

# Higher Education in America: Multiple Field Perspectives

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October 2012

Draft of paper prepared for *Remaking College: Broad-Access Higher Education for a New Era*, editors, Mitchell L. Stevens and Michael W. Kirst, forthcoming.

## Introduction

Higher education has been, perhaps, the most successful “industry” in the US during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A recent survey of the top universities in the world by the Institute of Higher Education at Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University reported that the top 100 universities included 53 US universities, while the top 20 included 17 US universities (Institute of Higher Education 2011). While this view is heartening (if you are an American), it is fundamentally misleading. The top-tier universities are hardly representative of the thousands of colleges and universities—some 4200—that have emerged during the past half century and, which now account for most of the providers and enrollments in higher education.

Many approaches to examine this wider system of higher education have been developed, the earliest being historical surveys, often focusing on specific colleges or universities with some attention to comparative analysis (e.g., Clark 1983; Cole 2009; Geiger 2005; Haskins, 1957), but we emphasize a family of conceptual frameworks emerging in organizational sociology in the late 1970s which we believe can be instructive. These approaches center around the concept of the *organization field*, a formulation which, in my opinion, has been extraordinarily productive of new insights in the exploration of complex societal systems. During the forty or so years since the concept was first developed, it has been elaborated and challenged to incorporate alternative models, each of which offers new and different insights. I organize this chapter around the application of three contrasting models to the examination of the field of higher education in America: (1) higher education as an institutional field; (2) higher education as an arena of strategic action; and (3) higher education as a demand-generated field. While it is possible and more usual to present a single, integrated model of the organization field (see, e.g., Scott 2008: chap. 8), I believe it useful for present purposes to emphasize multiple models, representing changes over time in both our

model of fields and in developments within higher education. There is interdependence between our theories and the world we are trying to interpret, although the two are loosely coupled. I devote more attention to describing the first, foundational model because it is more fully developed and more widely employed as a guide to understanding our current system. However, the two alternative models, developing later, may provide more purchase in understanding recent developments and may have more to teach us about the future of higher education.

### **Higher Education as an Institutional Field**

In their foundational formulation, DiMaggio and Powell define an organizational field as consisting of:

Those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 148)

Like the conception of “industry”, an organization field is constructed around a focal population of similar organizations—in our case, colleges and universities—but expanded to include other types of organizations who interact with this population, including exchange partners, clients, funding and regulatory organizations. Fields incorporate both relational systems—as organizations and their participants create networks to exchange information and resources, and enter into status and power relations—and symbolic systems—as these relations are grounded in and infused with shared cultural-cognitive and normative frameworks. In this view, organizations within a field “share a common meaning system and interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field” (Scott 1994: 208). Because these fields are defined by a set of commonly shared institutions, they are here termed *institutional*

*fields*. Such “local social orders” are the building blocks around which modern societal systems are constructed (Fligstein 2001: 107).

The earliest formulations of institutional fields were developed by Meyer and Rowan (1977), Meyer and Scott (1983) and DiMaggio and Powell 1983. This approach to organizational analysis differed from prior work in two important ways: (1) the level of analysis was not a single organization, or even a single population of organizations (organizations of the same type), but a collection of diverse, interdependent organizations engaged in some common collection of activities; and (2), rather than focusing primary attention on the material resource and competitive processes shaping organizations, attention was directed to the symbolic forces at work, including normative, cultural and regulative frameworks. Typically, studies employing this approach begin by identifying a collection of similar organizations engaged in the same type of work, e.g., museums, primary schools, biotech companies. In the foundational conception, the focal organizational actors are invariably the providers of services or products. They share a common cultural conception or, in Freidland and Alford’s (1991: 248) term, an *institutional logic*: “a set of material practices and symbolic constructions which constitute [the field’s] organizing principles and which is available to organizations and individuals to elaborate.” The master logic of higher education concerns academic values and associated practices surrounding teaching and learning. Of necessity, all fields employ cultural frameworks, but the field of higher education is especially rich in its endowment of symbolic regalia. On ritual occasions such as graduation ceremonies, many colleges mark these occasions by donning robes and carrying banners reminding all of the medieval moorings of this institution. In addition to this ancient legacy, today’s colleges celebrate their special role as the central creator, carrier and custodian of the arts and sciences that define the modern world to the point where colleges have been aptly described as “a secular version of religion” (Clark 1983; Meyer 1977).

In addition to colleges, the focal organizational population, the field also includes a diverse array of varying types of organizations that support, fund, or regulate them. The core argument is that, as such fields of interdependent organizations develop, they give rise to strong symbolic pressures, often associated with resource flows, including regulative, normative and cognitive-cultural mechanisms, that foster structural and procedural isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott, 2008). In order to be recognizable, acceptable, and legitimate, organizations performing the same functions within the field come, over time, to be strikingly similar in their ways of organizing and modes of acting.

### **Isomorphism in Higher Education**

According to this approach, as the field of higher education matures, organizations within the field become differentiated into a limited number of populations and sub-populations.

Focusing on the focal actors, six sub-populations of colleges can be identified:

1. baccalaureate colleges (liberal arts colleges)
2. comprehensive colleges (baccalaureate and advanced degrees)
3. research universities
4. associate degree programs (community colleges)
5. special focus institutions, (e.g., theology, medicine, law, art)
6. for-profit colleges (special focus, baccalaureate, and associate degrees)

These sub-populations usually appear at a particular time in history in response to changing circumstances, arising in “spurts”, followed by periods of less rapid growth. The structural features adopted by the sub-population at the time of founding tend to be relatively stable—they are “imprinted” by features adopted at the time of their founding—reproduced over time by succeeding organizations (Stinchcombe 1965).

*Baccalaureate colleges*, the prototypical college based on their medieval European counterparts, remain the oldest and most familiar form: relatively small, with high ratios of teachers to students and emphasizing undergraduate, residential education. More generally, these organizations created the basic structural template for most of the sub-populations following in their wake, being organized as either public or non-profit systems and employing a model in which professional academic participants are given considerable autonomy, working within collegially controlled departments, while managers oversaw support structures.

*Comprehensive colleges* emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, attempting to incorporate the traditional undergraduate college but to supplement it with more advanced vocational and professional training programs. This model was substantially advanced by the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act, in 1862 and 1890, when the federal government commenced its partnership with the states to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” ([www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/7/301.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/7/301.html)). It was also fueled by the professionalizing efforts of many occupations during this period, that attempted to elevate their training programs by embedding them in colleges (Bledstein 1976).

*Research universities* were modeled on late-19<sup>th</sup> century German programs that emphasized the role of knowledge creation and research training as central to the mission of higher education, although in the US these programs typically also included the more traditional undergraduate and professional training programs. *Associate degree* programs emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but their most rapid growth occurred after 1960s in response to a public sector political agenda to expand opportunity by increasing college capacity, allowing greater numbers of high school graduates to obtain access to college. *Special focus institutions* concentrate on specialized technical or professional training in multiple areas, but the bulk of these programs are concentrated in the areas of health, business and the arts. The final category, *for-profit colleges*, operated for many years on the margins of the field as special

focus institutions, but in the 1980s began to provide generalized college training. They have grown very rapidly up to the present time. This sub-population is not defined by its academic mission but by its distinctive form. Rather than the professional organization model embraced, in theory if not in practice, by the other sub-populations of college organizations, for-profits have adopted the corporate model of organization. Curricular decisions are highly centralized and teaching staff enjoy much less autonomy than in traditional colleges. Since their primary goal is to maximize profit, they attempt to grow as fast as possible, either by acquiring independent schools or developing new campuses, and seek constantly to find new ways to cut costs.

Category systems such as the foregoing are informed by more detailed classification systems developed by organizations such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. These systems both reflect reality—being based on observations of real differences in modes of organizing and ways of pursuing goals—but also help to reinforce and even reify these differences. If you find that that you are in an organization considered to be a member of a class of other organizations, you necessarily begin to make comparisons and to seek models, both positive and negative. The system is also hierarchical, in the sense that the similarity of all colleges is assumed—one model fits all—but some colleges are clearly superior to others and serve as models for all others, as exemplified by Reisman's (1956) image of higher education as a snake in that all lesser institutions are following the lead, at some distance behind, of the elite colleges and universities.

### **Fragmentation in Governance**

Colleges are the focal populations, but they are surrounded and supported by many other types of actors, including associations of organizations—associations whose members are organizations—and associations of individuals. Many associations of organizations link colleges of the same type (e.g., Catholic colleges, research universities) who, although

competitors, come together to create mechanisms for advancing their common interests. In a parallel fashion, there are many associations whose members are individuals, including professional associations for both faculty and staff members, unions comprised of teachers, staff or graduate students, and alumni associations for former students. Of primary importance, however, are the disciplinary associations among faculty, because they serve as central components of the order and structure of higher education.

As Clark (1983:29) reminds us, in addition to being a network of varying enterprises, “a national system of higher education is also a set of disciplines and professions.” Disciplinary associations are especially salient for schools in the upper tiers of the field: the elite colleges, comprehensive colleges, research universities, and special focus institutions. For faculty members in these settings, discipline typically trumps enterprise (college). Abbott argues that the resilience of the academic disciplines within higher education rests on their “dual Institutionalization”:

On the one hand, the disciplines constitute the macrostructure of the labor market 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: 208-209).

In addition, these associations and their members assist colleges in overseeing the quality of their faculty appointments as well as assisting in watching over the overall performance of their departmental programs. (These comments apply much less to “broad access” institutions, including comprehensive and community colleges, in part, because such a high proportion of the faculty in these colleges are in “adjunct” status, as discussed below.) Professionals also staff accreditation agencies that provide certification for colleges. Whereas in most countries, these functions are carried out by public ministries of higher education, in the



US they are assigned to a collection of six regional accreditation agencies. A favorable assessment, while not required for a college to operate, is a significant marker of legitimacy and also a condition for students enrolled to be eligible for government loans to finance their education. Accreditation programs for special focus institutions and for professional schools in comprehensive colleges and universities are carried out by the relevant professional associations. It is hard to overstate the extent to which the normative controls exercised by professional associations and their members provides structure for the field of higher education: meaning, coherence, standards, templates for organizing, and protocols for guiding the educational activities of college participants.

In addition to professional oversight, important governance functions in higher education are carried out by local, regional, state, and federal governments, as well as by the courts. Throughout most of the past two centuries, the vast bulk of colleges have been public institutions, heavily dependent on governmental sources of support. The several states provide the lion's share of funding for comprehensive colleges and associate degree programs. While the federal government does not directly fund colleges, with the exception of the military academies, from the 1940s, the federal government has served as the most important source of support for research and research training as well as a major source of student grants and loans through the GI Bill and the Pell Grants. With funding goes oversight, both legislative and administrative. To an extraordinary degree, these regulative oversight systems are both *federalized*—operating at multiple levels of governments—and *fragmented*—administered by relatively independent governmental agencies. In an exploratory study conducted by our research group of external control systems operating in higher education, we recorded the kinds of organizations exercising influence and/or oversight over a sample of post-secondary (PS) colleges in the San Francisco Bay Area (Scott, Proctor and Baker 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the variety of these organizations. Such field-level conditions affect the organizations operating with

them. Scott and Meyer (1983; 1991) argue and empirically demonstrate that fragmented and federalized control systems produce high levels of administrative complexity within organizations subject to their control. During the past half century, the administrative structures of all college institutions have increased in size, diversity, and cost relative to the academic core.

[Figure 1 about here]

### **Loose Coupling**

Another argument associated with the founding perspective is that many changes adopted by organizations in response to external pressures—specific structures, policies, and procedures—are often disconnected from the working core of the organization. Organizational responses to external pressures are often ritualistic rather than real, often having little effect on the ways in which work is carried out within the institution (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Weick 1976). Of course, this observation is not independent of the processes just described—that colleges are subject to multiple levels and modes of control, many of which are inconsistent .

### **Structuration**

One may learn much about an organization field by simply noting the numbers of types of actors it contains and the nature of the relational ties among them as these vary over time and space. A more systematic examination is called for, but it is obvious from cursory inspection that, over the past century and a half, the field of higher education is characterized by:

- a vastly expanded number of schools serving an ever-increasing number of students
- a widely shared set of templates for organizing and repertoires of activities for carrying out our educational work
- a much more specialized and professionalized labor force

- a proliferation of associations of many types to provide information and assistance to their members
- a complex array of uncoordinated oversight organizations exercising regulative and/or normative controls

It is also the case that the field of higher education has become much more highly “structured” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Giddens 1979)—exhibiting more dense interactions among the actors, multiple channels carrying increased flows of information, strong isomorphic pressures among organizations of the same type, clearer structures of status and prestige, and more stable patterns of coalition among participants. This system is created and maintained by the combined work of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive mechanisms that induce shared assumptions and conceptions of educational work, who and how it is to be carried out (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2008) .

The major thrust of this founding perspective of institutional fields has been to explain the extraordinary uniformity of organizational forms within established institutional fields: to answer the question: “Why are there so *few* kinds of organizations within a given sector?” Given the huge variety of geographic, demographic, and economic conditions occurring throughout the US, the system of higher education has been remarkably stable and has enjoyed wide acceptance and credibility. The framework privileges the overpowering effects of “top-down” isomorphic pressures creating uniform structures and procedures and lending legitimacy to actors that adopt and display them.

### **Higher Education as an Arena of Strategic Action**

During the early 1990s, an alternative conception of organization fields began to take shape that has challenged the foundational conception, both augmenting and attempting to

replace it. It argues that the initial approach placed too much emphasis on structures, whether relational or symbolic, and not enough on actors and action; was too quick to assume that conformity to institutional pressures is the default response rather than to recognize that actors often exhibit challenging and strategic responses; and was based on the presumption that fields are organized around a consensual “taken for granted” reality rather than recognizing that most fields are highly contested—arenas in which actors compete for dominance. This more critical perspective has drawn primarily on the earlier work on “social fields” by Bourdieu, on the work of management strategy theorists, on approaches to institutional logics, and on social movement theory.

### **Agency and Strategic Action**

While all actors, both individual and collective, are partially shaped by and responsive to their institutional contexts, all actors possess in varying degrees the capacity to exercise *agency*—to act independently, to resist and sometimes to change the relational and symbolic contexts within which they are embedded (Emirbayer and Miche 1998). In his early work on “social fields”, Bourdieu (1971) argued that within modern societies, all action takes place within “a number of relatively autonomous social microcosms” exhibiting a complex of rules or “regularities” which are the “product of the competition between players” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97-98). Each field is organized around competition for one or another kind of *capital*: some fields stress the importance of economic capital, others, social capital—based on access to networks of relationships—and still others on cultural capital—emphasizing the importance of status, prestige, artistic, and scientific values (Bourdieu 1986).

Rather than assuming, as the founding field conception does, that individuals and organizations will routinely conform to the pressures exerted by the institutional environment, analysts such as Oliver (1991) pointed out that a range of more strategic responses are often

observed, including compromise, avoidance, manipulation, and defiance in response to external demands. Actors are both constrained and enabled by institutional frameworks, and they are capable of using them to pursue their own interests as well as challenging and attempting to change frameworks if necessary. Moreover, while fields are made up of many established and institutionalized actors who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, they also include other types of players whose interests have been suppressed and who, given the opportunity, mobilize to promote change and reform. All fields contain both incumbents and challengers. Social movements provide a vital source of change in organizational fields (Davis et al. 2005). Far from being islands of tranquility and harmony, fields are arenas of contestation for power among players with diverse interests and agendas (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

Strategic processes and the competition for capital generate diversity in organizational fields. As noted, the founding conception of fields stressed the uniformity of organizational forms, and classification systems like the Carnegie system embrace a hierarchical imagery that overemphasizes the role of the top tier institutions, ignoring both the contribution of broad access colleges that educate more than 85 percent of all post-secondary students, as well as their diversity. The structures and missions of these colleges exhibit wide variety, including public, nonprofit, and for-profit forms, and serve complex mixtures of “nontraditional” students—including larger numbers of minority students, a wider range of age groups, married as well as single students, and part-time as well as full-time enrollees.

Competition among colleges has escalated in part because the continuing decline in public funding for higher education. From the 1970s into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, public expenditures have plateaued, in the case of federal funding, or substantially decreased in the case of state funding. With the end of the cold war and the arrival of more conservative policies, federal support for research and training in universities has not kept pace with increases in enrollments or expenditures. At the state level, public funding of state colleges has

declined, from covering 50 percent of higher education budgets in 1970 to under 30 percent in 2012. While public revenues have declined, enrollments have continued to increase. Total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions has nearly tripled, increasing from 7.4 million students in 1970 to 18.1 million in 201. Post-baccalaureate enrollments have also grown, but at a lower rate (National Center for Educational Statistics 2012). It is against this background of declining support for public institutions and increased enrollment pressures that we have witnessed an intensification in competition among colleges for revenues, as well as the rise of a new type of provider: the for-profit college.

Relying earlier primarily on public or philanthropic funding, colleges increasingly seek funds from tuition and fees, and some have developed financial ties to the corporate sector. Also, the reality of market forces has been made even more tangible by the emergence and growth of rating agencies, who doggedly score and rank every facet of a college's make-up and programs, including student body, faculty, residential facilities, curriculum, athletic programs, social life, and ambiance. Colleges have become more aware of their direct competitors, and many if not most consciously work to improve their ratings.

At the micro level of fields, colleges compete with one another to secure resources, including the most desirable students and the most productive and/or promising faculty. The competition for students often involves balancing the academic qualifications of students and their ability to pay tuition. Although liberal arts colleges have long insisted on their adherence to admitting those students best qualified academically, over time, they have begun to accord more weight to the ability to pay. Kraatz and colleagues (2010) suggest that this transformation has been aided and abetted by "mundane" changes in administrative structure. Whereas admissions departments had long made their decisions "blind" of financial condition, the introduction of "enrollment management" departments, combining admissions and financial aid officers into a single department, raised the salience of financial considerations, increasing

pressures on admissions personnel to heavily weigh a student's ability to pay in their admissions decisions. These structural innovations were endorsed and heavily promoted by a professional association, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, in part as a way of increasing the influence of these officials within their colleges. Another example of competition among colleges for students with financial resources is provided by the practice of many state colleges and universities to recruit out-of-state students. Declining state support has caused many colleges to seek to attract students from neighboring states, giving them priority over their own students, because out-of-state students can be charged higher tuition rates.

Within colleges, departments and administrative units compete for scarce resources. Academic disciplines have long jostled with one another over status and jurisdiction over intellectual turf (Abbott 1988), and now recent accounting schemes have begun to treat departments as "profit centers," shifting resources to those more able to contribute to the "bottom line." "Faculty and degrees too are increasingly rewarded according to their market value, thereby creating enormous disparities in incomes between universities, but also between disciplines within universities, as well as within disciplines" (Burawoy 2012: 147). Many faculty members have organized to protect their financial interests. By 1995, roughly 40 percent of full-time faculty in higher education were represented by labor unions (Julius and Gumpert 2003), and union membership has increased by about 24 percent between 1998 and 2006 (2006 Directory of Faculty Contracts). However, a sobering trend among college faculty is the large and growing number of part-time members employed on a contract basis: "adjunct faculty". Adjuncts today make up 73 percent of the instructional workforce and currently teach about half of the undergraduate courses at public institutions ([www.bestcollegeonline.com/blog/2012/09](http://www.bestcollegeonline.com/blog/2012/09)). Most adjuncts do not receive benefits, and their pay scale is low and has been declining in recent decades. Most are in, but not of, the university, lack an office and have little to no

contact with faculty colleagues. Adjunct faculty are neither supported by nor subject to the professional controls exercised by disciplinary associations. Even within elite institutions, the proportion of faculty covered by the tenure system has dropped from 55 percent in 1980 to 31 percent in 2007 (Clawson 2009).

The dominance of money over mission is also graphically illustrated by the overweening influence exerted by organized sports associated with the larger colleges. Head coaches are frequently the highest paid members of the faculty, sometimes eclipsing the salaries of college presidents, and sports events with the help of television coverage are the most visible public activities performed by most colleges. Of more consequence, athletic departments can exercise strong influence over admissions decisions and can have an adverse effect on educational standards.

During the 1950s-80s, the capacity of the higher education system was expanded, almost entirely with increased public funding (Fischer and Hout 2006). Since the 1980s, however, the system has undergone privatization, both in the sense that students bear a larger and larger share of funding their education through increased tuition rates and fees, and because the for-profit population has been the most rapidly growing segment of the sector. Although for-profit colleges remain a minority of providers, they have grown vigorously in recent decades. Two-year for-profit colleges numbered only 140 in 1980 and increased five-fold to 636 by 2010. The rate of increase for 4-year colleges has been even higher, from 18 in 1980 to 563 in 2010 (National center for Educational Statistics 2011). Their educational efforts are both fueled and enabled by the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT), which allows for distance learning. Once curricular materials are created, they can be transmitted virtually costlessly to widely-scattered consumers. While they operate in ways to reduce costs so as to increase profits, tuition at two-year for-profit colleges averages more than



six times that of a community college (Gonzalez 2009). For-profit colleges constitute the most significant challenge ever posed to the traditional model of providing education.

### **Institutional Logics**

Friedland and Alford (1991) introduced the concept of institutional logics, not simply to emphasize the organizing principles around which a given field was organized but to point out that modern societal systems are comprised of many, diverse fields, each with its own dominant logic, and to note that these logics compete for attention and adherents. Fields such as higher education intersect and interact with other fields, such as political and economic systems, and actors must work to manage the conflicting logics at play. Indeed, as Stevens and colleagues (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008) have observed, higher education in modern society is an important “hub” interacting with the state, the economy, kinship and stratification systems and servicing the professions and sciences. Among the principal contested logics are:

*Liberal vs. practical arts.* For many years, the logic dominating colleges in the US has been a belief in the value of “liberal education.” The core disciplines of the humanities, mathematics and the natural sciences and, later, the social sciences have long held center stage. However, as we have noted, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of the land-grant colleges, this model was not so much challenged as amended to include programs devoted to the cultivation of the mechanical and practical arts. For the next 100 years, these contrasting models co-existed and, to some extent, competed as liberal arts colleges continued to multiply alongside those devoted more specifically to “vocational” programs.

A common response by organizations that service diverse goals is to differentiate among programs within schools, allowing students and faculty to specialize in one or another area. And at the field level, different types of organizations develop to cater to one or another type of program, some providing a higher proportion of offerings in the liberal arts and others

specializing in the practical or vocational arts. Programs devoted exclusively to vocational training have long existed in this country but, over time, most of them have moved outside the boundaries of the field of higher education to operate within companies that provide tailored training for their employees. While about a third of vocational training is housed in independent schools created by firms, such as Motorola, Walt Disney, or Boeing corporate universities, most of the rest takes place in-house, within for-profit firms or public agencies (Carnevale 1993).

Within the field of higher education, the relatively new population of community colleges—associate degree programs—has tended in recent decades to offer an increasing number of courses serving vocational (rather than transfer) objectives, offering certificates in a variety of semiprofessional and technical fields. Brint and Karabel (1989) employ historical data to support their argument that, at least in the critical period of expansion during the 1960s, this vocational emphasis was supported by a number of foundations and the federal government and by the interests of administrators and college leaders who were resentful at being treated as inferior by four-year colleges and so sought to differentiate themselves. Rather than being on the bottom rung of the liberal arts hierarchy, they opted for being at the top of the occupational training hierarchy.

Meanwhile, even within mainstream colleges, since the 1970s, the practical programs, including business, engineering, health care, and computer science, have made substantial inroads on the liberal arts, so that by 2010 the most commonly selected majors were in the fields of business, management, marketing, personal and culinary areas, and the health services (Brint 2002). These changes reflect the increasing emphasis on economic values and goals—the incursion of economic logics into the core providers of higher education—as education is expected to justify its worth in terms of its contribution to economic development (e.g., the development of “human capital”). Moreover, since the mid-1950s, academic research

and training programs have increasingly been viewed as a vital engine of economic growth and development (Berman 2012).

*Elite vs. mass education.* Because the field of higher education intersects with the political arena, American democratic values of equality of opportunity have long pressured colleges to provide increased access to a college education for all. The convergence of social movements pressing for reform and the actions of Democratic administrations during the 1940s and 1960s expanded educational opportunities. Beginning with the GI Bill in 1944, which provided financial assistance to demobilized servicemen to pursue a college education, to the Higher Education Act of 1964, which promoted state-wide plans and provisions for expanding higher education throughout the nation, to the Pell grants of the 1970s that provided low-interest loans to college students, the federal government has worked to improve educational access (Cole 2009).

An important vehicle of expanding opportunities for advanced education was the community college movement. Although the form has been available from the early 1900s, the most rapid period of expansion occurred during the 1960s. In 2012, over one quarter of full-time students and over 60 percent of part-time students were enrolled in public community colleges (National Center for Educational Statistics 2012). State governments have increased opportunity largely through enlarging the number of public institutions, both two- and four-year colleges. In combination with federal programs, these efforts greatly expanded the capacity of the system: “At the end of World War II, there was space enough in colleges and universities for only one-fifth of American age eighteen to twenty-two; by the early 1990s, there was space for about four-fifths of them. The expansion came about almost solely through the construction and subsidization of *public* higher education” (Fischer and Hout 2006: 251).

More challenging are efforts to increase the diversity of colleges—both students and faculty—which critics argue pits the value of equality against that of merit and academic

achievement. Major social movements mobilizing efforts to improve civil rights emerged during the 1960s in arenas outside of higher education, but very quickly colleges found themselves embroiled in controversies ranging from anti-war protests to affirmative action initiatives involving the full range of disadvantaged groups, including ethnic, women, and gay and lesbian groups. While substantial progress has been made in increasing equity of access for most citizens, the most important barriers still to be attacked are financial. With the rising costs of higher education, low-income populations remain at a distinct disadvantage (Zemsky 2009: chap. 7).

*Education as Public vs. Private Good.* Related to the distinction between liberal and practical arts is the debate over the proper mission of higher education. From its founding period—a time of institutional “imprinting”—colleges have been somewhat set apart from the economic and political pressures of the societies that supported them—“ivory towers” providing sanctuaries for study and contemplation. Many academics see themselves as following a “calling”—a commitment to preserving cultural and intellectual treasures, enriching them, and passing them on to succeeding generations. Although, as we have described, the intrusion of the practical world occurred relatively early in US educational history, and educational missions began to be elaborated and programs differentiated, most public and nonprofit students—as their tax status suggests—have insisted that they were dedicated to scholarly values and serving the broader public good, not simply the demands of individual students.

However, as noted, new organizational forms have emerged during the last few decades that do not simply bend to the wider pressures of market logics, but directly embrace them. Thus, for-profit colleges seek as their primary goal to maximize profits and returns to their shareholders, either by growing as rapidly as possible or finding new ways to cut costs, or both. This has resulted in the exploration and exploitation of new technologies of teaching, but also in the utilization of hard-sell, sometimes misleading, marketing to prospective students, deskilling

of faculty, and the ascendance of managerial and financial logics. These new types of organizations are closer in their DNA to the factory than the monastery.

Viewed as a arena within which varying groups armed with diverse types of capital employ multiple strategies to pursue conflicting objectives, the organization field of higher education appears anything but a world of convergence and consensus. Rather, in this view, the structuration of the field is characterized by:

- the development of a highly varied and differentiated collection of colleges
- competition of logics among the academy, the state, and the economy
- the emergence of a challenger form: the for-profit college

### **Higher Education as a Demand Generated Field**

The founding and challenging view of organization fields differ in important ways regarding the processes and mechanisms by which fields operate and undergo change. The former privileges the role of relational and symbolic structures as they provide meaning and order for multiple types of interdependent actors. The latter shifts attention to work of actors, both organizations and individuals, who possess varying types of capital and are guided by diverse institutional logics and who compete to gain advantage within the field. However, both approaches share a common assumption: field analysis should focus on the activities, interactions, and structures of the *providers* of goods and services.

A third, emerging perspective departs from this fundamental assumption, suggesting instead that analysts attend to the motivation and actions of actors who *consume* educational services. Advocates of this view suggest that we should substitute a demand- for a supply-side approach to higher education. As Illich (1971) argued more than fifty years ago, it is important not to confuse the supplier with the service: the school with education. Education—in the sense

of learning and development—has long been available outside of formal schooling to individuals in all walks of life. Lessons are there to be learned in everyday experiences, from friends and strangers, from the media and books, from travel and participating in the arts. Given advances in information technologies, these long-available and familiar resources can now be vastly augmented by the reach of the internet. Under such conditions, who needs the colleges and universities? They have no monopoly on information and knowledge, and, in any case, many of these proprietary systems are increasingly making their courses available online. Education is being delivered to hundreds and thousands of student through a new vehicle known as MOOCs—massive open online courses. In one such course, offered in the fall of 2012 by Stanford faculty members, more than 160,000 students from 190 countries were enrolled (Lewin 2012).

Kamenezt (2010: chap. 5) cogently reviews developing approaches to unleashing what has been termed the “edupunk”: the liberated learner at the center of a web of intellectual resources, supported by “community- and practice-based learning” (p. 109). Utilizing resources such as those developed by the Open University in the UK, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with its OpenCourseWare Project, or more recently, Udacity and Coursera, involving a consortia of elite-university providers, students can design their own curriculum. Freely-available materials including lectures from highly-regarded faculty members can be combined with self-organized groups of learners, both co-located and virtual. In short, students are encouraged to “design their own university”. This model offers a radical recipe for reforming higher education, suggesting that students simply ignore the existing system with its complex of requirements, gatekeepers, 50-minutes lectures offered at set hours, and end-of-term examinations—and instead be empowered to create their own customized program of education.

While such an approach presents an intriguing and heady vision of the future of learning, it appears to posit a heroic, and probably unrealistic, viewer of the agency and perspicacity of the individual learner and his or her capacity to effectively mobilize the intellectual and social resources scattered throughout their environment. Somewhat ironically, the skills and discipline needed to create one's own educational experience appear to be those that we commonly associate with a highly education person! (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006: chap. 5). It was Herbert Simon (1945/1997) who first taught us about the cognitive limits of individuals and suggested that the primary purpose of organization is to simplify work by subdividing it and to support decision-making by creating formal channels to supply appropriate information to diverse participants as needed, authority figures to select goals and coordinate contributions, and rules to constrain choice. In sum, he argued that organization is required to support individual rationality.

And, indeed, it appears that new types of organization are beginning to emerge to enable and support individual learners, but also, perhaps, to exploit naïve customers and take advantage of new business models and income streams. New firms, some nonprofit, others for-profit, are emerging to select and package course offerings, serving as an intermediary between student and course. They are currently deciding whether and how to generate revenues from course offerings. This is a major concern of existing colleges and universities, many of whose faculty are beginning to participate in the development of MOOC courses. In addition, a host of governance issues have begun to surface, including: How is the adequacy of a course to be evaluated? How is student performance to be evaluated? How are we to develop trustworthy alternative credentials to signal varying levels of accomplishment. A variety of new, intermediary organizations are beginning to emerge, each providing competing solutions to these challenges.

In short, it would appear that a new, alternative field of providers, intermediaries, and governance systems is beginning to emerge, perhaps displacing, perhaps allying with earlier, traditional providers and associated organizations. In many ways, the traditional field of higher education providers and their supporting structures are the most salient environment for the emerging up-start initiatives. Given the familiarity, widespread acceptance, and credibility of these earlier forms, it would be surprising indeed if the new educational entrepreneurs did not appropriate, adapt, and re-purpose many of them as they construct the new edifice. As Meyer and Rowan observed in their seminal paper launching the institutional field perspective:

...institutions are myths which make formal organizations both easier to create and more necessary. After all, the building blocks for organizations come to be littered around the societal landscape: it takes only a little entrepreneurial energy to [re-]assemble them into a structure. And because these building blocks are considered proper, adequate, rational, and necessary, organizations must incorporate them to avoid illegitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 345).

If nothing else, this upstart set of players and novel processes, along with the crisis in public funding, has begun to challenge earlier modes of organizing, in particular, loose-coupling between administrative and teaching units. As calls for better assessment of teaching and learning within for-profit and on-line education have arisen, they are increasingly being applied to more traditional educational institutions. The accountability pressures which have been directed for over two decades toward primary-secondary schools because of their low performance scores as revealed by cross-state and international data, are increasingly targeting colleges both because of the absence of clear evidence regarding learning (cognitive) outcomes for students and because of low rates of graduation. Along with market-oriented institutional logics, accountability pressures are at loose in the land.





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Figure 1: External Control Systems in Higher Education

