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Academic Quality and Academic Responsibility: A Critical Reflection on Collegial Governance[1]

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Introduction

A recent set of intensive case studies of leading universities (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013), which included the public University of California, Berkeley, and the private Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US, attempted to develop generalizations regarding the 'internal governance' processes by which contemporary universities sustain or attain standards of excellence in instruction and research. The studies were usefully comparative, evaluating differences in major countries, as well attentive to disciplinary differences, which is a particularly important and influential variable in academic behavior in all countries. The authors concluded that academic quality was primarily a function of the social interactions, which occur within and between academic sub-units as well as within the host university. As they note, these processes play a major role in building shared identities as well as developing valuable common knowledge in instruction and research among academic staff members. These social interactions also help generate and communicate communal norms and values through socialization and internal regulation. Finally, and importantly, as they emphasize these processes legitimate certain decision-making criteria within academic institutions and have an impact as well on the distribution of authority and power within the university.

In sum, the studies (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013) suggested successful performance within the best universities was related to shared goals and values among faculty members and administrators, values shaped by the 'soft' institutions through which universities communicate the attitudes and norms about how governance decisions ought to be made.

Similarly Roger Brown's analyses (Brown, 2004, 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013) and my own professional experience with academic quality assurance policies suggests the heart of

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the matter is better comprehending and improving of the design of university collegial processes for assuring academic standards. As our distinguished colleague Burton Clark (2008) noted at the close of his career, to understand university change we need to be able to 'reason inductively from the experience of on-the-ground practitioners':

> Only secondarily do we glance at broad frameworks developed in the study of business and public administration – resource dependency, path dependence, isomorphism, management by objectives, total quality management. These borrowed approaches never get to the point of *how decisions are collectively fashioned in complex universities*, each loaded with unique features in an extended portfolio of missions and programs, general and specific, that need rebalancing from year to year (Clark 2008: 542) (emphasis added).

The New Public Management

In contrast, as Professor Brown (Brown, 2004, 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013) and other scholars have stressed, regulatory frameworks informed by the theories of the New Public Management are influencing academic work worldwide and these frameworks emphasize performance measurement systems that reify markets, empowering greater consumer and managerial control of universities. Embedded in this New Public Management worldview, they argue, is an attack on professionalism, challenging the collegial decision-making authority of faculties and departments within universities.

The impact on internal university governance of policies shaped by the New Public Management arouse significant concern, because a basic premise underlying the distinctive organization of universities is the complexity and uncertainty of university curricula, academic work, and research require that core academic decisions be determined by the professional expertise of the institution's academic staff. Indeed a strong case can be made, particularly in the research university sector, that well designed collegial processes are efficient for society, because academic staff are more likely to provide truly independent judgments on critical academic decisions than are administrators (McPherson and Schapiro, 1999).

Innovations in Information Technology

Poorly designed higher education policies can distort academic incentives as well as the internal governance of universities in a manner detrimental to the public interest. However I believe a focus primarily on government policy provides an incomplete picture of the challenges now confronting universities. In the contemporary world significant changes in the core activities of academic instruction and research are being brought about as well by exogenous factors such as the continuing innovations in information technology and these advances are also influencing the effectiveness of the existing institutional rules in use for assuring academic standards. For example, a recent UK Institute for Public Policy Research report titled *An Avalanche is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead* states:

> "With world-class content available anytime for free, the ability of faculty to be present anywhere, and the rise of online learning as an alternative to in-

person instruction, we need to reflect on the nature of teaching and learning in a higher education institution" (Rizvi, Donnelly, and Barber, 2013, 43).

Similarly IT innovations are also influencing the technology of academic research and scholarship as well as scholarly publication (Dill, 2014; Ostrom and Hess, 2007), thereby challenging traditional collegial norms and processes of governance in this area as well.

With regard the technology of instruction within the university sector the economist, former President of Princeton, and thoughtful analyst of US higher education William Bowen (Bowen et al, 2014) recently conducted a rigorous study comparing the productivity of traditional university instruction and a hybrid version of on-line instruction. Bowen is well known as the co-author in the 1960s of the 'cost disease' concept, in which wages in certain labour-intensive industries such as the performing arts and higher education necessarily must rise at a rate greater than their growth in productivity. However Bowen currently argues that productivity growth in higher education instruction is now both technically feasible and necessary.

Bowen acknowledges the serious need for systematic evaluations of different approaches to on-line learning, in different subject fields, and in different academic settings.   However, his analysis led him to call for openness to new means of instruction by institutions of higher education and he emphasized needed reforms in our models of academic governance (Bowen, 2013, 64):

> […] if wise decisions are to be made in key areas, such as teaching methods, it is imperative that they be made by a mix of individuals from different parts of the institution - including faculty leaders but also others well-positioned to consider the full ramifications of the choices before them. There are real dangers in relying on the compartmentalized thinking that too often accompanies decentralized modes of organization to which we have become accustomed.

In contrast to this call for more collective action in university governance the 'market logic' (Berman, 2012) of some higher education policies as well as the new information technologies influencing academic work appear to be providing incentives for greater privatization of academic conduct, understood as the pursuit of autonomy for individual teaching and research, for program development, and for institutional prestige. There is some evidence that the motivation for this academic pursuit is less to better serve the public and more to maximize private benefit (Macfarlane, 2012). Consequently a major challenge to the assurance of academic standards is the growing chasm between the common or collective good of the university and the self-interest of the individual faculty member.

In this new, more competitive and complex environment of higher education achieving the integration necessary for strategic academic decision making will require development of more effective mechanisms for coordinating academic work and for promulgating the shared beliefs essential to achieving university purpose. How is this process of collegial coordination and socialization best conceptualized?

The Collegial Model

The increasing application of political and economic perspectives such as the principal-agent model to the design of higher education policy and academic governance has renewed

interest in the traditional 'collegial' model of internal university governance most prevalent in the US and UK (Shattock, 2014). Recent analysis in the UK (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010) has attempted to clarify the academic collegial model, but in my view this attempt – following English university tradition – adopts the 'collegiate university' model of academic governance characteristic of Oxford and Cambridge featuring autonomous residential colleges emphasizing undergraduate education. As a result this particular 'federal' conception of academic collegiality is of limited assistance in the design of public policies and internal academic governance for universities in other countries, including the US, which are not organized according to this model of education. Nor is it useful in designing more effective academic governance in distance-learning and/or emerging internet-based universities.

A more valuable framework for evaluating academic collegial organization is the 'commons' model for addressing issues of collective action in self-governing communities thoughtfully articulated by the Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (2005). In her Nobel Prize lecture Ostrom (2009) argued that neither market forces nor the rules of the state are the most effective institutional arrangements for governing, managing, and providing complex public goods. Instead, she has attempted to identify universal design principles that permit individuals in self-governing organizations to effectively address collective action dilemmas.

A commons perspective is most applicable in circumstances where more effective cooperation and integration among independent individuals is critical to performance, clearly and increasingly the case in university instruction, research, and service. It is also most appropriate when organizations are self-organizing communities, when the organization's members share common values, when the organization possesses a 'nested' structure with multiple levels of rule-making (e.g., the 'federal' model of academic governance), and when the organization itself is of a size to facilitate the active participation of its members. All of these characteristics apply to most institutions of higher education in the US as well as to universities around the world. In addition the external governance of US colleges and universities has traditionally assigned the *collective* faculty or academic staff of an institution primary responsibility for the quality of academic degree offerings, the content of the curriculum, the evaluation of teaching and research, as well as for the rules and norms governing instruction, research, and public service (Kaplan, 2004).

I would suggest that Ostrom's 'commons' perspective provides useful principles for redesigning academic collegial governance for the new conditions of global competition as well as for the challenges posed by innovations in the technology of instruction and research. Indeed in one of her last publications Ostrom (Ostrom and Hess, 2007) applied the commons framework to universities and argued they are best understood as humanly constructed, self-organizing, 'knowledge commons'.

Principles of Commons Design

Ostrom's first principle of 'commons' design addresses the nature of 'external governance' in higher education by confirming the professional autonomy and responsibility of commons members to govern their own institutions This principle thereby strengthens the members' motivation and commitment to invest the necessary time and effort in collective actions required to address contemporary challenges to assuring effective performance. The ongoing debate in many counties about quality "accountability" versus quality "enhancement" in higher education, reflects a similar problem. With regard 'internal' governance, additional

'commons' design principles would encourage collective actions by commons members: 1) to develop more valid and reliable information for improving professional performance; 2) to enhance their ability to learn new means of improving professional activities from one another; and 3) to focus on the development of more effective governance processes.

Let me illustrate Ostrom's first design principle with examples of national policies intended to confirm professional autonomy and responsibility among academic staff. A great deal of literature has been devoted to research assessment systems similar to the former Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK (now the Research Excellence Framework, REF), which conducted retrospective evaluations of university research through the third party of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Dill and van Vught, 2010). In comparison less recognition has been given to the university research assessment system developed in the Netherlands where the government, consistent with a 'commons' perspective, confirmed at the outset academic autonomy and responsibility by permitting the evaluation system to be collectively designed and implemented by the universities themselves in concert with national research organizations.

In contrast to the UK RAE the research assessments in the Netherlands do not focus on assessments of research publications and are not tied to university funding. Instead, every six years each university conducts an external peer review of its research programs involving internationally respected researchers, which follows a Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) (Jongbloed, 2010). The SEPs focus on the academic quality, scientific productivity, and long term vitality of each research program and utilize a variety of information sources including on site interviews, university self-reports, as well as bibliometric evidence. These evaluations are made public.

A comparative study of research funding and performance in selected OECD countries (Himanen et al, 2009) revealed overall higher education R&D expenditures (HERD) in the UK more than doubled from 1990-2005. Over this period the UK experienced moderate growth in their share of OECD research publications, but no growth in the UK proportion of OECD research citations. More significantly during this period three RAEs were conducted in the UK, but the ratio of research publications to HERD actually declined. In comparison during this same time period, when the Netherlands SEPs were in effect, the Dutch HERD hardly grew. But Dutch universities showed a constant increase in both publication output and citation impact and also exhibited continued growth in the ratio of publications to HERD. In fact the Netherlands showed the greatest output for the least input of the compared countries, which included Australia, Finland, and Norway. Furthermore in contrast to the RAE the collegially designed, formative research assessment process developed in the Netherlands has been more stable and appears to provide more nuanced and useful information to each university on means of improving its research activities. As such these assessments likely can continue to make over time an effective contribution to improving research performance.

Of course this is but one study and the measurement of the quality of academic research is a complex issue. But precisely because of this complexity principal-agent theory (Weimer and Vining, 1996) would predict a number of complications in research assessments, which were in fact experienced by the UK RAE. These included the need to continually adjust the measurement of outputs in order to address a product as multifaceted as academic research as well as the high costs of monitoring a complex output like university research performance. Furthermore one would also predict difficulties in controlling cross-subsidies in an organization like the university, which possesses the multiple outputs of teaching, research, and public

service, an issue raised by the UK QAA. In fact in the highly competitive American higher education market the economist Ronald Ehrenberg (2012) provides convincing evidence of the extent to which instructional expenditures are increasingly cross subsidizing research expenditures in US universities and negatively effecting undergraduate educational performance.

A second example of a national policy, which first confirmed academic autonomy and responsibility, is the design of academic quality assurance policies in some EU countries (Dill and Beerkens, 2010). Consistent with the New Public Management, policy makers in a number of countries including the US believe if student consumers have sufficient information on the quality of colleges and universities their choices will provide a powerful incentive for universities to continually improve academic programs, thereby increasing academic accountability and the efficiency of higher education. However, as Professor Brown (2011) argues and as research on student choice in the US and other countries suggests (Dill and Soo, 2005) many higher education applicants are 'naïve consumers' whose enrollment decisions are influenced by a wide variety of educational, social, and personal factors, including the immediate consumption benefits of higher education. In fact a recent national study providing evidence of limited learning in US higher education concluded (Arum and Roksa, 2011, p. 137), '(t)here is no reason to expect that students and parents as consumers will prioritize undergraduate learning as an outcome'.

In contrast to the New Public Management perspective the Education Ministers who initiated the Bologna process for strengthening higher education in the European Union argued early on (Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2003):

> [...] consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.

One can certainly debate the extent to which the QA policies of particular Bologna-participating countries truly reflect this view, but as a consequence a number of EU countries have focused their quality assurance policies less on empowering consumers and university administrators and more on professionally-oriented quality 'enhancement'. That is, on rebuilding and strengthening the capacity of faculty members within each institution to collectively assure and improve student learning (Dill, 2000; Dill and Beerkens, 2010).

Academic Quality Enhancement and Research Doctoral Education

This focus on quality enhancement helps illustrate Ostrom's principles for cultivating the ability of commons members to learn new means of improving professional activities from one another and for focusing institutional efforts on developing more effective governance processes. For example the adoption of the EU Lisbon Strategy in 2000, which set a goal of strengthening the European Research Area, as well as the acknowledged market competition of US research universities, increased incentives for EU universities to reform their institutional processes governing research doctoral education (Byrne, Jørgensen, and Loukkola, 2013). In response EU universities are now moving away from the traditional 'master-apprentice' model of doctoral training, which awarded substantial autonomy to the individual supervising professor, and developing a university-wide culture of shared values and commitment to research-doctoral

education featuring new structures 'with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts' (Byrne, Jørgensen, and Loukkola 2013: 13).

These changes in EU university internal governance were not made in response to external policy directives or 'managerialist' incursions, but rather illustrate the types of voluntary collegial adaptations necessary to assure and improve academic quality in the more competitive global environment. For example, over the last decade many EU universities have implemented for the first time doctoral schools, often a university-wide unit similar to a US graduate school. In the US a graduate school is a collegial governance structure engaging the collective academic staff of an institution in developing and implementing policies designed to assure the academic standards of each of a university's research doctoral programs. Similarly in a number of EU universities the collective faculty has been significantly involved in creating new university-wide rules and guidelines for doctoral supervision. These new rules include the adoption of doctoral committees to augment the expertise of the traditional thesis supervisor, the creation of university-level admissions committees for research doctoral education, as well as the creation of 'institutional spaces' for the exchange of experiences and good practices among thesis supervisors via informal peer-learning groups and training opportunities. These largely voluntary efforts have, as noted in the PrestEnce studies (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013), adjusted the distribution of academic authority within EU universities, shifting from the traditional governance system that granted significant personal authority to individual professors to a more balanced system featuring collegial or collective academic authority over research doctoral instruction and programs (Clark, 1987).

Policymakers and the public may understandably question whether university processes promoting, as I have just suggested, increased faculty discussion will contribute significantly to improving academic standards in instruction and research. But as Ostrom (Ostrom and Walker, 1997) emphasizes face-to-face communication in social dilemmas is the most effective means of producing substantial increases in needed cooperation and coordination over time. These types of processes help stimulate the social ties necessary for the more effective observation, communication, and enforcement of academic standards (Dill and Beerkens, 2010).

Academic Quality Enhancement at the Program Level

A 'commons' perspective is also reflected in a number of other EU academic quality assurance policies. Countries such as Denmark and Germany have required state-sponsored external peer reviews of all or most subject fields in the university sector, but in contrast to the heavily criticized subject reviews conducted in England by the HEFCE, these reviews were more effectively focused on the enhancement of academic quality. As a consequence a frequently reported positive impact of these subject assessments and accreditations is the incentive they provide for more frequent collegial discussions and actions at the program level to improve teaching as well as the 'cohesion' of academic programs, i.e., the structure of academic curricula (Dill and Beerkens, 2010). The beneficial nature of these programmatic collegial actions is supported by research in the US (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) indicating students' learning of academic content and their cognitive development are most significantly associated with the pattern and sequence of the courses or modules in which they enroll, by program requirements that integrate learning from separate courses or modules, and by the frequency of communication and interaction among faculty members in the subject field.

Consistent with a third principle of Ostrom's commons perspective the program reviews which appear to have elicited the greatest respect and engagement of academic staff were designed to encourage the provision of more valid and reliable information for collegial decisions regarding the assurance and improvement of academic standards. For example, the learning-oriented subject accreditation process developed by Teacher Education Accrediting Commission in the US (El-Khawas, 2010), the subject assessments developed in Denmark (Stensaker, 2010), and the accreditation process of the General Medical Council in the UK (Harvey, 2010) have in common a rigorous evaluation methodology conforming to social scientific standards of evidence (Dill and Beerkens, 2010). Accordingly these subject assessments and accreditations place much weight on assessing the efficacy of each institution's self-organized monitoring of educational outcomes. Peer reviewers are trained, supported during the review process by professional staff, and employ systematic, standardized procedures and protocols. These external reviews all strongly emphasize development within universities of a ''culture of evidence'' (Shavelson, 2010) for assuring and improving academic standards.

However these subject-level, external peer reviews in the EU are costly to sustain for an entire system, their benefits tend to decline over time, and therefore they appear unsustainable. More critically because they focus on the subject level, these external assessments and accreditations continue a tradition of centralized state control of academic programs. Therefore from a 'collegial' perspective these external subject reviews fail to reinforce internal university accountability. They do not provide real incentives for collegial actions by the university's collective academic staff, as previously noted in EU research doctoral education, to develop more effective institutional processes for planning academic programs, implementing and evaluating them, as well as correcting and improving them based upon evidence of effective performance. This structural weakness in external subject assessments or accreditations is reflected in national policy shifts among several EU countries toward an institution or process-oriented focus for external quality assurance more similar to quality audit in the UK (Kehm, 2010; Stensaker, 2010).

In this regard Ostrom's principle of collectively developing more valid and reliable information for improving professional performance might be pursued at the university level by a rebalancing of academic authority similar to the case of EU research doctoral education. For example, as at Cambridge and Oxford where the university academic staff collectively assume responsibility for setting and marking the exams of students in the constituent colleges seeking a degree. Or by the collective university academic staff designing and implementing rigorous 'evidence-based' processes for assuring the effectiveness of teaching, learning, and assessment in each university degree program.

Conclusion

The PrestEnce studies' (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013) emphasis on norms, values, and forms of communication as a means of achieving necessary coordination and integration in universities remind me of an earlier study by the sociologist Jerald Hage, *Communication and Organizational Control* (1974), which I consider a neglected classic of the organization theory literature. Based upon extensive field studies of medical organizations in the US Hage concluded that traditional hierarchical methods of coordination and control are ineffective in professional settings because of the complexity of professional tasks and the need for individual autonomy. Consequently, Hage argued that necessary coordination must be achieved through a

process of socialization that features high levels of communication and feedback about professional tasks. This communication is not vertical as with administrators, not primarily written as in reports and procedural documents, not episodic, and does not focus on the detection or transmittal of sanctions. Rather, the communication is horizontal, with respected peers, largely verbal and face-to-face, continuous, and focuses on the exchange of information about means of improving core professional tasks.

Similarly in an analysis of higher education and the public good Craig Calhoun, now Director of the London School of Economics, concluded (2006, 35):

[…] (T)he productivity of academe depends upon the extent to which it is internally organized as a public sphere – with a set of nested and sometimes overlapping public discussions providing for the continual critique and correction of new arguments and tentatively stabilized truths […]

The answer must lie in the organization of academic institutions and academic work in fields which provide plausible boundaries to these critical debates, but boundaries which never allow for more than partial autonomy. There must also be boundary -- crossing: physicists must sometimes question chemists, sociologists must sometimes question economists.

In short Calhoun believes the public good is best served by academic institutions responding to their new, more competitive environment by reorganizing their collegial governance processes. In light of the thoughtful writing of Roger Brown (Brown, 2004, 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013) and like-minded colleagues, I believe we still have much to learn from systematic research on the necessary collegial conditions for assuring and improving academic quality.

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