THE MANAGEMENT OF ACADEMIC CULTURE: NOTES ON THE MANAGEMENT OF MEANING AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION*

DAVID D. DILL
School of Education, University of North Carolina, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the management of the symbolic life of academic organizations, an area strangely neglected in discussions of academic management. The adoption by higher education of the techniques of market-based businesses comes at a time when these businesses are being criticized for lack of attention to organizational culture. Academic institutions may best be understood as value-rational organizations grounded in strong cultures described as ideologies and belief systems. Some thoughts on the management of academic culture, on the management of meaning and social integration, are developed.

No community, no organization, no institution ... can exist for long without a belief or set of beliefs so deeply and widely held that it is more or less exempt from ordinary demands that its goodness or rightness be demonstrable at any given moment ... [But] dogma and faith unsupported by the bonds of structure are, as comparative religion teaches us, notoriously fragile. Robert Nisbet (pp. 23, 40).

Introduction

We are members of academic communities, but we manage academic organizations. When we seek to give meaning to the term "academic community" we speak of symbolic context: the distinctive history and traditions of our particular university, past sacrifices by notable faculty members on

* This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the Fifth International Conference on Higher Education, University of Lancaster, 2 September 1981. I am indebted to Philip Altbach, Tony Becher, Zelda Gamson, and the members of Study Group Six for their constructive criticisms of the original paper.
the behalf of academic freedom. When we seek to give meaning to the term "academic management" we speak of rational processes: goal setting, evaluation, cost analysis. A necessary condition for the management of academic organizations is the assumption that they are academic communities; the faculty are committed to a common set of beliefs. Yet academic managers do not discuss the actions by which a common set of beliefs can be maintained. We assume a common academic culture; we do not manage it.

The strength of academic culture is particularly important when academic institutions face declining resources. During these periods the social fabric of the community is under great strain. If the common academic culture has not been carefully nurtured during periods of prosperity, the result can be destructive conflicts between faculties, loss of professional morale, and personal alienation.

The basic argument to be presented is that academic institutions possess distinctive cultures which are developed and sustained by identifiable actions of the community members. These actions include the presentation of symbolic events, such as honoring a distinguished researcher, which emphasize the core values of the institution; this process will be termed "the management of meaning". These actions also include designing structural bonds, such as the joint appointment of faculty members, which help transmit the core values of the institution; this process will be termed the management of social integration. The techniques of managing meaning and social integration are the undiscussed skills of academic management.

To understand the relevance of these skills we must first explore three interrelated phenomena: first, the part culture plays in models of management; second, the traits which distinguish universities from other organizations and make the management of culture of particular importance; third, the reasons for the decline of the existing academic culture. From this discussion we can begin to develop the threads of a distinctive process critical to maintaining academic institutions — the management of academic culture.

The Trends in Management: Academic

Many academic institutions in the United States are confronting the issue of survival. To the issues of financial stress which dominated the 1970s — soaring fuel costs, rapid inflation, inadequate budgeting and investment strategies, decreased federal support for research — has been added the decline in available numbers of traditional age students. Recent policy decisions to cut federal support for student loan funds can further decrease, dramatically, student enrollments, thereby intensifying the competition between institutions.

The response to this on the part of academic institutions has been