

The Study of University Organizations

There Is a Scarcity of Research on This Subject

By WILLIAM E. MORAN

A HOST of articles and books in recent years by administrators and professors has largely failed to penetrate the fog which surrounds the question of what kind of organization the modern university actually is. Any major advance toward understanding this institution—what it is and why it behaves as it does—will depend upon a major effort of organized research comparable in kind and amount with that currently expended in the study of industrial organization. This article will review two organizational concepts often cited in connection with university organizations and discuss the kind of research that could lead to a more effective frame of reference for administrative purposes.

It has been suggested by one authority that, as organizations, universities are unique; that they are essentially different from all other organization types.¹ The assumption, however, remains to be proved. That universities are different from other kinds of organizations, such as hospitals, army divisions, unions, political parties, public utilities, and so forth, is, of course, true. But so are these different from one another; and yet, as least in some respects, they are comparable.² The principal characteristics that distinguish university organizations from other organizations therefore may be acknowledged without abandoning as irrelevant the substantial body of organization literature currently available and increasing daily.

The scarcity of empirical research on university organizations is a notable modern phenomenon. It exists in the midst of what has been called an organizational revolution,³ and a concomitant growth of research on organization behavior. In a comprehensive summary of organization research recently published, there are separate essays on nine important organization types, including hospitals and grammar schools. The uni-

¹John D. Millett, *The Academic Community* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1962), pp. 54-58.

²For an example of comparative organization analysis, see either Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, *Formal Organizations* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1962); or Amitai Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961). In addition, most of the modern texts on organization theory rely upon research done in many different kinds of organizations.

³Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Organizational Revolution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953).

WILLIAM E. MORAN is assistant to the executive vice-president for long range planning of the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

versity is omitted completely.⁴ This absence of scientific curiosity would perhaps be understandable if universities were either less dynamic or less important than they are. Society today looks to the university for help on a wide variety of social, scientific, and political problems, in addition to its traditional tasks of research and teaching. Indeed, there seems to be very little public sense of any limitation on what a university may be called upon to do, if the social need is great enough.

There is, nevertheless, reason to believe that neither the university nor any other organization has unlimited wisdom, energy, or capacity to apply to the world's problems. Achievement of fundamental objectives, adaptation to environment, and maintenance of internal stability pose formidable tests for most organizations without assuming unlimited additional responsibilities. That so little notice has been taken of the fact that university organizations are neither omniscient nor omnipotent may be considered further evidence of limited understanding of this type of social system.⁵

The last century has seen vast changes in the environment of these organizations, as well as in the public's attitude toward them. Less than 2 per cent of the college-age population in 1870 was enrolled in a college or university. Half of the same age group by 1970 will be active members of colleges or universities. The three hundred organizations responsible for higher education in 1870 have increased to well over two thousand, many with enrollments of twenty to thirty thousand students, several thousand faculty, and hundreds of full-time administrators. The education "industry," measured by virtually any index of organizational importance—plant investment, annual operating expenditures, impact on employment, social contribution—is clearly of a major magnitude. It is hardly necessary to point out that changes of this kind have had a great influence upon all facets of university life. The simple organization structure and relationships of the early days are now merely history.

Universities have been called upon to expand their size, accept new purposes and responsibilities, and integrate vast amounts of knowledge. They have attempted to respond with no sure knowledge of the long-term impact of these changes upon the organization itself. It is probably significant that those institutions that have relatively greater freedom of role choice—the well-endowed private institutions—have for the most part chosen to grow at a controlled and cautious rate, demonstrating

⁴*Handbook of Organizations*, edited by James G. March (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1965). In a chapter entitled "The School as a Formal Organization," p. 972, Charles E. Bidwell makes the following observation: "One of the major difficulties inherent in this effort is the diversity of schools. Consider, for example, the great differences between the structures and central activities of elementary schools and universities. . . . The author has deliberately chosen in this chapter to consider only public elementary and secondary school systems. In part, this choice was forced by the almost complete absence of empirical research dealing with any other kind of school. Even taxonomic descriptions, comparing the attributes of types of schools, are lacking."

⁵Recent experiences, characterized by serious conflict among internal groups, at the University of California, the University of Pittsburgh, and St. John's University have helped to make the point that universities are not invulnerable.

sensitivity to the hazards of changing organizational size substantially or at too rapid a pace. Such changes raise not only questions of structure but economic and educational issues as well. A California policy decision was made some time ago that no campus of the University of California should be permitted to grow larger than 27,500 students. How this cut-off point was determined is not clear, but its existence indicates that public universities as well as private have felt concern over the possible complications of organization growth. The truth of the matter is that little is known about the ramifications of organizational growth despite the extensive research on organization behavior currently going on.

THE fact that relatively little empirical research has been focused upon universities as organizations is no indication of a dearth of writing concerning the manner in which the university operates and what kind of organization it is. Some efforts have been made in recent years to relate university organizations to the literature of organization theory. Among the most prominent of these have been the works of John Corson, Edward Litchfield, John Millett, Beardsley Ruml, and Clark Kerr. Two interesting and conflicting "models" of the university organization have emerged, neither supported by research findings but attracting attention nevertheless by reason of the experience and stature of the authors and the insight and logic of their respective presentations.

The first, espoused by Millett, argues that "community of power rather than a hierarchy of power is the organizational basis of American colleges and universities."⁶ Millett adds that students of higher education are puzzled in their attempts to understand universities because they see them "in the light of the usual concepts of work specialization, of integration by hierarchy and authority, and of leadership through management."⁷ The university has, he believes, goals and objectives which bind together the university community.

The concept of community presupposes an organization in which functions are differentiated and in which specializations must be brought together in a harmonious whole. But this process of bringing together, of coordination if you will, is achieved not through a structure of superordination of persons and groups but through a dynamic of consensus.⁸

Ruml and Donald Morrison appear to support the thesis that college organizations are in fact communities.⁹

Kerr and Litchfield, on the other hand, have both contested the notion that a university organization is an organic community with schools and colleges bound to one another by a common goal or goals. Kerr observes:

⁶Millett, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁹Beardsley Ruml and Donald H. Morrison, *Memo to a College Trustee: A Report on Financial and Structural Problems of the Liberal College* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 47-59.

The university started as a single community—a community of masters and students. It may even be said to have had a soul in the sense of a central animating principle. Today the large American university is, rather, a whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common governing board and related purposes.¹⁰

Having “related purposes” is not the same as having a common purpose. Nor is a series of communities a community. Using the term he coined—the multiversity—Kerr speaks to this point: “A community . . . should have common interests; in the multiversity, they are quite varied, even conflicting.”¹¹ Finally, to establish clearly the difference he sees between this model of a university organization and the other, Kerr writes:

Flexner thought of a university as an “organism.” In an organism, the parts and the whole are inextricably bound together. Not so the multiversity—many parts can be added and subtracted with little effect on the whole or even little notice taken or any blood spilled. It is . . . a mechanism held together by administrative rules and powered by money.¹²

Litchfield’s thesis is essentially the same.¹³

One may point out that serious disagreement exists on the subject of university organization without trying to settle this dispute. Further, this disagreement is not merely verbal or inconsequential in practical terms. The differing implications of the two models with regard to the magnitude and nature of administrative and communication problems implicit in growth and size are clear. Kerr’s multiversity reduces growth as a serious organization problem—“many parts can be added or subtracted with little effect on the whole.” The alternative model emphasizes the need for integrating subunits into “a harmonious whole,” an accomplishment requiring substantial coordination of efforts toward common goals.

It would perhaps not be too serious an oversimplification of these differing concepts to point out their similarity to Herbert Simon’s “federal” and “unitary” organization types, the latter applying to Kerr’s model and the former being closer to Millett’s. In an early book, without reference to universities, Simon notes that “although the distinction between unitary and federal organizations is only a matter of degree, yet it is an important one to make, for the problem of coordination of the component parts is somewhat different.”¹⁴ He adds:

In the . . . federal . . . organization, integration at the top level is much less a matter of logic applied to a goal, for no common denomi-

¹⁰Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 1.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³Edward H. Litchfield, “The University: A Congeries or an Organic Whole?” *AAUP Bulletin*, XLV (September, 1959), pp. 374-79.

¹⁴Herbert A. Simon, Donald W. Smithburg, and Victor A. Thompson, *Public Administration* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), p. 271.

nator exists for the component activities. . . . We conclude that coordination between specialized units within a unitary organization can be secured by a more rational process than can coordination in a federal organization.¹⁵

Empirical research on university organizations and administration is rare, but the university organization has not been wholly ignored by the theorists. In addition to the above authors, Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn¹⁶ and Amitai Etzioni¹⁷ have attempted some classification of university organizations and comparison with other kinds of organizations; Barnard has noted the survival capacity of universities, comparing some of them in this respect with the Roman Catholic church.¹⁸ Ford, in an empirical study of university administration, has examined the relationship between administrative activity and the enrollment level of students at Purdue University.¹⁹ In 1960, expenditure data on a group of comparable colleges presented evidence suggesting that the percentage of operating budget expended on general administration, within a particular size-range, diminished with organization size.²⁰

THERE is general agreement today that university organizations are more closely tied than ever before to the society which shelters and supports them. The rapid rate of social and technological change that creates so much stress for other kinds of social organizations is now having a similar impact on universities. It is a good deal simpler to see the truth of this than to predict its effect on the structure and behavior of universities fifty or even twenty-five years from now.

Chris Argyris of Yale has suggested that organizations of the future may utilize more than one structure for decision-making, depending upon the types of decisions the organization may face at any one time. After reviewing several types of structure ranging from the "pyramidal" to the "participative" (Structure I through Structure IV), he makes the following observation about ideally designed organizational structure:

The exact amount that each structure is used will vary for each organization and within the same organization under different conditions. There may be time when the survival of the organization will require the use of Structure I. At other times, Structure IV may be most crucial. Presumably the normal situation will require the use of all four strategies in some balanced amount. Again, the exact point of balance must be left to further research.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 271-72.

¹⁶Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1966).

¹⁷Etzioni, *op. cit.*

¹⁸Chester I. Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1938), p. 5.

¹⁹Frederick R. Ford, "The Growth of Supporting Operations within a University: A Historical Study" (doctoral dissertation, Purdue University, 1963).

²⁰National Federation of College and University Business Officers Associations, *The Sixty College Study . . . A Second Look* (n.p., n.d.), p. 27.

We may conclude that *organizations (of the future) will tend to vary the structures that they use according to the kinds of decisions that must be made*. If one asks the individual in the organization of the future to see the company organizational chart, he will be asked, "For what type of decision?"

In order to accomplish this, "decision rules" will have to be defined to guide our choice of the proper structure.²¹

The characteristics of Argyris' organization of the future may readily be found today in universities. The hierarchical network of president, vice-presidents, deans, and department heads is certainly not bearing the burden of all of the university's decision-making for all types of problems. The hierarchical arrangement may be considered one of the existing structures but no more than that. There are others which coexist and are triggered by different kinds of decisions, according to decision rules which may or may not be well defined in any particular university organization. The existence of other decision structures of interrelated, powerful committees and senate bodies, cutting across hierarchical lines, is a recognized phenomenon of university life. But precisely how many decision structures exist, what signals or decision rules are recognized as justification of the legitimate crystallizing of a particular structure, and how the structures relate to one another, formally and informally, are important questions which deserve careful study.

It is entirely possible that the convulsions at Berkeley which followed the eruption of student disorder there in September, 1964, may be partly traceable to badly defined decision rules. Both the pyramidal structure (the administrative hierarchy) and other faculty structures responded virtually simultaneously and independently to the same signals of student resentment and the call for action of some sort.²²

There is, of course, more to successful organizational structure-shifting than a clear definition of rules. In the first place, rules imply a familiarity with and classification of problems, while organizational stress often arrives in a new and unfamiliar form. But beyond the need for rules, assuming they can be created, a certain minimal level of intra-organizational trust and a reasonable degree of agreement about the university's direction are probably essential.

A PRECEDING section of this article raised the problem of conflicting views of the university organization, that is, whether it is in fact a coordinated effort toward a common goal or goals, or, conversely, really a collection of semiautonomous parts which may be added or subtracted without much danger or difficulty. It was further suggested that the opposing models of Kerr and Millett really approximate what

²¹Chris Argyris, *Integrating the Individual and the Organization* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964), pp. 211-12.

²²*Revolution at Berkeley: The Crisis in American Education*, edited by Michael V. Miller and Susan Gilmore (New York: Dial Press, 1965). For a chronology of events, see p. xxiv-xxix.

Herbert Simon has called federal and unitary organization types, the latter having a greater potential for a rational process of coordination than the former by virtue of the fact that a common denominator exists which logically binds together component activities.

This article has certainly not settled the question nor has it been an objective to do so. Nevertheless, the opinion might appropriately be ventured here that both models may be correct, depending upon which university structure one has in mind.

Is there a coordination of effort toward a common university goal or goals? Or, more forcefully, is the large, modern university a bureaucracy similar to any large commercial corporation in its essential elements, as has been charged? This question probably deserves a qualified, but affirmative, answer. It is hard to deny that some of the familiar evidence of bureaucracy may quite easily be found in universities. The admission, processing, and certification of students in a standardized time period and the university's budgeting process itself both reflect sets of regulations which control member behavior. Regulations determine when fiscal affairs of subunits will be discussed, how expenditures will be accounted for, what kind are permitted, and when examinations will be held and grades submitted. Hierarchical levels are discernible and work specialization is present in both central administration and subunits of the university. Evidence of bureaucracy is incontrovertible. There is, in short, no reason to doubt that university organizations *contain* a bureaucratic structure, or at least one with strong similarities to such a structure.

It would be a vast oversimplification to conclude from this that universities *are* bureaucracies. Such a conclusion implies that there is only one real structure, rather than several, and that that structure is bureaucratic.

Assuming that coordination and quasi-bureaucratic hierarchy may be found with regard to certain kinds of decisions in a university organization, the question remains whether the large, modern university has goals beyond certifying student achievement and maintaining fiscal order and accountability which are operationally meaningful for subunits. It is not possible to supply a definite answer to so large a question here, but it may well be that future research will find that the university is not a unitary organization but does contain some such organizations in the form of academic subunits. It is possible, in other words, that what we call today a university is not unitary in any academic sense but is a federal organization acting as a shelter for academic organizations, some of which may have an academic goal, or goals, binding their parts. If such a holding-company concept proved to be a fruitful one after careful research, the idea that a university is a macro version of any one of its subunits would have to be abandoned. That a university is academically federal and fiscally unitary would not be inconsistent with what has been suggested in the previous discussion of multiple structure.

THE speculations of this article have suggested a variety of possible subjects for future research. Among them are the following:

1. What are the principal decision structures that exist within university organizations?
2. What kinds of decision rules determine which structure will respond to specific problems?
3. How are new decision rules formed in response to wholly new kinds of problems? Do the new problems actually lead to the development of wholly new structures or just modifications of the old?
4. In what manner, and how frequently, do the universities' several structures interact with one another?
5. Do the decision structures of public universities differ significantly from those of private universities?

In conclusion one can cite several reasons for a scientific examination of university organizations. It has already been suggested that a more complete and accurate model of university organizations would almost certainly be of considerable help to those charged with the responsibility of administering these complicated institutions. Second, it is a rich subject for social scientists, whose organizational explorations have largely ignored universities to date. But beyond the interest of university administrators and social scientists, it may be that those who are responsible for the effective operation of many other kinds of organizations have something to learn from the design of university organizations. The fact of the matter is, that many of the world's universities have been in existence a long time, surviving periods of war, economic catastrophe, technological change, and political storms that signaled the end for a great many other organizations of all types. If it is unfashionable today to suggest the possibility that modern corporate management has something to learn from the study of university organizations about long-term organizational effectiveness and survival, it may nonetheless be the case. For all of these reasons the careful study of university organizations could pay some very rich dividends in the future.