Understanding Institutional Diversity in American Higher Education

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Executive Summary

American higher education serves a variety of important political, economic, and social purposes. Since the earliest founding of colleges in the United States, institutional diversity has proved an important foundation. A range of institutional missions provides the capability for higher education to meet these various needs (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973). Many observers consider a significant level of institutional diversity as a sign of a healthy system of higher education. This monograph considers the various types of institutional diversity focusing on external diversity or the differences between institutions (van Vught, 2009). Institutional diversity is defined as the variety of different types of colleges and universities within a higher education system (Birnbaum, 1983; Morphew, 2009; Stadtman, 1980). Dill and Teixeira (2000) further refine institutional diversity as variety in the organization or product of the college or university.

Colleges and universities with different missions and purposes improve the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education. Higher education scholars often do not sufficiently consider the similarities or differences between institutions and trends toward homogenization. The policy debate regarding institutional diversity often suffers from a lack of empirical research explaining changes in institutional diversity, which weakens the ability to protect institutional diversity. My goal with this work is to contextualize institutional diversity and improve the dialogue around the issue for campus leaders, policymakers, and researchers. The following questions serve as primers for the discussion of institutional diversity presented in this monograph.
What Are the Benefits of a Diverse Higher Education System?

Institutional diversity creates greater learning options and flexibility within American higher education (Stadtman, 1980). Furthermore, diversity serves institutional, societal, and systematic goals. Most of the research literature focuses on institutional advantages, despite the obviously interconnected nature of the three. For example, a breadth of institutional options mitigates brain drain from a state by offering a variety of options to meet student demands. U.S. higher education consists of a number of niche markets that require differentiation to satisfy. Diverse needs require a number of institutional responses, as no single institution or institutional type can do everything well. A diverse system will additionally promote efficiency by limiting competition among institutions.

A range of institutional types provides stability for the system, which is a major benefit. Colleges and universities face pressure from external stakeholders, which influences institutional activity. Diversity protects the system by limiting the ability of any single external influence from negatively influencing all colleges and universities. As a result, key values such as the liberal arts or academic freedom are protected from potentially damaging external developments.

What Has Led to the Decline of Institutional Diversity in Recent Years?

Although observers of American higher education agree that institutional diversity has decreased over the past 40 years, the causes of the decline appear less clear. The role of statewide coordination, as an example, epitomizes the challenge of identifying the precise nature of homogenization. Many studies (Horta, Huisman, & Heitor, 2008; Meek, 1991; Rhoades, 1990) identify strong coordinating boards and governmental intervention as a central method to preserving diversity in the system, while others (cf. Birnbaum, 1983) contend that statewide coordination has limited impact on the diversification trend.
Academic drift represents one of the most common and potentially destructive examples of homogenization. Described by Riesman (1956) as a snakelike progression, upward drift limits diversity, with colleges following the lead of more prestigious and seemingly successful institutions. Colleges and universities strive to compete with the hope of increased resources and prestige. This occurs through various avenues, from increasing the level of participation in intercollegiate athletics to faculty research expectations and changes to doctoral education.

In recent years, researchers studying institutional diversity in higher education apply institutional theory (Morphew & Huisman, 2002), which promotes the notion that organizations exist in a normative environment where legitimacy fosters organizational survival. Political power and organizational legitimacy, rather than a desire for increasing resources, drives organizational activity. As a result, isomorphism develops as institutions respond to the norms within the organizational field.

“Powerful forces tending toward . . . centralization and homogenization” significantly influence colleges and universities (Trow, 1979, p. 271). Public policy, funding mechanisms, and competition pervade the higher education landscape, driving institutions toward similar ends. The lack of a strong federal ministry of higher education and a patchwork of state coordinating agencies, each with a varying degree of authority, has failed to stem the tide of these external forces.

What Are the Future Directions for Research on Institutional Diversity?

This volume provides an overview of the research literature studying institutional diversity and serves as a foundation for future researchers to understand the changes occurring within the higher education system. The level of institutional diversity present in the system grew from uniquely American ideologies shaping higher education access, opportunity, and missions. Colleges and universities within the U.S. system offer a tremendous variety of options for students from varying backgrounds reflecting the diversity of the country. However, the decline of institutional diversity in recent years and the need to
expand higher education attainment warrants critical discussion and consideration of institutional diversity. Increasing participation among underserved populations routinely cited as an economic necessity remains a goal fully unrealized in higher education today. Additional empirical research on institutional diversity and interrogating institutional strategies and aspirations will prove essential to maintaining and strengthening American higher education. As researchers examine colleges and universities, they should consider the tension between the importance of historical missions and contemporary demands on institutions.

The increasing diversity within the population and economy will continue to rely on a diverse higher education system and a greater amount of institutional diversity. Higher education systems that are able to provide students with a variety of options will prepare students for the 21st-century economy and society. The historical success of U.S. higher education largely rests on the broad diversity present in the system. Studies exploring how to preserve and expand this key facet of higher education will prepare higher education for future challenges and opportunities.
Foreword

A hallmark of the American system of higher education is its wide array of institutional types. This diversity allows the system to meet the needs of a broad base of students and to achieve many of the ideals espoused and valued about higher education. Specifically, concepts like student access, college choice, and specialization are facilitated by the diversity of colleges and universities in the United States. Regardless of why a person wants to pursue higher education, whether it’s for personal fulfillment, to make connections, to prepare for a career, or to delay adulthood, students can typically find a higher education institution that meets their needs. Unfortunately, with so many options available, it is not always clear how one institution differs from another and if it makes a difference which institution one chooses to attend. It’s not always clear to consumers of higher education, and it’s often not clear to campuses themselves what makes them distinct. There are several nuances related to institutional diversity, many of them overlooked or misunderstood, leading to confusion by students, parents, and community members and to an oversimplification in approach by researchers.

In this monograph, *Understanding Institutional Diversity in American Higher Education*, author Michael Harris helps clarify some of the nuances related to the diversity of higher education in the United States as a way to illustrate distinctions between and among institutions and to help facilitate quality research in the field. The work is focused on providing information for researchers, given the key role they play in examining different aspects of higher education. It’s helpful for researchers to be able to look at colleges and universities relative to peers and to point out commonalities and differences.
The intent of this monograph is to bring together the best research available on the topic in order to better explain institutional diversity in the larger context of higher education. The monograph is not just narrowly about institutional type. It also deals broadly with foundational and contemporary aspects of institutional differentiation, diversity, and distinction. The monograph provides information for policymakers, researchers, and administrators about the various forms and aspects of institutional diversity in an effort to bolster understanding and to highlight the value and importance of maintaining this diversity.

The publication of the monograph is timely, as many colleges and universities struggle with maintaining their foothold in a climate of economic uncertainty and dwindling resources. The forces of normative and mimetic isomorphism are strong and can make campuses feel the pressure to adopt the strategies and structures of campuses they seek to mimic. Institutions of higher education often engage in academic drift—copying other institutions that they perceive to be more prestigious and/or successful and therefore letting go of their own vision, mission, and niche. The risk here is that individual institutions might lose their identity and, in so doing, the traits and attributes that make them distinct. This academic drift is currently at play, and it is important to understand what effects it might have on the system of higher education in the United States. The information in the monograph helps readers understand the challenges to maintaining distinctiveness in the broad array of higher education offerings.

The monograph is well written and clearly explains key concepts to the reader. It offers a logical and easy-to-follow organizational flow between chapters and concepts. The first chapter provides a historical overview that is helpful to ground the reader by offering information about the origins and evolution of constructs related to institutional diversity. The second chapter offers different theoretical perspectives (population ecology, resourcependency, and institutional theory) to help understand the topic. These lenses provide additional insight and alternative ways to understand institutional diversity. The chapter on benefits of diversity shows how the various goals held by students, institution, and society are tied to institutional diversity. The chapter about homogenization includes a discussion about critical issues
related to factors that contribute to relying on similar structures and campuses gravitating toward common goals. The final chapter, “The Future of Institutional Diversity Research and Practice,” offers next steps and recommendations related to preserving institutional diversity. As a whole, the monograph provides foundational information, theoretical rigor, and clarity about the role and importance of institutional diversity in the larger higher education landscape.

The content of this monograph stands beside others in the ASHE Monograph Series related to aspects of institutional distinctiveness. Relevant monographs in the series include: Kinser and his coauthors’ (2010) examination of private higher education in The Global Growth of Private Higher Education and Gasman and her coauthors’ (2010) monograph on historically Black colleges and universities titled Unearthing Promise and Potential: Our Nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities. In addition, Toma et al.’s (2005) monograph, The Uses of Institutional Culture, and Anctil’s (2008) monograph, Selling Higher Education: Marketing and Advertising America’s Colleges and Universities, are also highly relevant to this work. These monographs, as well as others, are companion pieces to the work of Harris as a way to broaden understanding about institutional type, campus diversity, and distinctiveness.

The monograph is sure to be of interest to administrators thinking about what makes their own institution unique. Policymakers are also likely to find this monograph useful, given the connections the author makes between government policy, market forces, and decision making. Further, the monograph is also a great resource for students of higher education wanting foundational information and understanding about institutional type and diversity in higher education systems. The monograph provides great information about historical foundations and contemporary realities in the diversity of higher education systems. It could easily be used in a graduate-level course on organization and governance of higher education. Those who study different aspects of colleges and universities related to institutional differentiation, diversification, and diversity will also find this monograph to be useful. In fact, this monograph is useful to anyone who studies higher education. Too often, research related to topics such as faculty or administration fails to fully consider institutional setting and context. It’s easy for researchers to present