

## USING TRADITIONS TO FACILITATE CHANGE

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Many traditions are “sacred” in the sense that there is a strong, often principled—even emotional—commitment to them. On the one hand, this positive commitment to the traditions can be a significant impediment to change (e.g., to adaptation in the rapidly changing environment of higher education), which in many ways is a negative. On the other hand, this commitment provides some level of stability in a time of extreme volatility. But in addition, traditions can be used by constituents to facilitate change in both negative and positive ways.

The future of higher education is at best uncertain. The changing environment—e.g., political, technological, demographic, global—poses daunting challenges. At least as important, developments within higher education (e.g., new teaching modes, strong interdisciplinary movements) have potential to be as impactful as the external, environmental forces. These internal dynamics relate to the traditions as strongly as the external forces (e.g., disciplinary resistance to interdisciplinary initiatives, or faculty support for achieving equity/diversity).

In this paper I will address this issue of traditions as an impediment to adaptation and will also explore the potential of using traditions as drivers of important adaptation, innovation, and other kinds of change. The paper begins with a brief analysis of some of these complicated “traditional dynamics” as a way of forming a foundation for the more general approach of using traditions as drivers of change, focusing particularly on the use (or manipulation) of traditions by various higher education constituencies.

### **Change in Higher Education**

U. S. Higher Education, considered broadly, has seen stunning amounts of change over the past century, producing a diverse array of institutions and sectors, all with a varied sense of purpose and with different constituencies. Each of the sectors has evolved along with a set of traditions/values that sometimes drove the “evolution,” but sometimes traditions emerged organically as institutions adapted to a changing educational environment. A critical point is that traditions evolved with the development of the many different institutions and sectors, and traditions vary greatly across sectors. But then, there are over-arching traditions that are at least “claimed by all sectors,” if not really followed (e.g., commitment to “quality education,” to “broad access,” and to “intellectual freedom”).

For the many kinds of institutions which didn’t exist a century ago, an important model includes elite privates (e.g., Harvard, Stanford). These include elite publics (e.g., UC Berkley, U of Michigan) and highly innovative research universities (e.g., Arizona State, UC Irvine). A broad range of other sectors includes liberal arts colleges, regional doctoral universities, land grant institutions (some elite, such as Wisconsin-Madison), four-year non-doctoral regional public universities, urban universities, HBCUs, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Community Colleges, Technical Schools, Vocational Schools, free-standing professional schools (e.g., Medicine, Law, Pharmacy), and on-line institutions. Other important

distinctions include religious versus secular institutions and for-profit as distinct from non-profit institutions. Even more complex: these many categories overlap significantly in ways that create conflicting values and “traditions”—e.g., land grant and elite publics, HBCUs and land-grants, regional and national doctoral universities, and broader university “systems” that include diverse kinds of institutions.

As this evolution has occurred, a complicated system of “trickle-down” traditions has emerged, resulting in what we might call “layered traditions.” An important example is the elite privates (which were built on British and German traditions) which are in many ways the models for the public research universities. The latter were built on a stronger commitment to providing access to all “qualified” Americans than was so for the privates, but the “Harvard model” for the perception of prestige and status continues to be based on being very restrictive in selecting faculty and students. The model continues to have impact on the publics.

As time went on a general cultural belief in the value of post-secondary education grew across many parts of American society, and other kinds of four-year institutions were founded with very specific goals (e.g., training engineers, teachers), the public university model “dripped” down with some very important practical implications—e.g., could graduates of the teachers colleges be admitted to graduate or professional programs in the “big” universities (where, for the most part, the teachers college faculty were educated)? To put it another way, as the traditions, goals, and operations of the many kinds of institutions evolved, core traditions of the prestige institutions dribbled down, though taking different operational forms in different kinds of institutions.

So, in summary, from this broad historical perspective, one can see higher education growing from a very traditional base of private institutions modeled on European education, but evolving in a specific economic, technological, political, global, and social environment (especially considering fallout from World War II). It resulted in a very diverse set of higher education institutions, falling into several “sectors,” that share certain very general traditions, but for which the traditions play out very differently by sector and even by individual institution. If one is to understand and to “manage” or “navigate” these complex traditions in shaping the future of higher education, it is critical to understand the “layers”—the very general traditions along with the “sub-traditions” and operational implementation of them.

### **Traditions as Impediments to and Drivers of Change in Higher Education**

Perspectives on Tradition and Change. The concepts of change and tradition are much more complicated than they seem on the surface. As noted above, traditions are often seen as obstructing change, but if practice has been to do things that do not align with tradition, then following tradition would constitute change. Another kind of stress occurs when there are traditions that conflict at some level—e.g., in public universities, access and prestige. In such a case, following one tradition is to ignore or even conflict with another tradition. There are similar complexities in thinking about change. For instance, changing an admissions criterion from “being a member of a high-status family” to ACT scores does not change much, given the high correlation between the test scores and socioeconomic status.

It is important to note that many of the “different” traditions overlap in important ways. Admissions, the American Dream, and diversity/equity are obvious examples, as are hiring and equity/diversity. Hiring, research, and fiscal responsibility are other examples, as are hiring, P&T, and research. A rather

different kind of overlap would be that different kinds of publishers (e.g., disciplinary journals, for-profit book publishers, predatory publishers, and university presses) have an interest in P&T and research but from very different perspectives.

Higher Education Traditions and Constituents. A critical element of the impact of traditions is the fact that they can be seen/interpreted differently by different constituents, which vary by sector and by institution as do the traditions. The range of constituents in higher education is extremely broad, and different constituent groups often have competing interests that align with the many traditions in complicated ways. Accordingly, it is not just that the different constituents “interpret” the traditions differently, but they use (one might say “manipulate”) the traditions to help achieve their goals/outcomes for specific institutions and for higher education generally. Given this level of complexity, it will not be possible to do a comprehensive study of the constituent/tradition issues in this paper. Rather the paper will advocate a way of thinking about these issues by working through several rather different kinds of examples.

Table 1 shows the relations between a list of major constituencies and of major traditions, all construed broadly. An important point is that most constituencies have some kind of interest in nearly all of the major traditions. The links are based on the nature of the constituency not on individual constituents; it’s important to note, for instance, that an individual CFO may have interest in the English Literature Curriculum, but that’s not really part of his/her “job.” As this example suggests, different parts of a “constituency” may have very different interests in and interpretations of the traditions.

So, in summary, the traditions in Table 1 are key foundation elements for Higher Education, and these “high-level” traditions could be drivers of positive change. But as noted above, the more operational levels of their “sacred status” can pose serious challenges to change. This brings us to the core purpose of this paper: in what ways can traditions be used to drive positive change, and in what ways will they pose serious impediments. And, most important, how can these two dynamics be used to achieve change and stability appropriate to different sectors, disciplines, and professions.

I will be focusing primarily on public institutions—the sectors I understand best, but It is critical to recognize the complexity of these tradition/sector/discipline/institution dynamics. It is far too much to address these matters for all of the traditions, but I’ll briefly address the tradition of “faculty hiring” as an example.

Faculty hiring is at the heart of the very purpose of all sectors of higher education: quality of outcomes depends heavily on faculty quality, but the nature of desired outcomes varies greatly, as discussed above. That said, there are strong traditions about process and hiring criteria that impact all sectors. A critical constituency for hiring is the pool of potential applicants/hires. Compliance with the sacred traditions is strongly expected—e.g., recommendations, measurement of research productivity, IP creation and commercialization, success in teaching, and employment history (e.g., what kind of institution and what role the applicant had experienced). And the nature of the job is a critical concern: nature of the institution (e.g., teaching, research, vocational), quality (i.e., ranking) of the institution, compensation, tenure track or not, tenured or not (if moving from a senior position to another institution), and in many cases personal/professional network connections.

A similar level of complexity plays out for the various constituencies. The highest impact traditions, which have the most complicated relations with different constituent groups are those related to hiring

and promotion and tenure. The traditions link to various constituencies very differently in the sense that the different constituents have very different interests in higher education. An important example is the “student constituency.”

- Undergraduate students make many decisions that collectively have immense impact on an institution—e.g., their choice of majors, of classes, of social life options (e.g., Greek Life, social service, campus employment, or athletics). Involvement in student government can also have powerful effects (e.g., in publicity, in administrative decisions, and in curriculum). Their choices have significant impact on both academic and business matters in the institution. Graduate students have many of the same kinds of impacts, but they are positioned very differently in some ways. Many become university employees that perform critical work in teaching, research, and other functions, which are also central to their educational experience. Their typically close relationships with graduate committee members and other mentors has significant impact on all sides. Closely related to the dynamics with advisors and doctoral committee members are the dynamics among the students themselves, who have a very different perspective on the dynamics than do their advisors and other faculty, but different students, of course, also have very different perspectives. Some, for instance, will be focused on being placed in a high-prestige position when they graduate, while others are more focused on getting a stable and decently-compensated job. And of course, the students’ position on these issues depends greatly on their socialization in graduate school and by family or others influential in their lives. For those seeking careers in higher education, high prestige institutions may be a negative consideration for people who come from non-privileged backgrounds, often with a passionate commitment to help students with a background similar to theirs. And in many cases, the stability of a tenure-track position is more attractive than a better-compensated non-tenure track one in a more prestigious institution—or vice versa.

### **Recent Examples of Constituent/Tradition Dynamics**

Below are three examples of the complicated relations of traditions and change. They are only examples and by no means cover the full range of traditions or constituencies. To underscore the currency of these dynamics and their relevance to Higher Education, I’ve chosen documentation from recent articles/essays/opinion pieces in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Two examples are about “tradition” areas--Shared Governance and Equity/Diversity--and the third focuses on a constituency, the Disciplines, which links to many traditions. Together the three link explicitly to virtually all of the traditions and constituencies in Table 1.

Shared Governance. An area of notable conflict among many traditions and many constituencies is shared governance—the idea that especially the academic and administrative sides of the institution should come together to share in governance functions—policy, planning, and from a broad view, implementation. To begin within the institution: administrators are broadly seen by “academics” as using the idea of shared governance to garner faculty support for what they want to do—to at least have the appearance that faculty input was requested and considered carefully as administrative decisions are made. Faculty tend to see administrators as having “administrative agendas” for which shared governance is a cover-up. Administrators, on the other hand, tend to see faculty as unengaged, uninformed, and naïve about the complexity of administrative issues. This tension has some base in reality on both sides, and one might say that the tension between the academic and business sides of

the university is perhaps a tradition of its own. But there is much more going on than this tradition of mistrust.

Faculty positions on shared governance are driven by many other elements than administrative “plotting.” For instance, faculty from different disciplines and professions often have very different alignment with higher education traditions, as noted above, so that it often is hard for faculty to come together on governance issues—e.g., differences between the values of those in applied areas and those in more basic-research areas (e.g., Physics vs. Engineering, Social Work vs. Sociology, or Psychology vs. Counseling). And then there are the extremely complicated issues around faculty workload traditions—the relative value of teaching, research, and service (see Monaghan 2017:A8-10).

Similarly, different kinds of administrators have conflicting links to various traditions—e.g., the chief research administrator may have different ties to research productivity than would the dean of fine arts, and the Provost would have different links than deans or the CFO. Or, the chief research officer might have very different links than the CFO or other senior people in “administrative services” such as head of facilities, or the head of HR.

Bottom line: whenever faculty and administration come together to work collaboratively in the governance domain, it requires a significant commitment on both sides—often a steep learning curve, a significant time commitment, and the ability to wrestle with complex decisions for which difficult trade-offs are necessary. From the faculty side, the time commitment can be a serious problem, since it comes in conflict with the time needed for research productivity and quality education contributions, and governance ironically comes at odds with quality education, with research, and with P&T traditions.

In a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 17, 2017), several articles and opinion pieces address this issue from the perspective that shared governance tends to require significant faculty time on committees—a form of service that generally is not regarded highly in promotion and tenure, hiring, performance evaluations, and compensation. Kerry-Ann O’Meara is quoted as saying, “Serving on committees is the sort of work we don’t associate with star faculty.” As she points out, there are also complicated links with gender and minority status, thus linking to equity/diversity traditions (Monaghan 2017:A12).

Peter Monaghan quotes O’Meara (2017:A12) in addressing service contributions: “Research institutions confound such efforts by telling faculty members that their service is crucial while at the same time rewarding only research, grants, and perhaps teaching...In that “ambiguous situation” confusion reigns over what level of service is appropriate. ‘People’s biases emerge in a sort of perfect storm.’” Using traditions in a more positive way, David Perlmutter’s article (2017:A-10-11), “Embracing Governance—and Efficiency” argues that “not all committees are created equal and operate with equal alacrity and productivity.” Creating more structure, criteria for the importance of committee/governance contributions, and perhaps creating awards for “stalwart committee service” are among his recommendations.

In summary, shared governance traditions come into strong conflict with P&T, Research, and other traditions, and are seen in complex and tense ways by different constituents—especially faculty and administrators—and although not discussed in detail, with others such as accrediting bodies, disciplinary groups, and regents. On the one hand, the complexity of the many relations can be seen as hindering

progress in shared governance. On the other hand, for some constituents, using the tradition of shared governance to create faculty support for an initiative may be an effective driver of change.

Equity and Diversity. There are few if any traditions in higher education that generate the passion, anger, confusion, breadth of substantive issues, and engagement of many constituencies as do equity and diversity. Although the very general idea of “all men being created equal” has been a critical element of American culture for a very long time, the changes in the dialogue, the politics, the scholarship, and the social norms have changed in breathtaking ways.

Sarah Brown’s article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2017: A22-23) is a compelling statement about the range of constituents involved in the current dialogue and politics on equity and diversity. She addresses comments by Shaun Harper, Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, who expresses his “painful gratitude” for Donald Trump’s bringing reality back to the national understanding of ugly race issues. “Many people interpreted the election of Barak Obama in 2008 as, OK, we’re finally done with America’s racist history because we’ve elected a black man.” Harper sees this Trump “gift” as having racist and white supremacist people “to emerge from anonymous, obscure corners....” “We are going to have to deal with racism in a very different way now, because it is so much more apparent and so much harder to deny its existence on campuses.” He suggests that many on campuses have been in denial but committed in principle to racial equity. Clearly faculty, students, political constituents, and others are deeply involved in this dynamic.

A powerful example of the academic engagement of researchers and other faculty in equity issues is the conflict generated by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw’s concept of “intersectionality” (Bartlett 2017:B6-7). Basically, the original idea from 1989 was that sexism and racism could not be seen in isolation which leads to “black women’s being ‘theoretically erased’” (p. B6). Crenshaw, a law faculty member at Columbia University, originally framed the idea legally, focusing on black women, but the idea has now expanded to include race, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic status, and other kinds of overlapping identities. As such it has drawn bitter criticism, an example being strong comments by Alan Dershowitz, who noted that from this perspective Black Lives Matter “activists express solidarity with Palestinians” and are, therefore, anti-Semitic. Other criticisms are from academics, raising what Jennifer Nash called “the intersectionality wars” among scholars (Bartlett 2017:B7).

A somewhat similar issue was raised in regard to what became an extremely controversial article by philosopher Rebecca Tuvel on “transracialism” (McKenzie, Harris, and Suarez 2017). The article discussed parallel dynamics in the experiences of Rachel Dolezal (the former head of an NAACP chapter with white ancestry who identifies as black) and the experiences of Caitlyn Jenner, who changed her identity to be a woman. Critics were brutal, blasting “the article as a product of white and cisgender privilege” and “discounted important scholarly work by transgender and black academics” (McKenzie et al:A22). The journal in which Tuvel’s article was published, *Hypatia*, was strongly criticized for its review process and there was strong pressure to rescind the article. In the end the Journal did not rescind the article, and significant support for the article and for the journal’s position grew, but conflict continues. Clearly, as with the intersectionality issue, academics and many others used traditional positions both to advocate and oppose the transracialism article and the journal’s publication of it. Constituencies involved include not just scholars, but also the publisher as well as external people of relevance including Dolezal and Jenner.

In many ways parallel to the Shaun Harper comments (Brown 2017: A22-23), Peter Schmidt's article in the *Chronicle* (2017:A19-20) discusses ways that President Trump's presidency "raises hopes" for some conservative advocates. He points out, though, that President Trump has expressed support for "affirmative action" and has said that same-sex marriage is settled—positions of some concern to many conservative advocates—supporters of scaling back enforcement of Title IX, based on traditions of free speech. He also discusses the interest of those who oppose considering race (or other dimensions of diversity) in admissions. The issue is particularly high-visibility given the Supreme Court's positive ruling on the University of Texas considering race in admissions. There is significant concern in the Trump administration about certain aspects of affirmative action. Ward Connerly, president of American Civil Rights Institute, is quoted as saying, "I am hopeful that a nontraditional presidency will return the nation to more fundamental beliefs, such as in colorblind government." Again, external constituents are using traditions (in this case going beyond higher education traditions) to achieve desired changes.

Finally, a brief reference to a recent opinion piece by Brian Rosenberg (2017:A44) addresses issues about the traditions of higher education related to socio mobility. In the form of a letter to Secretary Betsy DeVos, he notes that "Higher education in the United States should be an engine of social mobility...All evidence...suggests that the system is not functioning as it should. The wealthy have better access to better colleges, both public and private, and more and more financial aid is being used to maximize tuition revenue rather than to provide support for those who are unable to pay." Here we have a college president addressing the Secretary of Education on issues related to several key higher education traditions—the American Dream, Equity/Diversity (in this case socioeconomic status), Fiscal Responsibility, Admissions—using the traditions in an argument for achieving specific end results.

Disciplines. In this paper, I've characterized the disciplines as "constituents," though they embody rich traditions of their own and could, perhaps, be characterized as traditions. The many disciplines and professions are represented by different advocates such as faculty, departments and colleges, accreditation agencies, and alumni in ways that collectively make the disciplines and professions themselves important constituents. Like other constituencies, their role plays out in complex ways, in part because their "advocates" (or "challengers") are extremely diverse both inside and outside the Academy. And this, interacting with the strong disciplinary traditions, makes this constituency particularly powerful.

A topic that receives a great amount of attention is the fact that the disciplines pose strong challenges to interdisciplinary research and teaching. This is a critically important topic, but it will not be a focus in this paper. It is important to acknowledge, though, that much of the very high impact—even transformative—research today is interdisciplinary. It is sometimes thought that interdisciplinary research challenges the legitimacy of the disciplines; I have argued many times that this perspective misses one of the most important benefits of interdisciplinary work: that is that it is the differences among the disciplines that create the "sparks" that underlie the high impact of much interdisciplinary work. This being the case, maintaining/nurturing the strength of the disciplines is a critical element for interdisciplinary work. It is this topic that links the interdisciplinary dialogue to the kinds of advocacy I will address here.

Many of the current dynamics focus on specific disciplines or professions (e.g., History or Medicine), but much plays out for clusters of fields—e.g., humanities, STEM fields, basic science, applied science, or fine arts. Much is driven by external forces such as media, political agendas, employers, corporate

collaborators in research, and donors. And many scientists are alarmed (Basken 2017:A22). But much conflict arises from internal dynamics ranging from highly principled ways of doing research to institutional competition for resources. As higher education has become increasingly high-profile in politics and the media, related to many of the traditions discussed above (e.g., fiscal responsibility, the American Dream, equity/diversity, and preparing students for jobs), the rhetoric tends to focus on disciplinary/professional/vocational elements in ways that make simpler, more compelling arguments than the more abstract, broad higher-education arguments would make, as outlined in Lafer's article on "The Corporate Assault on Higher Education" (Lafer 2017:B8-10).

A very high-profile issue regarding science disciplines has to do with the political dynamics regarding climate and environmental change. The political drivers of the issue are broad, including corporate sectors with an interest in the potential outcomes of research (e.g., the coal industry on the one hand and clean energy firms on the other) and the workers who lost jobs in the coal industry (or gained them in clean energy), scholars who are doing research in the area, and politicians who are engaged in many ways. As Joshua Weitz says (2017:A68): "It is one thing to engage in a good-faith debate over the prioritization of distinct approaches to finding a cure for cancer or to enhancing the efficiency of alternative fuels. It is quite another to be targeted by a 'mean tweet' from the president amplified by online threats, to find one's work added to a congressional list of 'wasteful research,' or to see crucial discoveries scrubbed from government web pages and projects cut off from funding entirely." In reference to this kind of environment, Weitz raises the troubling question "Should Scientists Compromise?" Among the many recent responses to these issues is the March for Science—an effort that brings scientists together to "get the word out" to the public with a "strong unified message" that makes sense to non-scientists (Pagoto 2017:A48).

Ironically, questions about the value of science have gotten as much or more visibility recently than similar questions about the arts and humanities. Questions about the value of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities (NEH and NEA) have gone on for many years (Gardner 2017:A24) and it is not surprising that it has come up in the early budget discussions by President Trump. The public case to be made for humanities and arts is not an easy one, since very large parts of the American population and, accordingly, many legislators and governors, find the negatives a relatively easy way to get political support. As Gardner points out, much of the academic response is focused on how much education in the arts can be of value in careers outside the arts and humanities. A fascinating article on "Opening Doors for the Ph.D." in history and humanities (Patel 2017:A8-12) and on "Helping History Ph.D.s Expand Their Job Options" (Patel 2017:A12, interviewing James Grossman) takes the issue to the relevant constituencies on their own terms: jobs—but also addresses the concerns of Ph.D. candidates about getting jobs, given that something like 50% do not get long-term academic jobs ("that they were trained for") or may end up in the "adjunct" state (Patel:A10).

In summary, as we look at the disciplinary constituencies, we see the dynamics affecting them driven by a wide variety of higher education traditions that are "used" by all the many players in the game. It is clear that many of the higher education traditions we have discussed are being used as foundations for the many disciplinary constituents seeking change, both positive and negative: e.g., preparing students for jobs, hiring and P&T, the American Dream, Research, Engagement, and fiscal responsibility. The disciplines are foundation stones for nearly everything academic, including interdisciplinary research and teaching; that being so, the disciplines as higher education constituencies will surely be at the core

of academic, political, and other discussions of higher education, involving nearly all kinds of other constituents and many higher education traditions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Traditions and change come together often in higher education. For many constituents, their goals are driven in highly principled ways as they realize the very positive end results captured by the traditions. Such efforts may be from within or from outside the academy (e.g., faculty, donors, legislators). Examples would include improving shared governance such that academic values drive the business side of the university. Better achieving the American Dream or reaching new levels of equity/diversity would be others. On the other hand, the traditions can become tools for realizing goals that are not really captured by the traditions—e.g., for achieving objectives in raw politics. Thus equity can become a “tradition” to support race-blind admissions. Similarly, fiscal responsibility can be a rationale for defunding “wasteful” research or education programs that are negatively valued by certain constituents (e.g., evolutionary studies or research on climate change).

That said, traditions can be strong impediments to change, which can be both positive and negative. In times of volatility traditions provide a kind of stability that is of great value. On the one hand, strong traditions can bring academe together in principled resistance to political or other external drivers of change. And on the other hand, powerful traditions like equity or the American Dream can be the basis for powerful communications with external constituents. Traditions can also become very conservative forces for impeding adaptation to difficult times or to changes driven by important developments in higher education itself—a good example being the many traditional impediments to interdisciplinary work.

“Traditions and change” is an important topic with powerful impact on higher education...a topic that has received considerable attention in very narrow perspectives. But as a broader topic it has received little attention, and a better understanding of the broad dynamics would provide a deep insight into the current volatility and unpredictiveness of the future of higher education.



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