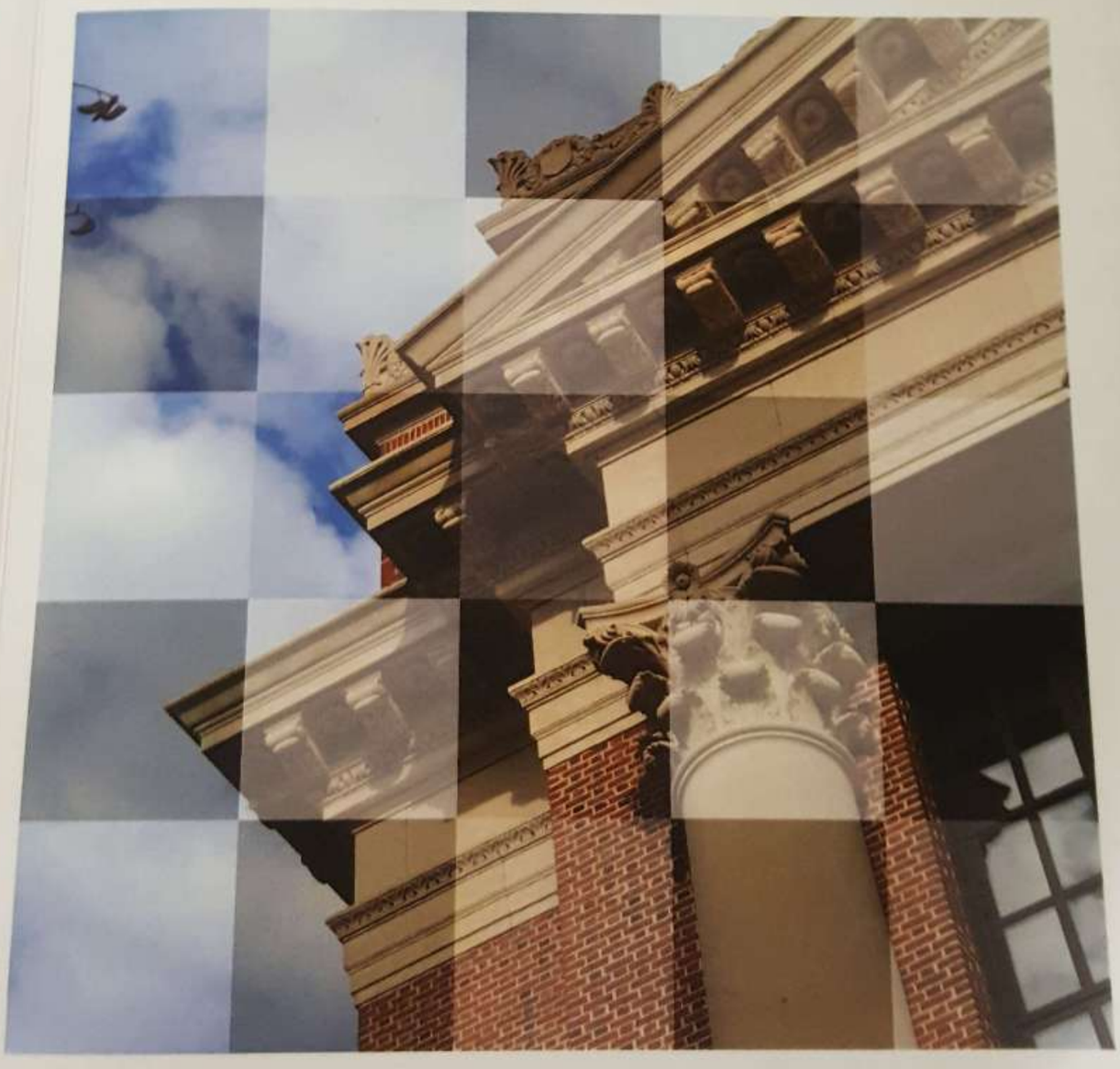
The Organization of Higher Education

Managing Colleges for a New Era



Edited by Michael N. Bastedo

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CHAPTER ONE

why is orgnization is imp.

Organizing Higher Education

A Manifesto

As Dr. Rob. said that

MICHAEL N. BASTEDO

how any org is work is it based on relations or on bureaucracy.

Modern organization theory is built upon the study of colleges and universities. Resource dependence theory resulted from studies of power and the budgetary process at the University of Illinois (Pfeffer, 2005; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974, 1978). "Old" institutional theory was built upon studies of adult education and community colleges (Clark, 1956, 1960) and "new" institutional theory on studies of college "chartering" effects (Kamens, 1971, 1974, 1977; Meyer, 1970) prior to extensive work in K–12 schools (Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Meyer & Scott, 1983). Organizational culture was built in the 1980s upon studies of distinctive liberal arts colleges conducted over a decade earlier (Clark, 1970, 1972, 2008). "Garbage can" theory was constructed entirely from a study of college presidential leadership (Cohen & March, 1986), and "loose coupling" was based on observations of schools and universities (Weick, 1976). The major frameworks not founded on studies of colleges—primarily organizational ecology and transaction-cost economics—are few and far between.

In turn, higher education as an organizational form has never been more powerful. Colleges and universities, through their research, disciplines, and academic programs, increasingly define the legitimacy of knowledge in modern society (Clark, 1983; Frank & Meyer, 2007). Even as the university comes under attack for its high costs and lack of attention to student learning, the university's role in defining what is known, how it should be known, and what should be pursued as knowledge in the future is largely taken for granted. This is a phenomenon that translates to higher education not simply in the developed world but also, through the massive expansion of higher education, in nearly every developing country (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), leading to pervasive efforts to establish "world class" universities in countries both large and small (Salmi, 2009).

The nature of academic work—autonomous, driven by knowledge generation,

shareholders. Each year, 10% of B corporations are audited by B Lab to ensure their continued commitment to socially responsible behavior. In early 2011, there were nearly four hundred certified B corporations earning almost $2 billion in corporate revenue, and B corporations can now be legally chartered in the state of Maryland. According to his official biography, B Lab cofounder Jay Coen Gilbert has enjoyed two sabbaticals in Australia and Costa Rica.

Understanding higher education has an immense amount to contribute to our comprehension of organizations, knowledge generation, and our society writ large. Yet the study of organizational topics within higher education is in sharp decline, owing largely to a lack of perceived connection between organization theory and major contemporary concerns in higher education, such as student access, cost escalation, and social justice. Questions related to governance, elite leaders, and field dynamics have been emphasized disproportionately, and major questions—who will attend college, who stays in college, how much do students learn, how much should college cost, how the equity and stratification in our higher education system can be improved—have, with notable exceptions, been largely ignored or marginalized.

As a result, scholars of higher education interested in access, equity, and social justice often fail to see the usefulness of organization theory, and scholars of organization theory see themselves as disconnected from the rest of the field. This disconnect is intellectually unnecessary and unproductive and limits the impact of organizational scholarship on the field of higher education. I would argue that if this trend continues, it threatens the very survival of organizational studies in the field.

This book seeks to reinvigorate the study of higher education as an organization. The book's authors seek to address these criticisms by reevaluating and reconsidering the state of the field of higher education organizations and proposing lines of inquiry for the future. In the first half of the book, we reconsider our existing theories of higher education organizations, most of which have been taught and used since at least the 1970s. In the second half of the book, we address new theories of organizations that have particular applicability in the modern context. As a result, we are seeking to become both a primer on the contemporary study of higher education organizations and a message to the field about the potential of pursuing new avenues of research.

This chapter lays out an argument about the state of organization theory in higher education. In particular, I argue that the great achievements of organization theory have left a disproportionate mark on the field, causing us to overemphasize issues in the organizational environment, which focuses attention almost exclusively on the organizational elites who interact with that environ-

ment: presidents, trustees, and other public policymakers. This chapter examines how this evolved historically and provides an agenda for using organization theory to study the most pressing issues facing higher education today.

But first: How did we get here?

What Is the State of Organization Theory in Higher Education?

THE RISE OF OPEN SYSTEMS MODELS

The state of organization theory in higher education was reviewed many times by Marvin Peterson, to whom this book is warmly dedicated. By 1974, open systems models were already sharply in ascendancy, viewing higher education as embedded in an environment that drives resources (Peterson, 1974). The relationship between government and higher education was rapidly gaining in importance, and field-level collaborations were emerging to adapt to environmental pressures, such as regional accreditation agencies and consortia. Studies of governance and decision making were prevalent, but studies of organizational practice below the top leaders were sparse—a concern that has been echoed again and again over the decades.

By the 1980s, open systems models had firmly taken hold over organizational scholarship and were elaborated to address issues of organizational culture, university strategy, and adaptation in turbulent environments (Peterson, 1985, 1986). The major theoretical traditions developed during the 1970s—resource dependence, institutional theory, anarchical models, organizational culture and climate, strategy and organizational change—yielded a rich variety of studies in higher education, leading to a fertile period of research into the 1990s that is still widely read and cited today. Indeed, these studies provide the foundation for courses in higher education, and these traditions are reconsidered and reinterpreted throughout this book.

Over the course of the 1990s, there was a shift in emphasis toward studying more field-level phenomena, including globalization, for-profit models of higher education, and virtual universities. Peterson (2007) sees this as a shift in higher education toward a postsecondary knowledge industry characterized by high levels of interdependence, innovation, and entrepreneurship. As is often the case, our theorizing itself has modeled the emerging shifts in higher education toward business practices and revenue-driven decision making, instead of looking at higher education as a traditional institution and conservator of knowledge (Gumport, 2000).

As a result, our organizational thinking has moved increasingly toward strategic models (Gumport, chap. 2; Toma, chap. 5). We also see this in the rise of impression management through marketing, branding, and development (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). In addition, our thinking has tended toward structural and functionalist accounts of organizational change, instead of looking more broadly from postmodern and other philosophical perspectives (Kezar, chapter 7; Kezar & Dee, forthcoming).

It also reflects a push toward field-level dynamics in organization theory more broadly, and institutional theory in particular (Bastedo, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Walsh, Meyer, & Schoonhoven, 2006). As a result, studies of the relationship between public policy and higher education gained even further, and the study of higher education politics has become particularly fruitful in recent years (Bastedo, 2005, 2007; Hearn & McLendon, chap. 3; Lane, chap. 10). The study of college rankings alone has become a minor industry of research (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011; Pusser & Marginson, chap. 4). In turn, topics more internal to higher education, such as organizational culture and loose coupling, have been declining in the literature (Tierney, chap. 6). Decision analysis and psychological models are almost entirely absent.

As Peterson (1985) notes, we have often failed to critique organizational frameworks drawn from management, sociology, and other disciplines for their fit to the higher education context. Instead, an implicit assumption has been that these frameworks apply to higher education without need for substantial revision or elaboration. Often there is good reason to believe this would be true. As I noted earlier in this chapter, the major theoretical frameworks in organizational studies were built upon empirical studies of higher education in diverse forms and contexts, from community colleges to major research universities.

However, there are two major issues to consider. First, the most deeply elaborated versions of these theories were created with many organizational types in mind, across firms, governments, and other nonprofit organizations. So while the empirical base was often higher education, the express purpose was to find the elements of higher education organizations that resonated in a broader range of organizational types. Second, these theories were developed by people outside the field of higher education, with the purpose of creating generalizable theories. Thus these scholars may not share the same depth of interest, concern, or expertise in higher education as scholars within the field or the desire to create theories that are nuanced and adaptive to differences across subunits (e.g., technology transfer, multicultural centers) or across stakeholders (e.g., presidents, staff, faculty, students, alumni).

THE DECLINE OF WORK

We also need to consider how open systems approaches have driven us to understand the influence of environments better than the nature of work itself. Certainly, there is no escaping that all organizations are embedded in field dynamics around resources and norms that influence most of what we do. However, our theorizing seems incapable of escaping environments, to the extent that the nature of the work that we do—the administration, management, teaching, and learning that we do every day—has little influence on our theorizing.

What does it mean to study work? On one level, work is so ambiguous that most sociological studies seem reluctant to define it (Barley & Kunda, 2001). The accepted definitions are thus almost obscenely broad. Thus, "Work tends to be an activity that transforms nature and is usually undertaken in social situations" (Grint, 2009, p. 6). In addition, defining work can be seen as a political act, privileging some forms of "transforming nature" over other forms, particularly along dimensions of class, race, and gender. For our purposes, however, I believe work in higher education is the tasks, problems, and cognitive demands faced by students, faculty, and administrators in the university.

Work itself is an immensely important activity and crucial to a complete understanding of the organizational dimensions of educational practice. Unfortunately, within organization theory, work has become synonymous with administration and connotes an old-fashioned approach to organizations (Barley, 1996; Barley & Kunda, 2001). It connotes dreariness, embedded in notions of bureaucracy, paperwork, and red tape. We have an outmoded impression of work, and this is a serious mistake. The nature of our work—the tasks we face, the problems embedded in those tasks, and their cognitive demands—is often more determinant of organizational outcomes than the demands placed by the environment. The influence of information technology and social networks, changes and developments in the disciplines, emerging understanding of student cognition and learning, the externalization and commodification of low-status work—these are not merely environmental demands. They change the nature of work itself, yet these issues have been deemphasized by organizations scholars in our nearly exclusive focus on externally driven pressures and processes.

How have we moved away from work? The disciplines are studied more for their interlocking networks of journals and professional organizations than for the ways they construct and define knowledge. Academic research is studied more as a form of technology transfer and academic capitalism than as the passionate pursuit of knowledge (Neumann, 2009). Adjunct faculty are studied primarily as unionized negotiators seeking adequate pay and legitimacy. Information technology is treated as a broad spectrum of rapidly evolving environmental demands rather than a cognitive structure that changes the nature of tasks, roles, and rewards.

Our lack of theorizing about work results in a distortion in our understanding of higher education stakeholders. We have a far better understanding of the work of college presidents and trustees than we do of academic deans or vice presidents, much less lower-level administrative and academic managers. We might have almost nothing if it were not for the proliferation of professional communities centered on admissions, technology transfer, registrars, and student affairs administrators, among many others. Even our pedagogical case studies are overwhelmingly focused on presidential leadership, governance, and public policy influences. It is no surprise that students with inherent interests in those stakeholders see organization theory as intellectual leverage for conducting empirical research, and students with interests in other stakeholders—faculty and students in particular—often do not. And the result is that administrators increasingly find the academic study of organizations distant from their problems, concerns, and leadership aspirations.

THE RETREAT FROM PRACTICE

These two interrelated trends—the emergence of open systems models and the decline of the study of work—have resulted in a retreat from educational practice itself. This has had enormous impact on the relevance of our models for the daily work of educators and managers while also impoverishing the quality of our theorizing. As organization theorists in higher education had less and less practical administrative experience, they increasingly sought their idea of disciplinary legitimacy in exciting new areas of theory, and the study of administrative practice became distinctly uncool. Yet to remain useful and relevant, organization theorists in our field must address issues of common concern in education and leverage our deep knowledge of higher education to develop insights that scholars in other disciplines and professions are unlikely to discover (Ball & Forzani, 2007; Heath & Sitkin, 2001).

This is in many ways consistent with the call to develop a distinctive scholarship of higher education organizations (Peterson, 1985) but shifts the focus in a new direction. Few people in higher education are either equipped or inclined to compete with pure theorists who are trained in the disciplines, but the disciplines lack theorists with the nuanced understanding and depth of concern of those who study higher education as the commitment of our professional lives.

Theorists within higher education need to leverage this nuanced understanding by embracing higher education as an applied profession and by deepening our understanding of higher education as an organization that *cannot be duplicated* by scholars from other traditions.

Conceptually, this means a refocusing on educational work and a defocusing or "backgrounding" of environmental dynamics. Practically, this allows for a shift in topical direction toward issues of intense contemporary concern: the inflation of college costs, dilemmas of student access and retention, the need to improve and assess student learning and development, and the need to understand effective processes of knowledge generation and diffusion. All of these have the potential to leverage deep understanding of higher education, develop relevant and useful knowledge for higher education, attract talented people to the field, and develop a vision of higher education with the organizing function at its center.

What Should Be Studied?

Organization theorizing that is relevant to major contemporary concerns in higher education requires reorienting the concerns of organization theorists toward issues of educational work that have effects on these major outcomes in higher education. We can improve the study of educational work by specifying the connection between the micro-level behavior of students, faculty, and administrators within and across institutions with macro-level outcomes in college costs, as well as student learning, access, completion, and diversity. We can be useful to practice by providing sticky ideas (Bastedo, chap. 12; Heath & Heath, 2007) that are memorable and have the potential for lasting impact among practitioners.

STUDENT AND FACULTY LEARNING

The need to understand the depth of learning among college students has been identified as one of the primary challenges of higher education, both within the field and from innumerable outside commissions and commentators. The question is not largely whether we should address the problem but how. We have remarkably little information about what happens inside college classrooms on a broad scale and no consensus on how what is learned (or is not) should be measured.

Similar difficulties plague K–12 education. Yet we have far more organizational knowledge of school learning because scholars have pursued it vigorously. Scholars have wanted to know *how schools can be better designed to promote learning outcomes*. They have studied intensively how principals and school districts can promote instructional leadership; the design of educational interventions that

seek to improve student achievement through systemic reform; how teachers respond and resist accountability measures and instructional reform; and the problems of diffusing and "scaling-up" organizational change to other schools (for just a few examples, see Coburn, 2001; Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003; Rowan & Miller, 2007).

These are not studies of teaching and learning per se but intensive studies of the context of teachers' work and how these contexts influence student learning. These kinds of studies are exceedingly rare in higher education. Our knowledge of learning generally comes through student psychological development, which has a long and rich history in the field to this day and a great deal to contribute to our understanding of learning (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Organizationally, there have been good studies of specific interventions, such as service learning and learning communities (e.g., Tinto, 1997). However, these studies rarely use organization theory or even put organizing at the center of the analysis—although Lounsbury and Pollack (2001) is a notable exception.

Organization theory has a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the nature of professors' work. Sensemaking can contribute to our understanding of how professors interpret demands from students and policies; decision theory can contribute to how professors use (or fail to use) data for instructional improvement; resource allocation and cost-effectiveness studies can help us understand the financial trade-offs of various organizational decisions. But these areas remain largely untouched by organizations scholars because of the nearly exclusive focus on environmental effects and the retreat from the study of educational practice and work. We also have extremely poor quantitative data; there is no source of classroom data across institutions. In addition, as a field we have a weak tradition of studying learning: How often have you seen a higher education researcher studying a college classroom? But the potential is there for rich studies of organizational design, interventions, and technology, as well as for deep studies of faculty scholarly learning, research, cognition, and work (see Neumann, 2009, chap. 11 in this volume) as well as scholarly creativity and innovation (Tierney, chap. 6).

Organization theory also has potential to contribute to the study of student affairs administration, which has been almost entirely divorced from organization theory more broadly. I am happy to say that I am currently working with many students who are addressing this gap in the literature from multiple theoretical perspectives. Their studies include work on the emergency-response routines of residential life administrators (Molina, 2010), the effects of the organized sweatshop social movement on the civic engagement of college students (Barn-

hardt, 2011), and the professional socialization of new student affairs professionals (Perez, forthcoming).

COLLEGE COSTS

Rising college costs are seen by many as the primary threat facing higher education. The financial dynamics are well known: higher education costs are driven by personnel, costs that almost never decline and generally increase higher than inflation. There are few economies of scale. States, facing monstrous costs for Medicaid and prisons, have been reducing support for decades. Students from upper-income families—the ones who pay the full price of tuition—increasingly demand the luxury services they enjoyed as children.

Fifteen years ago, Leslie and Rhoades (1995) produced an extensive theory-driven research agenda for the study of college costs. Very few, if any, of these studies have been conducted, and there are many cost drivers in higher education that have the potential for empirical study. For example, there has been a massive expansion in master's programs throughout American higher education in recent decades, particularly in MBAs and teacher education. The adoption of master's degree programs, however, may be far more related to competitive dynamics and institutional prestige than workplace demands (Jaquette, 2011). These processes impose huge costs on both individuals and society, and people pursue master's degrees in fields that are often unnecessary and add little value to individual growth or society in general.

Again, organization theory has enormous potential to contribute to our understanding of college cost drivers. Resource dependence helps us understand how internal power dynamics among administrative and academic units may lead to cost escalation. Institutional theory contributes by focusing on the organizational need for legitimacy that may lead to the adoption of functions without real needs from students or faculty. Sensemaking and routines allow us to see how administrators or faculty may engage in practices that increase costs unnecessarily. An analysis of strategy allows us to see how our vision and priorities affect costs and the degree to which cost reduction is even an institutional goal. On the quantitative side, however, we are often hamstrung by the absence of comprehensive datasets providing fine-grained financial data about colleges, which would allow for the nuanced analysis we need to sort out these effects.

STUDENT AND FACULTY DIVERSITY

Although diversity is often examined from an individual perspective, diversity is by its very nature an organizational concept that requires organizational analysis

and solutions. Daryl Smith (chap. 8) addresses the issue in depth, noting the many accomplishments of researchers to date in studying organizational diversity issues, and laying out an agenda for future research. Undoubtedly, student and faculty diversity is one of the primary challenges facing higher education, and one to which organization theory can contribute.

In addition to the many lines of research noted by Smith (chap. 8), social movement theory has been a recent addition to organization theory, with particular interest in diversity issues (Rojas, chap. 9). In his book, Rojas (2007) analyzes the adoption of black studies programs in the United States as an emerging social movement, examining both the dynamics among black studies faculty and connections to major funders in the environment, particularly the efforts of the Ford Foundation. Slaughter (1997) also has an excellent analysis of the role of social movements in the expansion of higher education curriculum focused on race, class, and gender.

Diversity analysis has been widely studied among business professionals. For example, in the business field there is a rich literature examining the effects of diversity on team dynamics and on the perception of workers and executives. A recent experimental study concluded, for example, that perceptions of the influence of affirmative action cause observers to downgrade the education credentials of black executives (Sauer, Thomas-Hunt, & Morris, 2010). There are many implications for the hiring and retention of minority executives both in business and in higher education; bias against applicants with stereotypically black names has been shown in a famous résumé experiment (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004) and against both men and women in executive compensation, even when performance evaluation scores are held constant (Castilla, 2008). There is potential for significant empirical analysis studying administrators in higher education along many dimensions (see Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009).

STUDENT ACCESS AND COMPLETION

Student access and completion have been the predominant topics of interest in recent years among higher education researchers, students, and external foundations and public policymakers. Yet the focus of our efforts has been almost inclusively at the individual level of the students, rather than the rigorous examination of institutional polices, practices, and attempts at organizational change to improve student access outcomes. In addition, federal and state policy has focused on enrollment as its primary measure of success, rather than student learning, completion, and graduation. As our national agenda has changed toward incentivizing retention and completion, our research agendas as organization theorists

should support our understanding of these dynamics as well. We particularly lack knowledge of organizational structures and dynamics at community colleges and nonselective four-year universities, which educate the vast majority of students in U.S. higher education.

While the focus on student learning would examine the context of professors' work and associated learning outcomes, this agenda focuses on the administrative and incentive structures that influence student decisions. Resource dependence theory would focus on the internal power dynamics among units that facilitate or hinder student access and completion. A strategic focus would examine how institutional mission and priorities have adapted, or failed to adapt, to this new national policy need and how institutions balance student success with other stakeholder demands. Sensemaking theory could inform our understanding of how students and administrators interpret the multiple demands placed on them and how they differ in their behavior in the response to obstacles to success, particularly in their use of social networks. Routines could help us understand how students and administrators develop routines both "on the fly" and as standard operating procedures to intervene with at-risk students and how both groups invoke identities that either support or hinder students' educational progress. We particularly need an understanding, whatever theoretical framework is used, of the vast differences between campuses in student completion that are not explained by differences in student background or characteristics.

The potential for organization theory to contribute to our knowledge of higher education is enormous. The study of higher education organizations has been massively generative for organizational theorists, leading to our most exciting and compelling knowledge about how all types of organizations work. Higher education as an organizational form has never been more powerful, and its ideas and values pervade our lives. Yet the problems that higher education faces are unusually challenging, representing deep issues related to how students learn in classrooms and student subcultures, how organizations accommodate a diversity of increasingly autonomous stakeholders, the conditions that enable and constrain creativity and innovation, and how rational action can lead to highly dysfunctional organizational adaptations.

Deep study of the organizational mechanisms underlying these basic organizational issues has immense promise for educational theory and practice. How to develop our understanding of these mechanisms is the subject of the final chapter.

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