Naomi Li
Economics and Sociology, Class of 2020

"Push and Pull: Organization and Leadership in Higher Education"

Abstract

The internal organization of higher education reflects its role as a social, economic, and political institution. In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for the internal workings of the university to be laid bare. Throughout this summer, I intend to stay in Ithaca to work on multiple aspects of my honors thesis. First, I will obtain approval from the IRB in order to conduct interviews with administrators and leaders in higher education. Second, I will work on building a literature review to delineate how the university is organized along racial and gendered barriers, and examining how organization of the university along these lines has changed over time. I am hoping that by the end of this summer, I will be able to produce interview data from at least two interviews and a literature review on internal organization of higher education.

Biographical Sketch

My name is Naomi Li. I am a junior studying Sociology and Economics. I was born in Rolla, Missouri, but then moved to and grew up in Center Valley, Pennsylvania. My college years have been a fruitful opportunity to work with groups investigating our world's greatest social problems, with one of those primary questions being the role and purpose of education. I am excited to have this opportunity to work with the Sociology department to explore an incredibly immediate and relevant issue.

Statement of Purpose

Higher education has become a central institution in American society, occupying roles that extend far beyond educating the nation's youth. It serves to stratify populations, develop competent social actors, legitimize official knowledge, and connect multiple institutional domains (Stevens, Arum, and Armstrong 2008). Universities have become complex organizations that are both responsive to and generative of social systems. As the functions and constituencies of the American university system continue to expand, so too do the demands and conflicts that the system must contend with. This conflict of interests in these demands have made it incredibly difficult for administrators in higher education to maintain their positions.

The university is a unique site of knowledge production and radical demands. Historically, the university has been organized along racialized and gendered distinctions (Ferguson 2012). Throughout history, we have also seen external and internal demands for the reorganization of the university along these lines. The most recent iteration of racialized and gendered organization has been rearranged by narratives and conversations about "diversity". This re-organization has revealed the effect of the pressures from multiple constituencies who want purchase to the inner workings of the university. However, these pressures often exist in conflict with each other, meaning that leadership in higher education must undergo a near-impossible balancing of demands while under public scrutiny. Furthermore, anthropologists Benson and Kirsch lay out an effective framework for understanding the university's organization as a corporation. When social controversies erupt, corporations undergo three phases to navigate these controversies. Phase 1 is about mitigating external liabilities, and a key part of this strategy involves proliferating doubt. This behavior was particularly salient with protests against anti-black racism at Missouri State University in 2015, where accusations of

racism were routinely denied until undeniable proof of racial discrimination on campus was brought to the national spotlight. At this point, when there is undeniable proof of a corporation violating a public value, in this case being complicit in racism, the corporation is forced to progress to Phase 2. In phase 2, corporations acknowledge that there is something wrong, and that there is something ethically or scientifically valid about the critique of their behavior, but only engage in symbolic gestures in an attempt to ameliorate the general public. If that is not sufficient, and there is the risk of catastrophic financial or social loss, then the corporation progresses to Phase 3. In phase 3, corporations engage in crisis management that can involve co-opting critical narratives, implementing regulation, or "the emergence of what has been called 'audit culture' (Strathern 2002; see also Power 1997), the development of regimes of monitoring and accountability that fail to produce real change" (Benson and Kirsch 2010). This phase 3 in the university often presents itself in the form of re-organization of the administrative structure of the university.

Most recently, we have seen an eruption in resignations in the midst of controversies surrounding race and gender at universities such as the University of Missouri, University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill, and Michigan State University. These controversies have led to demands not only for retributive action to be taken against the ostensible leaders of these universities, but the controversies have also ignited demands for a closer scrutiny of the university's inner workings. These demands became clear to me through three case studies I conducted on high-profile resignations in higher education. I studied the resignations of Tim Wolfe at the University of Missouri, Lou Anna Simon at Michigan State University, and Biddy Martin and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. While the controversies surrounding these resignations were qualitatively different, one thing became abundantly clear: in the midst of

massive external social movements, the demands and interests that university leadership have to balance increase, and the stakes grow higher. When I study these resignations, I focus on understanding how the resignation of leadership in higher education reveals how the multiple constituencies present who all make demands of leadership. In each of these cases, there were several clearly defined constituencies that leaders were responsible to: The Board of Trustees/Regents, students, faculty, the marketplace, and the court of public opinion. Each of these constituencies has substantive power, and have played crucial roles in the ousting of leadership. These case studies have helped me build a theoretical foundation for discussing the forces at play in the organization of the university.

For this summer, I will continue to build the theoretical grounding for my senior honor's thesis. There is an extensive literature base on how social movements and disruptions regarding racial equality have shaped and been shaped by the university; I want to examine another way in which social disruptions have shaped the university in regards to gender inequality. There have been three notable instances of demands for a more equal and safe place for all genders: the explosive case at Michigan State University, the resignation of three professors from Dartmouth University, and the case involving Florian T. Jaeger at Rochester University. I believe that there will be valuable insights into how multiple constituencies simultaneously vie for and against initiatives regarding gender inequality in the university. I also intend to conduct a case study on Cornell's administration and how its administrative leaders balance different groups of interest through interviews. This information will be incredibly important to the development of my senior honors thesis, as it will constitute the data collection I need to support my theoretical hypothesis.

Works Cited

Benson, Peter and Stuart Kirsch. 2010. "Capitalism and the Politics of Resignation." *Current Anthropology,* 51(4): 459-486.

Ferguson, Roderick A. 2012. *The Reorder of Things: the University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Stevens, Mitchell L., Elizabeth A. Armstrong, and Richard Arum. 2008. "Sieve, Incubator, Temple, Hub: Empirical and Theoretical Advances in the Sociology of Higher Education." *Annual Review of Sociology.* 34: 127-151.