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Tales of university devolution : organizational behavior in the age of markets

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Abstract

In the wake of the Cold War era, America's research universities became increasingly characterized by a tribal mentality among schools and departments, and disciplines. The surge in research funding, and the tremendous growth rate among the major public universities in particular, fostered the idea of the "multiversity" was becoming less communal, and less aware of the collective purpose. These patterns have accelerated considerably over the past two decades in the US that reflect three relatively new realities or influences: a) within the public university sector, decreasing public subsidies have influenced a movement toward internal management decisions and organizations that have eroded a

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previous model of revenue sharing (in tuition and fees, in overhead generated by extramural research, for example) to profit, loss, and prestige centers; b) this has been accompanied and reinforced by the concept that there are different market opportunities among different schools, departments, disciplines and their degrees, and hence opportunity costs (in the tuition price of an MBA versus and English PhD, for example) in which high income units should retain and spend those monies. These influences are common in various degrees globally but from different source. In much of the world, including Europe, the demands and edicts of ministries and evolving concepts of faculty as civil servants heavily influence organizational behavior. In the US, the decrease in public investment is driving internal behaviors shaped as well by the interests of faculty, the increasing global nature of knowledge production, and market opportunities that differ among the disciplines. This paper explores the development and impact of these various influences on research intensive universities, with the theme that the internal concept of the university is rapidly changing, influencing the behavior of academic leaders and faculty, the organization of the post-modern university, the flow of funds, and ultimately the perceived and real role of the research university in society. Past observers of the life and times on universities have described aspects of this shift as a movement from a larger sense of a university community among faculty to a tribal mentality. But the current shift extends well the weakening of disciplines and departments, beyond faculty as individual actors to the internal organization of the academy and a relatively new concept of profit and loss centers. This shift toward what I call "University Devolution" or fragmentation is influenced by the external political, social, and economic world. In Europe and elsewhere, neo-liberal ministries wield great power and have helped pushed universities toward this model. In the US, it remains largely a phenomenon influenced by reduced government investment yet ultimately driven by internal decision-making related to privatization ? thus far. The paper ends with a brief discussion on whether the organizational behaviors in US research universities are reflective of global trends, or are in some aspects unique.

(HRK / Abstract übernommen)

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