceptual Framework

When anthropologists conduct fieldwork to better understand the culture of a society or a collective group, they are equipped with disciplinary-specific terms, such as "fictive kinship," that define commonly encountered phenomena. These terms are not only intelligible to other anthropologists, but also deemed crucial for a thorough description and analysis of a given culture or cultural activity. For a discussion of institutional culture in higher education, it is therefore useful to pinpoint similarly important phenomena and provide a working terminology that can serve as the basis for a conceptual framework (Välimaa 1998). In what follows, six such terms are provided – mission, environment, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership:

1. Mission: As described by Fugazzotto (2009), "mission statements dictate the core activities of an organization" (p. 285). For colleges and universities, mission statements are exceptionally important, as they can affirm which parts of the institution should be points of emphasis, how resources are allocated, and the types of individuals that are considered exemplary members of the university community. The language used to depict elements of a mission statement can also provide clues about an institution's relationship with the surrounding community, its status among peer institutions, its

aspirations, and its priorities. If a mission statement is articulated regularly by prominent administrators and other university officials, the culture and direction of the institution may be understood by stakeholders. If it is not articulated frequently or is unclear, the mission statement may be ineffectual, and institutional priorities may be contested by various actors.

2. Environment: The environment surrounding a higher education institution can be interpreted in multiple ways, particularly in today's digital age. Traditionally, though, one might first consider the relationship between the university campus and its surrounding city or town. The extent to which the student population of the institution reflects the demographics of the city's citizenry can provide valuable information about its impact on, and relationship with, the community.

   The state of an institution's campus can also shed light on an institution's heritage. Some universities have strategically positioned statues and inscriptions, harkening back to august figures that either cast the institution in a positive light as prominent alumni or gave back to their institution through financial donations or extended periods of service. A university that considers itself to be innovative and transgressive, on the other hand, may deliberately eschew Gothic architecture in favor of modern buildings that proudly exhibit new investments in technology or resemble the type of work environment future graduates will hopefully one day inhabit. If an institution values residential education, the campus will be populated by student learning spaces and dorms. If an institution's student population mostly commutes to campus, study locations may be limited to a couple of buildings. Finally, the attitudes of faculty and staff toward their institutional environment may reveal whether an individual is comfortable with their institutional culture or if they pine for the type of institution they attended as undergraduate or graduate students.

   The digital age has thrown the idea of "environment" into turmoil. What does it suggest for an institution when it is located in Maine, for example, but its students reside in all 50 states? The environment surely is no longer defined by a geographic radius; at the same time, the institution still needs to incorporate its members into the culture of the institution. Today, the institutional environment is shaped as much by the flows of international and intranational students and faculty as the campus location.

3. Socialization: The process of socialization is how actors – whether they are students, staff, or faculty – discern which values and character traits are valued by their institution (Tierney and Rhoads 1994). This aspect of institutional culture can be assessed in at least three different ways. First, one can examine how new members in an institution become socialized to their environment. Second, similar to the analysis of mission statements, the manner and frequency in which socialization is articulated can be investigated. Third, one can assume the position of different individuals within the institution and interrogate the types of knowledge that are necessary for success in their positions. Through each of these three approaches, knowledge about the socialization process can offer insights into why people interpret and react to institutional actions in a certain fashion. Socialization becomes particularly important in the twenty-first century insofar as some students and faculty may study and work from afar. And more individuals work from home than ever before. Nevertheless, individuals still need to be socialized to the culture of the organization. The degree to which an institution's leaders consider these issues, the likelier they are to create and maintain a vibrant culture, even from a distance.

4. Information: Although information may appear to be a straight-forward concept, it can be subject to an equally complex set of considerations as the other terms listed here. Similar to socialization, three different approaches can guide an understanding of information in institutional culture. A valuable starting point is to query *what* constitutes information within an institution. In today's age of email, twitter feeds, and numerous social media outlets,

individuals are often inundated with "urgent" messages and, at times, suspect information. As a result, the process by which individuals determine *who* holds useful information is also a vital line of inquiry. After determining what information is significant and who holds it, the efficacy of *how* information is disseminated can be assessed. Public representatives of the university regularly supply information about their institutions through speeches and formal documents. Increasingly, however, as higher education institutions adopt neoliberal ideologies and the practices of corporate culture (Kirp 2003; Slaughter and Leslie 1997), marketing and communications departments have become essential generators and communicators of information that can inform an analysis of institutional culture (Olssen and Peters 2005).

As a result, these departments also play a crucial role in defining and promulgating organizational identities. Traditionally, higher education has been portrayed as a field of "loosely coupled institutions" that are not only inward looking, but resistant to change (Weick 1976; Stensaker 2015). With state governments demanding increased accountability and efficiency from higher education, many colleges and universities have been compelled to take charge of their public image, instigate reforms, and publicize identified strengths while competing for scarce resources. One active area of research on institutional culture investigates such "branding" efforts, insofar as they represent a deliberate attempt to shape public opinion and frequently engender resistance from within the institution (Humphreys and Brown 2002; Stensaker 2007; Wæraas and Solbakk 2009).

5. Strategy: Strategic concerns may involve some of the most complicated and subjective aspects of an institutional culture analysis. At many universities where academic freedom and shared governance are presumed to be nonnegotiable, fundamental values of the institution, faculty may expect a participative decision-making process, especially for institutional decisions that match their expertise, such as curricular issues (Rhoades 2005). If leaders do not respect these values and expectations, their internal legitimacy may be undermined and institutional trust and support for future strategies may be difficult to obtain (Stensaker and Vabø 2013). And yet, shared governance and academic freedom are not universal values in higher education systems throughout the world, nor are they uniformly embraced at colleges and universities within the same country (Altbach 2001). Hence, many institutions may adopt a more linear strategic process, with even minor strategic decisions remaining the province of a small group of individuals in high-level administrative positions.

   The rhetoric of change and disruption also plays a role in contemporary strategic decision-making, particularly when it appears that early adopters of a new technology may have a strategic advantage over peer institutions. Lest they be placed at a disadvantage that could cripple their institutions' future economic viability, many leaders feel compelled to make quick decisions, circumventing traditional participatory processes that give voice to multiple constituencies. Consequently, communication becomes an essential tool for the dissemination and implementation of institutional strategies. In the next section, the importance of communication will be discussed in greater detail.
6. Leadership: Leadership may seem to be the most obvious aspect of institutional culture, but it is a deceptively complicated concept, especially in the university setting. Everyone might point to a university president or provost as individual "leaders." Nevertheless, the leaders who, at times, have the most palpable impact on institutional practices may be deans or division chairs who enjoy enhanced legitimacy due to their academic backgrounds as professors within the departments they oversee. The expectations for different levels of leadership can vary drastically, depending on the institution. Furthermore, "informal" leaders who do not hold a specific leadership position, yet are recognized as dependable individuals who represent certain important

positions on behalf of others, exist in every institution. A thorough examination of institutional culture explores the expectations that individuals have of leadership, the multilayered nature of leadership, and the recognized "formal" and "informal" leaders in an effort to contextualize strategic decisions that impact higher education institutions.

Taken together, the six terms that have been described here in detail – mission, environment, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership – form a comprehensible, and potentially useful, framework for understanding institutional culture. As one might anticipate, how one enacts a term changes over time. As we noted above, for example, the environment of the twenty-first century gets defined in a manner very different from that of the 1980s. How students are socialized to the mores of the organization involves social media in a manner that did not exist a generation ago. Nevertheless, the terms themselves remain of fundamental import. The applicability of this framework, however, is dependent on a view of higher education institutions as socially constructed. In the next section, the ways in which an institutional culture framework can be useful for different stakeholders, namely administrators and researchers, are explored.

Import of Institutional Culture for Administrators and Researchers

Higher education institutions, despite their longevity and reverence for tradition, are not static entities. Administrators who consider their institutions from a cultural perspective keep the multidimensional nature of higher education in mind. Depending on the individual, this can be either a disconcerting or a liberating way of looking at an institution. On the one hand, a cultural perspective suggests that, for most problems, no single solution is likely to ameliorate every potential issue and appease all parties. On the other hand, a cultural perspective encourages administrative creativity and multiple feedback channels. By weighing the positives and negatives advised by a framework similar to the one outlined above, administrators may feel less beholden to tradition and more willing to solicit diverse opinions and build consensus in support of a bold initiative. They might also be mindful that a viable solution for an issue will likely need to be revisited at some point in the future, as both the environment and the individuals within an institution continue to evolve.

Amid this turbulent environment, two key administrative behaviors have the potential to instill a sense of stability and confidence within an institution. First, adherence to an institutional identity is key. Change is a healthy part of any organization. And yet, change that appears to contradict the core values of an institution, as established by cultural artifacts such as the institutional mission statement, can foment a sense of existential despair, even among the most talented and/or productive individuals. The challenge for many institutions today involves maintaining a strong sense of identity while remaining dynamic enough to respond to outside pressures and environmental needs (Vaira 2004). Leadership that changes institutional direction or priorities based on the vagaries of the marketplace may well solve a short-term problem, but they may also do nothing for long-term viability.

Second, the maintenance of effective communication channels is critical in any conceptualization of institutional culture. For mission statements to be effective, their basic principles need to be reinforced by leadership through speeches, letters, and other forms of written and spoken discourse, especially at times of institutional uncertainty. When new people join an institution, the socialization process needs to establish preferred forms of communication so that feedback channels can be utilized. Additionally, communication from administrators is essential during strategic reform processes that can easily be misinterpreted by individual actors.

It is important to emphasize that researchers looking to establish either an association or causality between two isolated variables are not likely to be seduced by a framework based on institutional culture (Smircich and Stubbart 1985). Researchers gathering qualitative data, however,

will almost invariably notice that few events are perceived by individuals in a similar light. Similar to administrators who are mindful of the multidimensionality of their institutions, researchers who are attracted to Geertz's definition of culture will find an institutional culture framework an invaluable tool for contextualizing and making sense of their participants' intricate "webs of significance." In short, a cultural perspective enables the exploration of the multiple perceptions at work within a single institution.

A cultural perspective also embraces the temporal nature of an institution by encouraging longitudinal analysis, along with the collection of historically derived data. This gives researchers an opportunity to triangulate sources so that complex phenomena, such as the effects of institutional change over time, can be comprehensively examined. Such an investigation requires the sort of "thick description" advocated by Geertz. Institutional portraits, like those pioneered by Burton Clark (1970, 1971), are excellent ways to demonstrate the enactment of culture in higher education. By capturing the voices and attitudes of several individuals from throughout the institutional spectrum, a more authentic portrayal can be produced than that of a faceless crowd stifling top-down reforms or a heroic individual fomenting comprehensive change.

Advantages and Disadvantages of an Institutional Culture Perspective

To summarize many of the earlier points of this article, an institutional culture perspective confers several advantages. It acknowledges that decisions are complex, necessitating the consultation of numerous stakeholders and the consideration of multiple perspectives. A nuanced understanding of institutional culture has the potential to help leaders anticipate problems, minimizing the potential for cultural conflict.

As Kezar and Eckel (2002) have demonstrated in their research on institutional transformations, a thorough consideration of institutional culture is particularly important during periods in which leaders are planning change strategies. Without a thorough understanding of the history of an institution, administrators and other change agents may repeat failed strategies that cause consternation throughout an institution. At some institutions, specific individuals in impacted positions may feel as though their input is necessary before the implementation stage of an institutional change can commence. Moreover, change may not be accepted among individuals within the institutional community if certain informal leaders are not recognized and given an opportunity to express their opinions and/or support.

Lastly, an institutional culture perspective does not presume that procedures which are successful at one institution can simply be transferred to another, without modification. As Robert Arnove (2003) has observed, "the school system of each country reflects the corresponding sociocultural systems within which they are embedded. One cannot simply uproot elements of one society and expect them to flourish in the soil of another society" (p. 7). By employing an institutional culture framework, researchers can specify tangible reasons why what works at one university may not work at another university, even if the two institutions share many similarities.

One of the primary disadvantages of an institutional culture framework relates to its willingness to embrace complexity. To meet externally imposed goals, it may make rational sense for administrators to fixate on specific metrics and rely on proven techniques that have produced desired results in the past. At the same time, an institution focused on the procurement of funds might use an institutional culture framework to better understand the relationship of the university with its alumni base, the institutional messages that are most attractive to potential donors, or the possible negative effects of a tuition increase.

Another potential negative effect concerns the resource-intensive nature of understanding the institutional culture. A thorough process of consensus building, among several different constituencies, may delay the implementation of administrative directives. Industry partners interested in developing a mutually beneficial, vocational curriculum may find the shared governance model too sluggish. Also, some individuals in

powerful positions may be troubled by the notion of researchers giving traditionally disenfranchised groups a platform where their experiences and concerns in an institution can be heard by an outside audience.

Conclusion

As we noted at the outset, higher education is undergoing a period of unprecedented turbulence, with institutions engaging in a multitude of partnerships, initiatives, and new programs to maintain relevance in the twenty-first century. Some even argue that the status quo is no longer tenable. Of consequence, individuals have tried to figure out what might enable higher education institutions to move forward, rather than remain wedded to the norm.

The point is not to drop everything that outsiders might consider superfluous or to copy another institution's successful strategies. Rather, the challenge is to communicate to insiders and outsiders what an institution values and how those values distinguish one institution from other colleges and universities. An institutional culture framework enables the kind of reflexivity necessary for administrators to clarify an institution's identity while highlighting its singular qualities. In addition, researchers employing a cultural framework can develop a profound understanding of what enables change within an institution. In doing so, they can capture the intricate tapestry of individuals and aspirations that enrich many impactful colleges and universities throughout the world.

Cross-References

- ▶ Academic Identity in Higher Education
- ▶ Academic Profession
- ▶ Types of Higher Education Systems

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