

Becoming an entrepreneurial research university: The impact on professors, teaching, and learning

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Research problem

- **Privatization and marketization:** contribute to government policies that provide more autonomy to universities, so that managers can develop strategies to enhance revenues and rankings (Musselin & Teixeira, 2014).
- In the U.S. context, a primary strategy to achieve these aims has been to expand research capacity, add graduate programs, and partner with industry – that is, to become an **entrepreneurial research university**.
- In some cases, top-level administrators at **regional teaching-focused universities** in the U.S. have attempted to **change the identities of their institutions** toward the entrepreneurial research university model (Harris & Ellis, 2020).

Research problem

- Trying to **redefine the identity of a university**, however, is a **risky** proposition.
- Efforts to redefine an established identity **can generate significant opposition** from internal and external stakeholders, who may resist and try to uphold the organization's long-standing identity.
- Despite the risks, the entrepreneurial research university model is appealing because state governments expect universities to increase degree completion rates and generate innovations with commercial potential so that the state can **remain competitive in the global knowledge economy**.
 - Accountability pressures from the state
- Funding and incentives are aligned with becoming an entrepreneurial research university.

Research problem

- If managers at regional teaching-focused universities begin to develop strategic initiatives that shift organizational identity toward the entrepreneurial research university model, then the **teaching missions of these institutions might be degraded** (Harris & Ellis, 2020).
- **Resources and incentives** might be redirected toward research initiatives that can raise the national or international profile of the university.
- As a result, fewer resources would be available to support teaching improvement, and professors would receive few incentives to focus on their teaching.

Research questions

1. How and to what extent did strategic initiatives at four regional teaching-focused universities in the U.S. shift organizational identity toward the entrepreneurial research university model?
2. How and in what ways did professors respond to the university's efforts toward becoming an entrepreneurial research university?

Theoretical framework

Organizational identity

- Organizational identity refers to the characteristics of an organization that its members believe are **central, enduring, and distinctive** (Albert & Whetten, 1985).
- Addresses the question of “**who we are**” as an organization (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013).
- The identities of higher education institutions might be typified by the **localized meanings** that actors attribute to words such as entrepreneurial, world class, student-centered, community-engaged, and teaching-focused.
- While organizational identity is a **social construction**, organizational members recognize it as meaningful and real (Stensaker, 2015).
- A clear and compelling organizational identity, for example, can create a sense of common purpose and generate a **high level of commitment to organizational changes** (Hartley, 2003).

Research context

Regional public universities

- Regional public universities in the United States are **similar to universities of applied sciences** in the European context.
- While research universities occupy the top positions in the prestige hierarchy, regional public universities educate **large numbers of undergraduate students, award master's degrees in some professional fields, and produce applied research** that serves the needs of specific communities and regions (McClure, 2018).
- More regional public universities in the United States (N=254) than public research universities (N=211) or private research universities (N=183) (NCES, 2020a).
- The regional public university sector enrolls approximately 2.3 million students, representing 25% of total four-year public college/university enrollments in the United States (NCES, 2020b).

Research context

- The **four regional public universities** selected for this study are located in the same U.S. state and are governed by the board of the same state agency.
- The state is also served by a large public research university, which is governed by a different board.
- Several highly-ranked private colleges and universities operate in the state, creating a **competitive market for student enrollments**.
- The researcher has never been employed at any of the institutions in this study, and thus, **the researcher's perspective is that of outside observer**.

Research context

- As state funding declined and student enrollment began to drop, the state agency called on each of the four regional public universities to **develop a strategic plan that would enhance quality and efficiency**.
- University plans needed to establish **priorities for enrollment growth**, while also highlighting **cost-saving measures**.
- Beyond those broad parameters, the state agency did not specify which strategies and priorities the universities should adopt.
- Instead, top-level administrators at each university were provided autonomy to develop and carry out **plans for strategic change**

Research design

Case study

- Field work was conducted two to three years following the initial implementation of strategic plans at these four universities.
- **Interviews** were conducted with 51 full-time academics, 19 part-time/contingent academics, 23 department chairs, and 17 administrators (roughly equal numbers across the four institutions).
- The semi-structured interview protocol allowed study participants to describe the effects of institutional strategies and policies on their work.
- Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with NVIVO software, using an iterative process of open and axial coding (Creswell, 2007).

Study findings

- At three of these universities, top-level leaders interpreted the instructions from the state agency as a **threat to their organizational identity** (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).
- One administrator explained that “we cannot continue with business as usual.”
- Another administrator called the budget cuts and external pressure from the state a “watershed moment” in the history of this university.
- “More agile and nimble” is how a top-level manager described the vision for their university’s future.
- At the fourth university, however, leaders were confident that they could navigate pressures from the state while still maintaining the current organizational identity. “We will figure this out” is how a top-level administrator described this university’s response to the state agency.

Study findings

- At the first three universities, top-level leaders developed strategic priorities that can be grouped into four categories:
 - 1) encourage more research activity to attract external grant funding
 - 2) develop new graduate programs to attract more tuition revenue
 - 3) improve student services to reduce undergraduate student drop-out rates
 - 4) internationalize academic programs to attract more students from outside the U.S.
 - Overarching emphasis: **become an entrepreneurial research university**
- The research, graduate programs, and internationalization themes **differed from the historic identities of these universities** as teaching-oriented institutions that primarily serve local communities.
- The student services theme could have been connected to existing organizational identities, but leaders instead framed the issue in terms of **university finances and maintaining sufficient tuition revenue**.

Study findings

- The identity shift, promoted by university managers, from a teaching-oriented university to a research university generated a **large amount of opposition from academic staff**.
- Research performance had become the top criterion in academic **evaluation and reward systems**
- Applied research designed for public service was deemed less important than publications in top-tier journals.
- This emphasis on research excellence shaped how professors allocated their time (**less time devoted to teaching**).

Study findings

Less emphasis on providing distinctive learning experiences for undergraduate students.

- A professor in the natural sciences, for example, noted that “the university president has made it clear that presentations at local conferences do not count toward tenure and promotion, and that has discouraged faculty from working with undergraduate students [on research], since those projects would probably only get presented at local conferences.”
- Ironically, this particular university touts **undergraduate research as a hallmark of its curriculum**, but its reward policies serve as a direct disincentive for professors to engage in this form of work.

Study findings

Less emphasis on providing distinctive learning experiences for undergraduate students.

- Study participants reported that they were scaling back their pedagogical work in the classroom, given increasing research expectations and no decline in teaching responsibilities (teaching four courses per semester).
- Academics described how they had reduced the number of papers they ask students to write, as well as how they no longer engage in time-consuming teaching practices, such as collaborative learning and service-learning.
- These findings indicate that attempts to change the identities of regional public universities may diminish pedagogical innovation and potentially compromise the quality of undergraduate education.

Study findings

A professor in the social sciences stated that:

- “I think our university should follow its mission and not strive to become a different type of university.
- “We are a teaching university, and it is unrealistic to expect us to become a research university with the current 4-4 teaching load.
- “Research at institutions like ours should focus on teaching and addressing needs in the community.”

A recently-tenured professor in the liberal arts stated that their university:

- “...cannot figure out who it wants to be.
- “It is a teaching institution, then it wants to be a research institution, and then they want us to devote to public service.
- “Junior faculty cannot be everything that the university wants them to be with the heavy teaching load. Something’s got to give.”

Conclusions

- Study findings provide empirical support for understanding the effects of privatization on university autonomy and accountability.
- Governments provide universities additional autonomy to generate revenue, but they also impose accountability to state priorities for degree completion, workforce development, and research innovation – all to ensure that the state remains competitive in a global knowledge economy.
- Furthermore, this study shows how university administrators can translate external accountability pressures into strategic change initiatives that destabilize organizational identities.
- This destabilization may generate unintended consequences or exacerbate underlying tensions in the organization.

Conclusions

- **Alternative approach:** Instead, university administrators and academics can engage in strategic changes that reinforce and gradually evolve, rather than destabilize, organizational identities (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).
- Rather than delete or destabilize, higher education leaders can infuse long-standing organizational identities with new meanings and metaphors that advance the future direction and development of the university.