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# American Research Universities: Feature of Bug? A Quick Explainer of the Place You Work



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# Goals of this Training



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# As a Result of this Presentation You Will:

- Learn a bit about the history of universities
- Learn a bit of organizational theory that will (hopefully) give you some context for how this place works
- Discuss whether some of the ways that we work are features or bugs
- Be able to contextualize how your work is influenced by our organizational behavior



# Why Have This Training?



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- Owner's Manual
- I have heard misconceptions
- Avoid difficulty or frustration (if features)
- Avoid difficulty or frustration (if bugs)





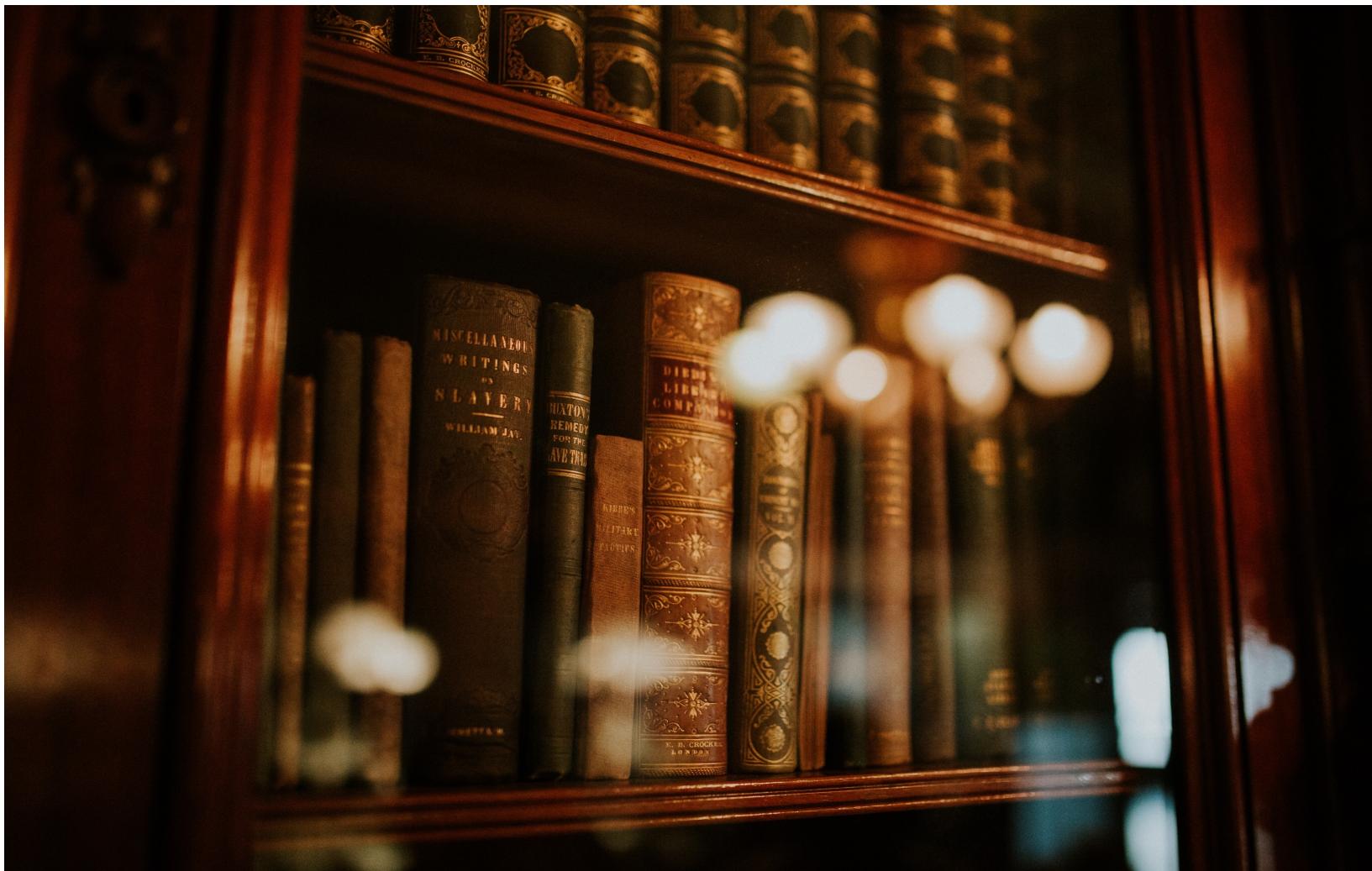
# The Office of Data Analytics : Who We Are



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 ODA is a centralized analytics team that exists to provide data, data tools, software, and decision support to stakeholders at CU Boulder and beyond

 Our goal is to inform campus decision-making with data and to improve outcomes for students, faculty, and staff



# Some History



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# Europe's Oldest University

## University of Bologna (1088, A.D.)



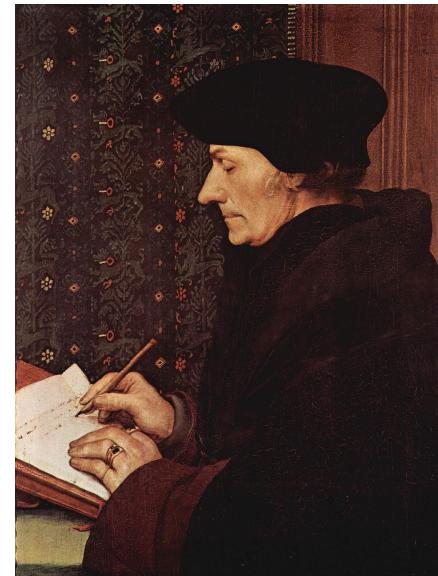
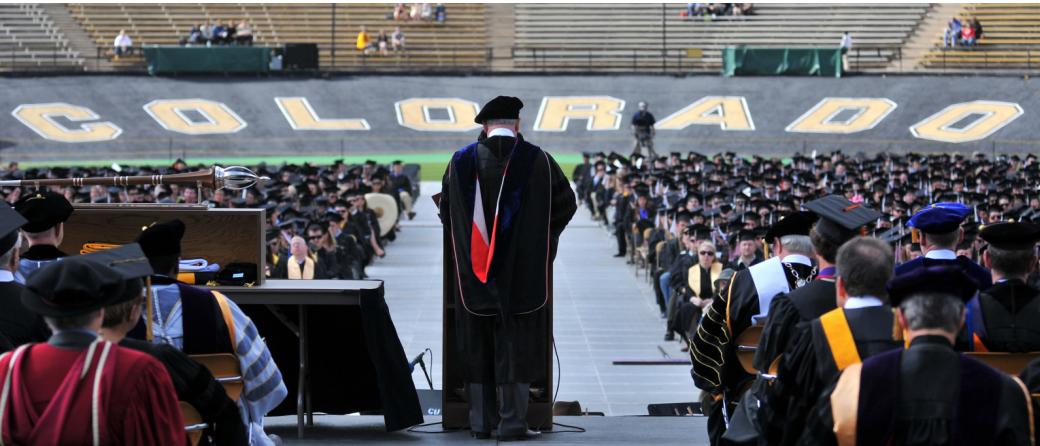
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# Why Should I Care?



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# Because You Work for a “Medieval” Institution



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# Medieval Universities

- **Small guilds of academics who banded together**
- Hired by students, the church, or the state
- Physical spaces didn't happen until later
- Town gown relations were problematic and even dangerous



# But You Also Work for A Modern “Multiversity”



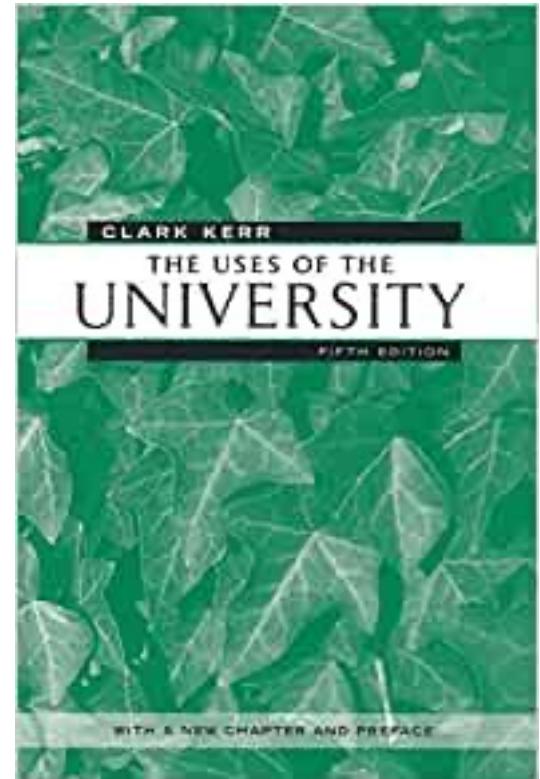
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# Multiversity (Kerr, 2001)

“The university started as a single community of masters and students. Today, the large American University is, rather, a whole series of communities and activities held together by a common governing board, and related purposes.”

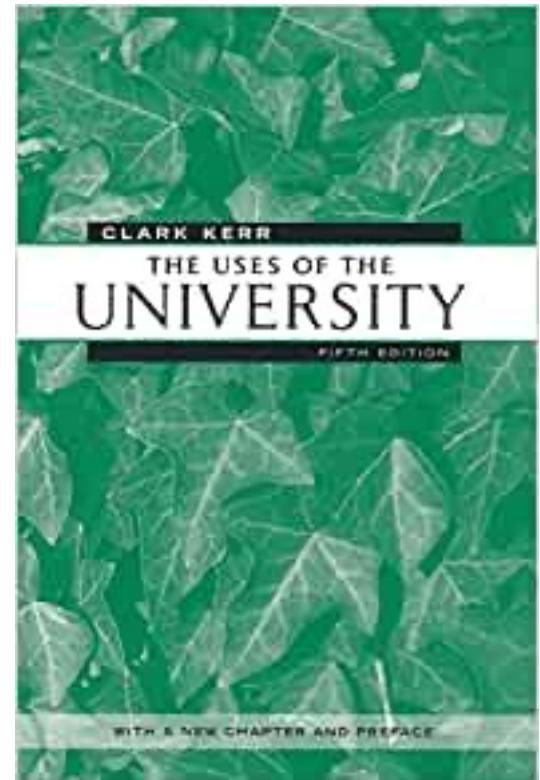
OR

... ”a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking.”



# Multiversity (Kerr, 2001)

“As the institution becomes larger, administration becomes more formalized and separated as a distinct function; as the institution becomes more complex, the role of the administration becomes more central in integrating it...”





**Dr. Delarocker, mild-mannered prof. of education**  
@drdelarocker

...

I'm setting up my new university email, and I knew to check the marketing dept.'s website before creating an email signature, because I need to follow the style guide, and oh my god I've been in academia for a long time.



**Sara Chatfield**  
@poliscisara

...

Hahaha, I love that our marketing people think they get to decide what faculty email signatures will be (and that they think they can forbid people from adding pronouns, land acknowledgements, etc. -- NOPE!)



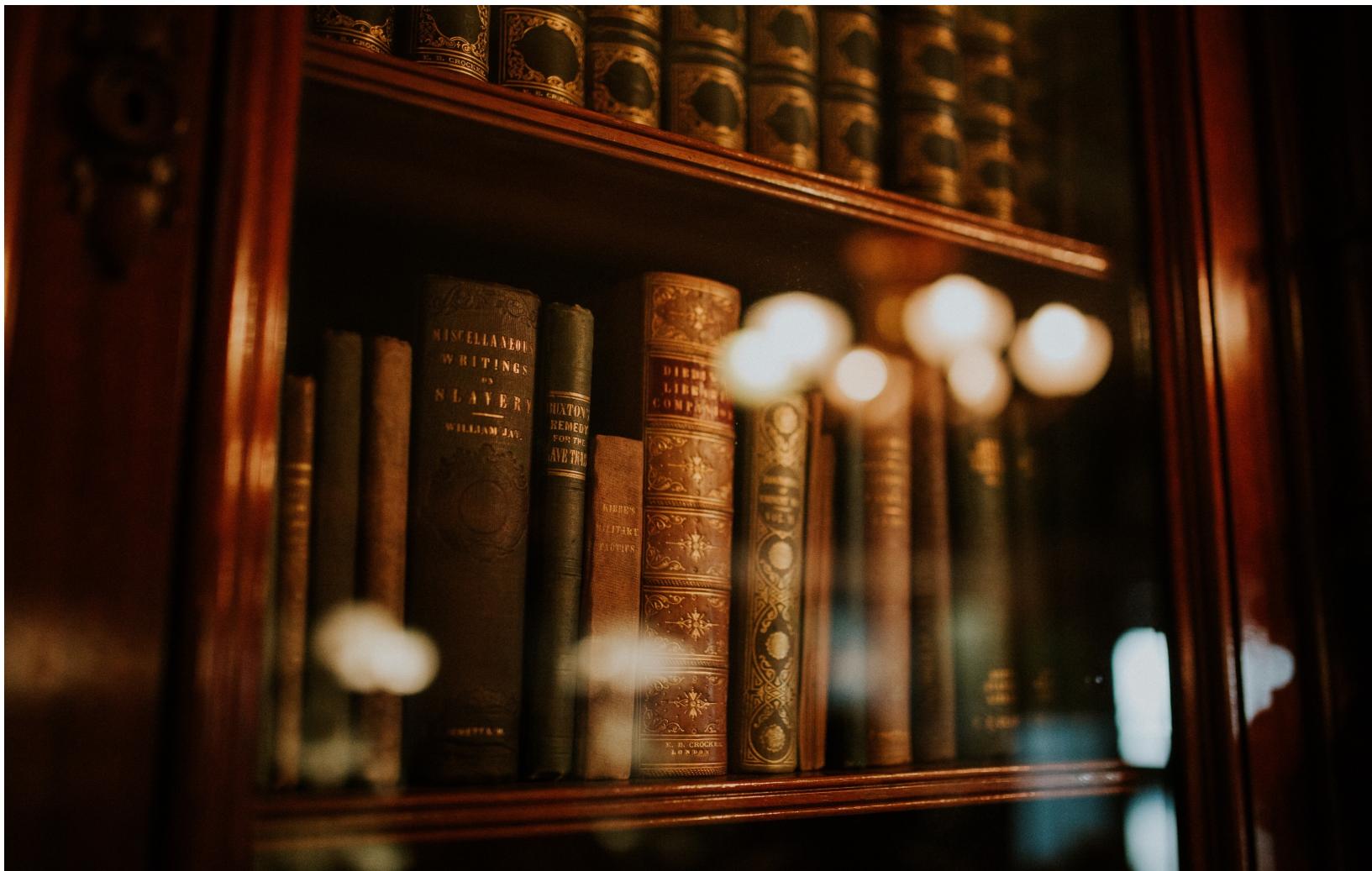
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# Shared Governance: Feature or Bug?



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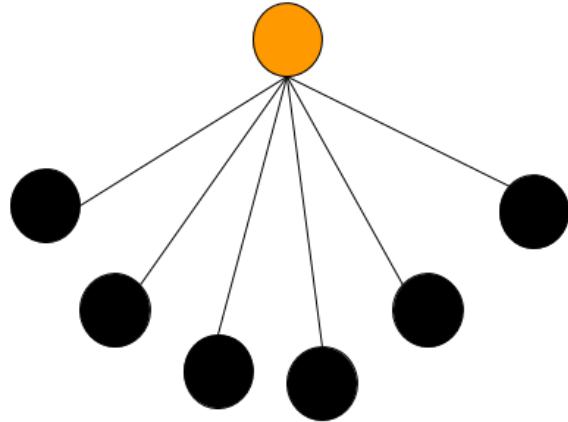
# Some Organizational Theory



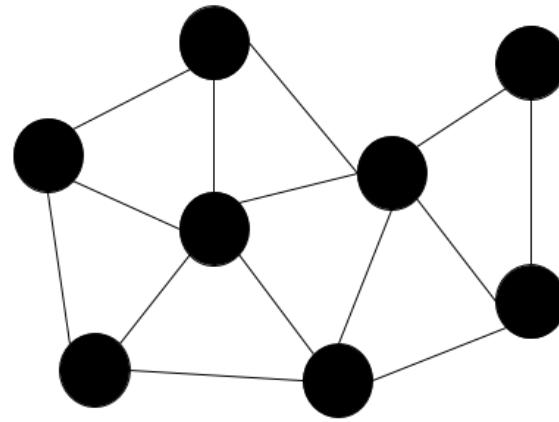
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# Universities are Decentralized

Centralized



Decentralized



# Loosely Coupled Decision-Making

Figure 2. Inside a Predictable Black Box.

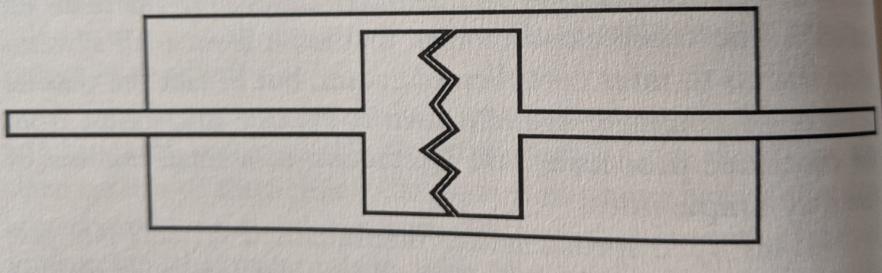
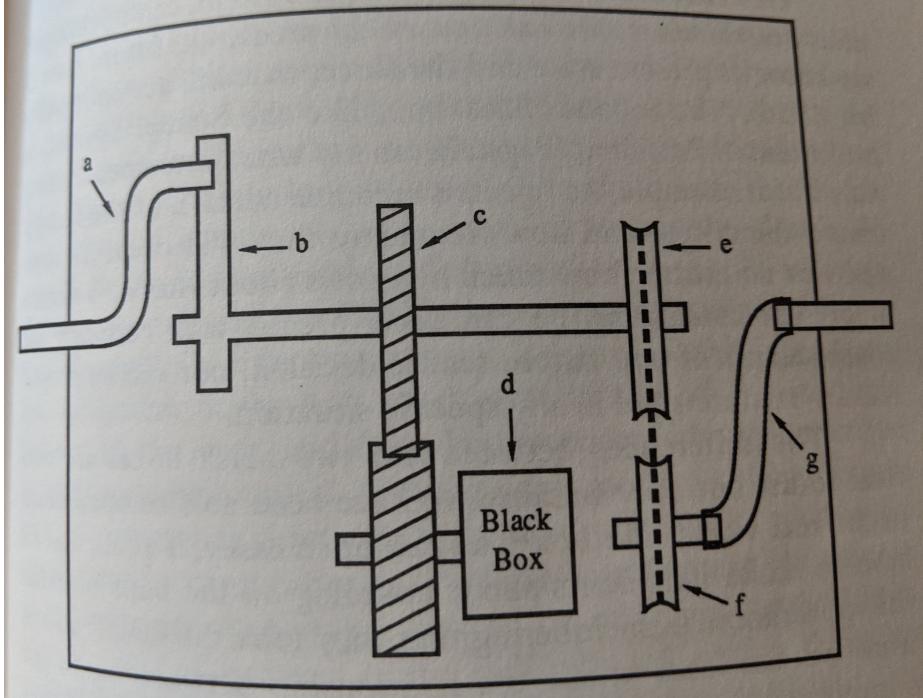


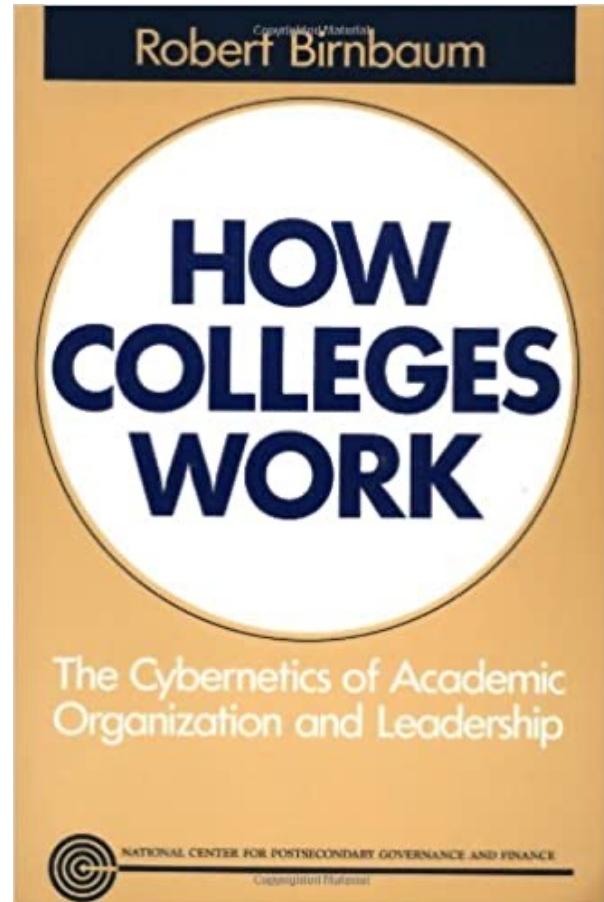
Figure 3. Inside a Perverse Black Box.



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# Birnbaum, 1988

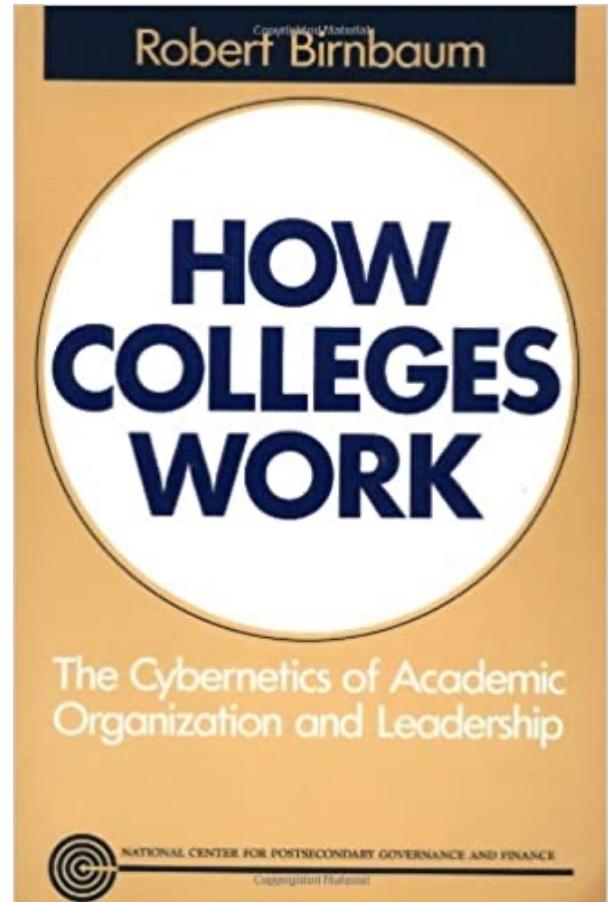
- Organized Anarchy
  - Problematic Goals that can be poorly defined or in conflict
  - Unclear Technology
  - Fluid Participation



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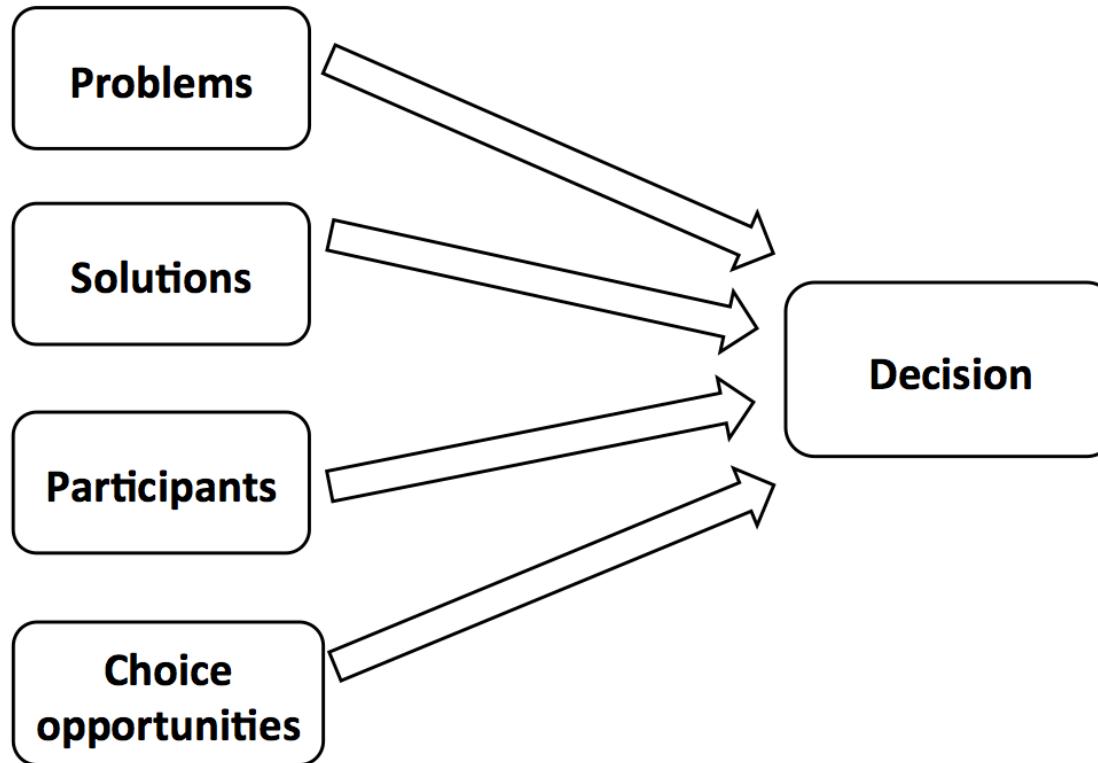
# Birnbaum, 1988

- Leads to satisficing
- Garbage Can Decision-Making



# Cohen, March, Olsen, 1972

## Garbage Can Theory of Organizational Choice



*Michael D. Cohen, James G. March, and  
Johan P. Olsen*

## A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice

*Organized anarchies are organizations characterized by problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation. Recent studies of universities, a familiar form of organized anarchy, suggest that such organizations can be viewed for some purposes as collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work. These ideas are translated into an explicit computer simulation model of a garbage can decision process. The general implications of such a model are described in terms of five major measures on the process. Possible applications of the model to more narrow predictions are illustrated by an examination of the model's predictions with respect to the effect of adversity on university decision making.*

Consider organized anarchies. These are organizations—or decision situations—characterized by three general properties.<sup>1</sup> The first is problematic preferences. In the organization it is difficult to impute a set of preferences to the decision situation that satisfies the standard consistency requirements for a theory of choice. The organization operates

ventions of necessity. The third property is fluid participation. Participants vary in the amount of time and effort they devote to different domains; involvement varies from one time to another. As a result, the boundaries of the organization are uncertain and changing; the audiences and decision makers for any particular kind of choice change



# Examples as Memes (Isomorphism)



imgflip.com



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# Examples as Memes (Satisficing)



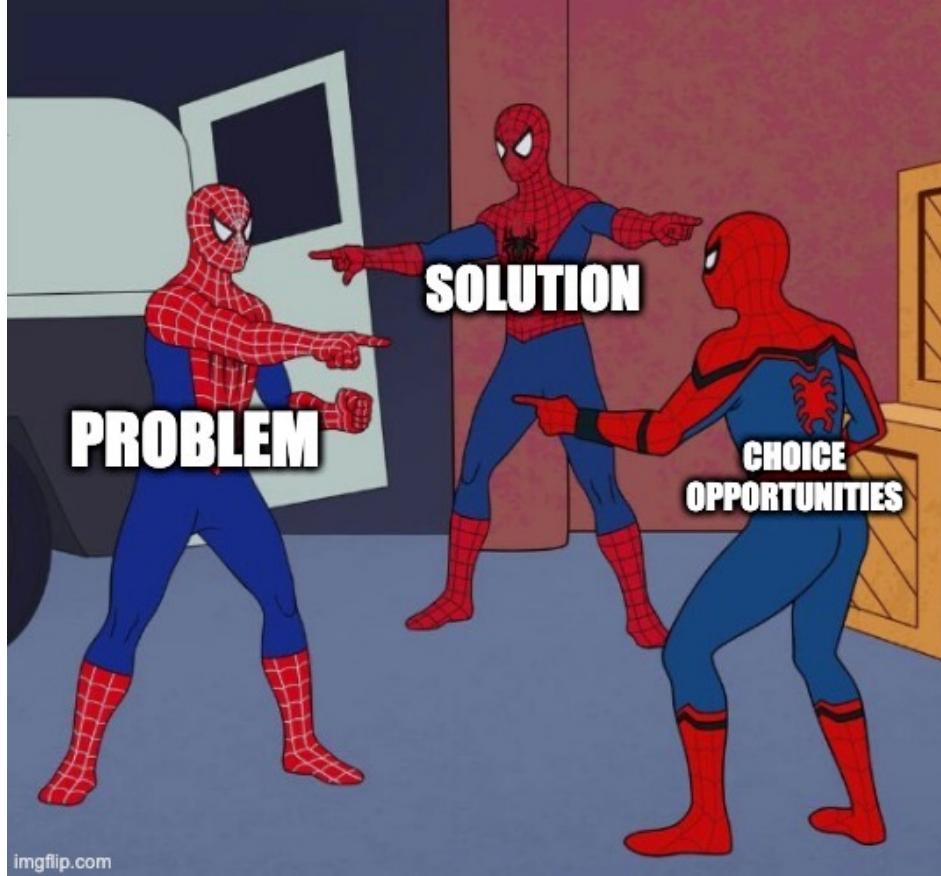
The agenda  
says  
student retention

Our  
proposal  
recommends  
more parking



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# Examples as Memes (Garbage Can Decision-Making)



imgflip.com



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## Loosely Coupled Decision-Making: Feature or Bug?

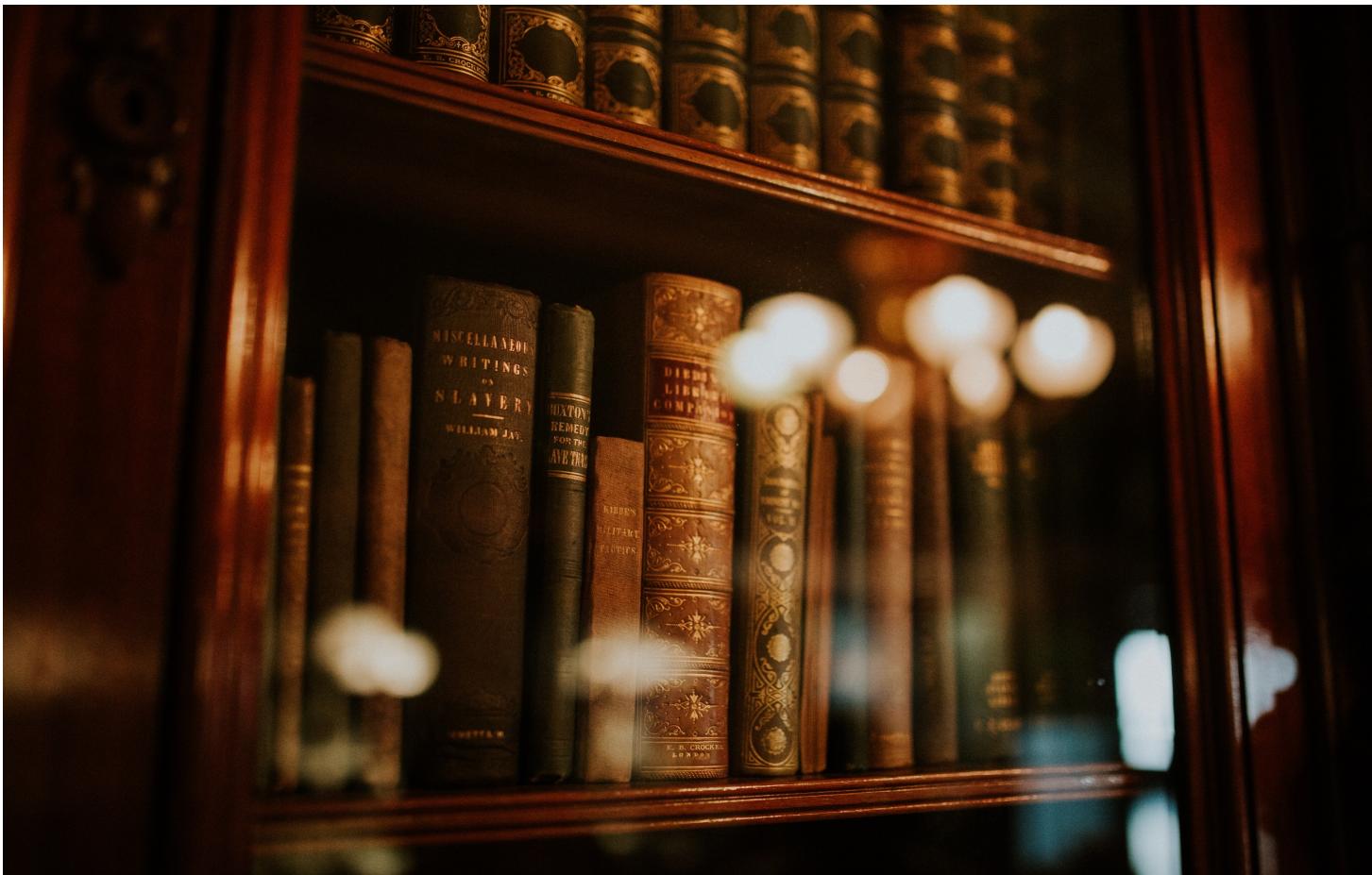


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# Conclusion

- For me, it is an honor to work at a public, flagship university
- It is helpful to have some context for how the place operates
- Organizations behave in ways that make sense to the actors who exist in them





# Thanks!



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