

Higher Education: A Field in Ferment

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Abstract

Higher education in the United States is in the throes of change as existing institutions are being challenged and new forms and modes of educational delivery are appearing. To understand and examine these changes, three versions of the “organization field” perspectives are employed. The first emphasizes the forces that have created and perpetuated the existing configuration of colleges and universities. The second stresses the ways in which colleges compete for scarce resources and engage in strategic behavior to survive and gain advantage in a highly competitive and contested arena. And the third focuses attention on consumers (students) rather than providers (colleges), noting alternatives that are emerging to offer training and education outside of the conventional providers. In combination, these perspectives identify varying players and processes that collectively are shaping the future of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two centuries, higher education in the United States has exhibited much success and substantial stability. Its success is indicated by a recent survey of the top universities in the world conducted by the Institute of Higher Education at Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University that reported the United States accounted for 53 of the top 100 universities as well as 17 of the top 20 (Institute of Higher Education, 2011). Its stability is signaled by the steady increase in the numbers and types of colleges and universities, punctuated by growth spurts in the late nineteenth century occasioned by the creation of the Land Grant universities following the Civil War as well as a rapid expansion following the end of World War II in the mid-twentieth century. Both of these episodes were underwritten by substantial increases in public funding (Fischer & Hout, 2006). Other important markers of stability include the reproduction of a class of somewhat distinctive forms: colleges have long been structured as “professional bureaucracies”—that is, as systems governed by rule-based managers who support the work of professional teachers who self-organize and enjoy considerable autonomy

(Brint, 2000). Also of note, compared to most other types of institutions, colleges continue to enjoy high prestige and the confidence of the public (Immerwahr, 2004).

But the ground may be shifting beneath our feet! As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is much evidence of destabilizing, perhaps revolutionary, change in the offing. Conventional colleges are staggering under the dual challenges of reduced public funding and increased costs of operation. New types of “nonconventional” students increasingly inhabit our colleges—ethnically diverse, older, many married with dependents, many attending part-time, often with poorer academic preparation. Partly as a consequence, completion rates in US colleges now rank 12th among 36 developed countries (Lewin, 2010). US colleges today are also far more diverse than a few decades ago. Two-year community colleges offering both transfer and vocationally oriented practical training have grown rapidly, and new kinds of educational entities—for-profit education corporations—that challenge conventional modes of organizing have arisen. And disruptive technology—digital media—is rapidly being adopted, challenging conventional modes of instruction and ways of organizing educational services. We are entering a time that will test the mettle of faculty and administrators, as well as stretch the imagination and creativity of social scientists who attempt to understand the nature and magnitude of the changes under way.

To capture and comprehend this rapidly changing scene, I urge the value of employing an “organization field” approach, a focus calling attention to the collection of diverse types of organizations densely connected by network ties that together view themselves as “players in the same game.” However, to fully capture the varying processes at work, there are advantages to employing more than one field model. The original model that stressed the unity and stability of organization fields served well as a valuable guide for scholars during a number of decades, but as the field has become more unsettled and conflicted it has proved less serviceable. Two more recent models that provide helpful lenses for conceptualizing recent developments have emerged.

HIGHER EDUCATION: THREE FIELD APPROACHES

The concept of “field” is based on earlier work in electromagnetism in the physical sciences and gestalt theory in psychology during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its first introduction into sociology was through the work of urban ecologists, such as McKenzie (1926/1983), and it has subsequently been adopted and adapted by organizations scholars. As Martin (2011) emphasizes, what is common to all these approaches is the view that

the behavior of the objects under study is explained not by their internal attributes but by their location in some physically or socially defined space. In organization studies, the use of a field perspective directs attention away from the attributes of a specific organization, its structure and activities, to consider the effects of environmental forces on a collection of diverse organizations. For our own discussion, three models of organization fields are sketched: higher education as an institutional field; higher education as an arena of strategic action; and higher education as a demand-generated outcome (Scott, 2014).

HIGHER EDUCATION AS AN INSTITUTIONAL FIELD

Following the insights of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Meyer and Rowan (1977), and Meyer and Scott (1983) this approach focuses attention on the collection of specialized organizations, including educational providers, supporting organizations, and oversight bodies that populate the sector of higher education. In particular, stress is placed on processes—coercive, normative, and memetic—that shape the structures and procedures of educational organizations so as to be broadly similar—creating a small number of recognizable forms, predictable and stable systems of relations, and shared meaning systems. A number of types of colleges have developed over time, populations of organizations that share a common archetype: for example, liberal arts colleges, research universities and comprehensive colleges, special focus colleges, community colleges, specialized institutions, and for-profit entities. Each of these types developed at different times in response to varying conditions.

Thus, *liberal arts colleges* were modeled on European counterparts dating from the 1600s and emphasizing residential education, high ratios of faculty to students, and broad grounding in the humanities, social and natural sciences. *Research universities and comprehensive colleges* were patterned on the late nineteenth century German universities, although they were democratized in the American context to include in addition to the more esoteric arts of philosophy, theology, and science, the more practical arts, such as engineering, agriculture, and business administration. This project was rapidly advanced by the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 that established a federalized system of land grant universities to foster the development of agricultural and the mechanical arts. And, over time, most professional occupations in the United States have connected their training programs to universities, recognizing that ongoing practice should be informed by and, over time, improved by advances in theoretical developments and empirical findings (Bledstein, 1976). *Special focus colleges* primarily serve the needs of specialized, professional, or craft occupations in a wide variety of areas. Commonly

served arenas include medical and other health programs, engineering and technology, business and management, art, music, design, and law. Currently in the United States the bulk of such training is concentrated in the areas of health, business, and art/music/design.

The first *community colleges* appeared very early in the twentieth century, but this form did not diffuse rapidly until the 1960s in response to a general movement to increase access to higher education for larger numbers of students. These 2-year programs serve some combination of providing remedial education to less advantaged students, general education to transfer students, and vocational training to those seeking terminal degrees or certificates (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Without question, it is *for-profit* entities, offering both 2- and 4-year programs that have adopted an organizing archetype that differs most from traditional college models. Rather than the professional organization model embraced, in theory if not always in practice, by traditional colleges, they have adopted a corporate model. Their focus on profit causes them to centralize decision making and concentrate on strategies for growth and cost reduction rather than compete for top faculty or embrace broader liberal arts programs. They typically serve nontraditional student markets, offering more highly focused programs with few electives (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007).

These distinctive college populations did not develop in response to some general plan, but emerged at different points in time in response to changing societal conditions. What is remarkable is that, to a surprising extent, these differences among populations of colleges have persisted and been perpetuated. The creation of more formal typologies, such as those developed by the Carnegie Foundation, were meant to capture these differences, but over time have served to reinforce them. If you find yourself in the organization considered to be a member of a class of similar organizations, you necessarily begin to make comparisons and emulate successful role models (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). More broadly, with the exception of the for-profit forms, educational organizations share a common institutional vision in which lesser schools are trying to copy more prestigious ones. As Riesman (1956, p. 14) observed more than a half century ago, "It may be illuminating to see the avant-garde, both educational and more generally cultural, as the head of a snake-like procession ... [in which] the middle part seeks to catch up with where the head once was."

These isomorphic processes through which colleges imitate one another, particularly those of the same type, are hugely abetted by a wide range of supporting organizations, professional associations for faculty and administrators, unions, accreditation agencies, public and private oversight bodies, foundations, the courts, and state and federal agencies. Especially influential are the academic disciplines. As Clark (1983, p. 29) reminds us, in addition

to being a network of varying enterprises (colleges), “a national system of higher education is also a set of disciplines and professions.” Disciplinary associations are particularly salient for the upper tiers of the field: the liberal arts colleges, the comprehensive colleges and research universities, and the special focus institutions. For faculty members in these settings, discipline typically trumps enterprise. Abbott (2002) argues that their resilience rests on their “dual institutionalization”:

On the one hand, the disciplines constitute the macrostructure of the labor markets for faculty. Careers remain within discipline much more than within university. On the other hand, the system constitutes the microstructure of each individual university. All arts and sciences faculties contain more or less the same list of departments

(Abbott, 2002, pp. 208–209)

In the field of higher education, regulatory controls exercised by governmental authorities, are supplemented by normative controls lodged in professional associations and accreditation bodies; and both are supported by cognitive-cultural elements—widely shared conceptions of what is meant by “college,” “faculty,” “credit hour” and “major” (Meyer, 1977). In sum, those who view higher education as an institutional field stress the unexpected similarity of its forms and the stability exhibited by its operation over past centuries. It is viewed, in the language of economists, as a “mature industry.”

HIGHER EDUCATION AS AN ARENA OF STRATEGIC ACTION

A second perspective challenges the view of organization field as one of stability and consensus. These scholars argue that most organizations operate in relatively conflicted contexts, disagreeing on fundamental assumptions, pursuing varying missions, and competing for scarce resources. They insist that actors (including organizations) do not readily conform to external pressures, but seize opportunities to exercise agency and engage in strategic action (Oliver, 1991). Rather than zones of harmony and conformity, fields are more accurately characterized as “games” within which organizational actors struggle to improve their position at the expense of their competitors: there are winners and losers. Whatever rules exist are “the product of the competition between players” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 97–98), perhaps with some intervention by the state (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

While fields include many established and successful actors who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, they also host other types of players whose interests have been suppressed and who, given the opportunity, mobilize to promote change and reform. And, in the field of higher

education, there is much over which to compete: prestige, faculty, athletes and coaches, qualified students, financial resources. Such competition has become much more intense over time as state funding for schools has dropped from over 50% of public college revenues in the 1970s to under 30% in 2012 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Colleges increasingly attempt to make up these differences by increasing tuition and fees, competing for students able to meet these higher costs (often by enticing students from out of state). These contests have been fueled by the emergence and growth of rating agencies, who doggedly score and rank every facet of a college's makeup and programs. Because of these ratings, colleges have become more aware of their direct competitors and many if not most consciously work to improve their ratings (Bastedo & Bowman, 2009).

Another important reason why organization fields are contested in modern societies is because they do not operate in isolation, but are surrounded and affected by many other fields, each organized around differing "institutional logics"—definitions of goals and views of appropriate means (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). While some in higher education would like to believe that it is dominated by a single logic—the importance of knowledge for its own sake and adherence to appropriate modes of scholarly work—this comfortable assumption is challenged by actors involved with other fields who have different ideas about what education is, what it is good for, and how it should be pursued. As Stevens, Armstrong, and Aram (2008) point out, higher education has come to function as an important "hub" in modern society, connecting to, affecting, and being affected by other fields such as politics, economics, religion, the status system, and the family.

Even at its origin, education was intertwined with another field, serving for many years as the handmaiden of religion. It required many years for higher education to develop its own *raison d'être*: the cultivation and transmission of knowledge. This logic still holds sway in some parts of higher education, but has increasingly had to compete with alternative logics arriving from varying directions. From the earliest period of our democracy, schools were enlisted in the political project to provide literacy and problem-solving skills to create an informed electorate and engaged citizens (Loss, 2012). Later, the federal government enlisted universities in its cold-war struggle to dominate other countries in basic science (Lowen, 1997). Also, it has largely been a political agenda to expand the capacity of colleges—as occurred in the aftermath of World War II—to insure that it was not simply the "elites" who receive a higher education but the "masses," that is, the majority of citizens.

Also, from fairly early in its development, the value placed on a liberal education was joined and, sometimes, challenged by the growing recognition of

the economic utility of a higher education. Over time, this connection has become stronger and stronger, to the point where a society's investment in higher education is primarily justified today by its contribution to economic development at the macro level, and "human capital" at the micro level. In this manner, education also intersects with the status system and the family, providing the path to upward mobility and insuring economic security.

The increasing marketization of universities and colleges is part of a larger pattern of increasing dominance of economic values in more and more sectors of modern societies (Scott, 2013, pp. 251–255). As noted, public funding for higher education has greatly declined in recent decades, suggesting the *de facto* privatization of public colleges. Students and their families are increasingly expected to pay most of the costs of their own higher education. Many liberal arts colleges that formerly considered academic achievement and promise independently from financial assets, have now combined these admission criteria in "enrollment management departments" that simultaneously consider both, assuring that financial criteria enter into every admission decision (Kraatz, Ventresce, & Deng, 2010). Enrollments in liberal arts majors, even within "liberal arts colleges" have declined over time, so that by 2010, the most commonly selected majors were in the fields of business, management, marketing, culinary, and the health services (Brint, 2002). As for research universities, with the passage of the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, universities obtained property rights over the knowledge produced by faculty, including that funded by government research grants. Knowledge that had been publicly accessible to all became proprietary, weakening the justification for public funding of research (Powell & Owen-Smith, 2002). Universities are increasingly partnering with private corporations, patterns that affect not only the topics on which research is conducted but also the ways in which research training is carried out and the types of careers available to faculty and students. There is no doubt but that the revenue considerations loom ever larger in academic decisions and that money does indeed impact mission (Weisbrod, Ballou, & Asch, 2008).

Meanwhile, while public and nonprofit colleges and universities are bending to the winds of market pressures, a new wave of for-profit entities has appeared that fully embrace market logics (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). For-profit colleges are in business to produce profits for their shareholders by cutting costs, increasing capacity, and aggressively recruiting students. They invest heavily in marketing and recruiting while attempting to reduce costs on instruction to a minimum. This has resulted in their employment of part-time and short-term faculty, primarily instructors, and in pioneering the use of digital media and distance learning systems to standardize educational content and promote its efficient delivery to large numbers.

In part because of current cost pressures, a growing number of both public and nonprofit schools are beginning to experiment with online courses. A myriad of new questions have emerged around these changes. Do students learn as well from digital courses as from in-class experiences? Can digital presentations be combined (blended) with face-to-face meetings? How can student performance be assessed accurately and fairly when the student is distant from the evaluator? How can faculty and universities be compensated for these courses. How should these earnings be shared? Will the growth of these courses threaten faculty in existing colleges who may be made redundant or reduced to teaching assistants? Will the education experience become standard and uniform, losing its variety and creativity? (Stevens & Kirst, 2014).

Competition, struggle, diverse goals, both within and between colleges, escalating costs and diminished revenues—an emphasis on these features provides an alternative and more sobering perspective from which to examine the higher education field.

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A DEMAND GENERATED OUTCOME

Different as they are, the first two perspectives share the common underlying assumption that analysts should focus primary attention on existing providers of higher education as the focal actors of interest. An alternative, emerging perspective points out that it is useful to view higher education as a market in which consumers (students) are the central actor of interest. Such a perspective shifts attention from providers to consumers, from supply-side to demand-side concerns and forces. It reminds us of the truth voiced several decades ago by an outspoken critic of educational organization. Ivan Illich (1971) argued eloquently if somewhat caustically that we should never equate education with schools: indeed, that it would be a service to all if society could be “deschooled”!

A half century ago, Illich’s views seemed, at best, a utopian mirage, but in the early decades of the twenty-first century, they begin to emerge as a real possibility. In addition to such important, previously available activities as “experience,” reading, and travel, the explosion of learning opportunities opened up to all by the internet has vastly expanded the repertoire of available options. A variety of search engines is available to guide those in search of data, information, even knowledge on a vast variety of topics. Even more significantly, a wide range of college-level courses are freely available to any and all with access to a computer, some offered (and presumably approved) by leading universities. Hence, do-it-yourself education, or “design your own university” is more than ever a realistic possibility for some (Kamenetz, 2010).

We can perhaps get a glimpse of the future by considering some trends observable in the “new economy”—newer industries in which work is organized in novel ways. Studies of how work skills are acquired in regions such as Silicon Valley report that individuals increasingly want to take charge of their own careers. Rather than committing themselves to stay and attempt to advance up the ladder of a single company, they move from company to company, changing jobs frequently. Because technologies change rapidly, knowledge and skills are quickly outmoded. However, the new knowledge and skills needed are often not available from traditional colleges. Instead, courses are frequently offered by companies providing certificates or badges to those enrolled. Such credentials may have higher value than college credit or degrees (Saxenian, 1996). Observers describe how technical employees often teach themselves new skills using on-line programs, attend technical conferences and workshops, organize themselves into user groups to assist each other, or rely on hiring firms or immigrant associations who offer technical training (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Saxenian, 1999). In short, many new paths have arisen leading to improved understanding and enhanced skills that do not lead through traditional educational institutions.

Still, it is important that we not overlook the existence, the resilience, the adaptability, or the power of higher education as it exists today. Novel educational approaches and providers are not entering an empty arena, but one crowded with entrenched and resourceful players. Colleges and universities are banding together in associations, such as the American Council on Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, to clarify the meaning of the “credit hour,” to defend and shore up accreditation, and to reassert control over educational standards. Many are also exploring new ways to adapt to changing students and educational requirements. Numerous universities, including many of the most prestigious are experimenting with online courses and exploring ways to combine or blend them with more traditional face-to-face classroom interchange (Johnston, 2012). Many colleges, particularly public state comprehensive and community colleges, have been exploring ways to partner with companies and associations to be more responsive to industry needs. For example, many colleges utilize industry and business affiliate programs, department advisory committees, pursue firm-college partnerships in developing courses or teaching them onsite in company space, or collaborate to create internship opportunities for students. They more commonly utilize adjunct faculty with company or business experience, some making adjustments in appointment and/or tenure criteria. Many devise more flexible enrollment programs, allowing students to attend part-time, off-site, or intermittently, more easily transitioning from school to work and back. Almost all have developed a wider range of credentials, not simply degrees and diplomas, but certificates and

badges. Some of these adaptation procedures are likely to set in motion more long-lasting changes in college programs, structures, and mission.

For their part, entities attempting to cater to the emerging student-centered marketplace have been compelled to embrace some of the trappings and practices of more conventional educational programs. Students want to be sure that the courses they are taking or the skills they are acquiring have some kind of currency—that they will be accepted as having value by employers as well as by other training institutions. New forms of certification are being developed, and older modes are being borrowed and adapted to fit new circumstances. Evaluation procedures are being developed to assess the new forms of learning and means devised or appropriated to insure that they have validity. Students usually require assistance in locating appropriate learning experiences and in connecting them to related more advanced work. In response, some organizations have emerged to create curricular programs and provide guidance to students. Existing chunks of the educational structure are being replicated or repurposed.

Most important, as the institutional model of higher education emphasizes, existing college institutions continue to enjoy high legitimacy and strong support from the public. And most American individuals continue to aspire to a traditional college education and a college degree, an aspiration that is likely to persist for many years to come.

A CONCLUDING COMMENT

As we enter the twenty-first century, higher education in the United States is undergoing significant change. Older forms and traditions are challenged and new forms and modes of education are emerging and being tested. We have emphasized that, in the midst of change, old models, structures, and beliefs continue to persist and to exert force. Institutions bend but do not usually break. They undergo change, but the metric appropriate is typically measured in years and decades, not days and months (Pierson, 2004). Multiple countervailing forces are at work, which, in combination, create complex vectors and unanticipated outcomes. Because of its continuing centrality and its complex and vital connections to other societal sectors, higher education merits the attention of social science, perhaps now more than ever.

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Scott is a former editor of the *Annual Review of Sociology* (1988–1991) and former president of the Sociological Research Association (2006–2007). Awards include Phi Beta Kappa, member of the Institute of Medicine, Distinguished Scholar (1988) and Distinguished Educator (2013) award from the Management and Organization Theory Division of the Academy of Management, and the Richard Irwin award for Distinguished Scholarly Contributions, Academy of Management. He was a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, 1989–1990. In 2000, The Organizations and Occupations Section of the American Sociological Association designated its annual award honoring an outstanding article-length contribution as the “W. Richard Scott” award. He has received honorary doctorates from the Copenhagen Business School (2000), Helsinki School of Economics and Business (2001), and Aarhus University (Denmark, 2010).

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