Journal Critique:

Conceptualizing Change in the Institutional Diversity of U.S. Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

The journal article by Christopher C. Morphew, a professor of higher education at the University of Iowa, examined research done on the importance of institutional diversity at colleges in the U.S. higher education system. The author discussed how institutional diversity prevents brain drain in states, students leaving their home state to attend more attractive out of state institutions.

He later outlined that institutional diversity prevents youth from accepting a set of beliefs uncritically and increases the cost effectiveness of higher education. Researcher Robert Birnbaum conducted a study that used population ecology to show decreases in U.S. institutional diversity over time, perhaps due to environmental factors. In contrast to population ecology, Morphew described a study using institutional theory to examine changes in institutional diversity and organizational behavior of colleges in the U.S. after 1972. He noted how academic drift (student enrollment and growth of for-profit institutions) could influence institutional diversity.
The researcher stressed the importance of institutional diversity based on a study done by Robert Birnbaum focusing on two snapshot years of 1972 and 2002. The main point being, “states with less diverse higher education systems face greater risks of losing students to out-of-state institutions that fit these students’ needs” (as cited in Birnbaum, 1983). Another perspective we must consider is the importance of cost when examining institutional diversity. “A more diverse system of institutions is likely to be more cost-effective at producing the kinds of outputs that a society needs and values than a less diverse system (as cited in Stadman, 1980, p. 244). These statements, made more than 30 years ago, still hold true in today’s post secondary educational world.

Theoretical Analysis

To further examine institutional diversity the author investigated both population ecology and institutional theory in attempt to explain the changes we have seen between 1972 and 2002. Population ecology theorist would suggest that institutions respond to their environment as animals do: they either adapt or do not survive. This model often produces results of less diversity at institutions (as cited in Kast & Rosenzweig, 1973). Student affairs professionals could assume that with greater environmental diversity equal greater institutional diversity. Institutional theory in contrast to population ecology purposes that institutions are ran in normatively defined environments, where success is measured by the perceptions of the institution’s legitimacy rather than the quality of what it produces (Morphew, 2009).
It is important to understand the history of how institutional diversity came about. With Birnbaum’s study looking at both the years of 1972 and 2002 we are able to examine why institutional diversity has become an essential piece of student affairs administration. Alan Seidman noted, “The number and types of campuses that comprise the loosely coupled system of higher education in America have changed over time as well, resulting in a diversified contemporary collection of campuses composed of more than 3,600 institutions (2012).

**Differing Institutional Landscapes**

Even though we are seeing a more diversified group of institutions, we are also witnessing more selective and specialized types of institutions. Institutions therefore can choose to provide for the masses or a specific niche; one being seen as engaging in institutional diversity while the other is not. The author would describe this phenomenon as academic adrift.

“Academic drift—defined as the tendency of colleges and universities to ape the programmatic offerings of the most prestigious—as the gravest threat to institutional diversity” (Morphew, 2009, p. 247). More programmatic institutions may prove to be necessary as technology advances and our society becomes more modernized yet if these institutions offered more programs and expanded beyond what they are currently offering students, they could further develop their institutional diversity.

**Population Ecology**

Population ecology could explain the decrease of institutions such as women’s colleges and historically black colleges as they are adapting to their environment as it exist today and becoming more coeducational (Morphew, 2009). If these types of institutions were able to survive, they would not be engaging in institutional diversity as they only serve a specific student population and have little opportunity to expand if they do not adapt. One could also argue that
when institutions do adapt to their environment, they tend to copy what they believe are “successful” institutions who they feel are increasing institutional diversity. By doing this, they are decreasing their institutional diversity, as they are not offering students anything more than other institutions. Institutions must then try to set themselves apart from other institutions. If they do not succeed, they will be perceived as too similar to other institutions and weaker than competing organizations, and ultimately result in failure.

Balancing Mission and Needs

Institutional diversity is about finding a balance between the institution’s mission and students needs. Morphew argues that, “organizations that are faced with competing demands for what services they should offer or how they should be structured will strive to find a balance between accommodating these demands while still maintaining their institutional core (2009, p. 259). With finding a balance, institutional may be faced with limited resources to increase institutional diversity. Private institutions may be more apt to change and adopt new methods where as public institutions may not be. This could be due to where the institution’s revenue comes from. Public institutions receive 32.1% of their funding from state and federal funds and must seek out other financial support (Morphew, 2009). With less of a budget and support to allocate to institutional diversity efforts, amongst other pressing issues organizations may face, it may take a greater time to achieve goals related to institutional diversity.

Summary

This journal article attempted to bring to light the importance of institutional diversity. The data may be outdated, but remains relevant today. The author could’ve related institutional diversity to student retention, as they could be correlated. If an organization increases its diversity, it could gain more students. Both arguments to explain changes in institutional
diversity are strong, and the study could prove to be beneficial if replicated with more data that are recent as the definition of institutions and types have changed dramatically. Persistence theories could have been explored in this journal in alignment with population ecology and institutional theory to better relate student diversity with institutional diversity. The future of institutional diversity could be a promising one, if we continue to research and learn about current trends and how to better increase and adapt in the ever changing society in which we live.
References


