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30 September 2008

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/16485/>
MPRA Paper No. 16485, posted 29 Jul 2009 20:47 UTC

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A case of mimetic isomorphism: a short-cut to increasing loyalty to academia

A widely-held conception about bringing academia and business close to each other in the times of financial crisis presents no novelty any longer. Numerous income-generating, fund-raising or demand-supply oriented strategies offered by university top officials and ever-increasingly empowered administrators could easily testify to this trend. However, in spite of the efforts made by administrators, faculty and presidents, universities still face a wide array of challenges (like changing demographics, increasing enrollments, academic quality, to name just a few) that they need to tackle with limited resources. So the question remains: why is it that despite business-like oriented strategies universities still cannot yield quick business-like results? Traditional answer would entail trite phrases like: academic conservatism, slow to respond to changes, retaining ‘public good’ values, so on and so forth. However, a recent article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 24, 2008) goes to the core of the problem and tries to uncover the true reasons why universities face so many unresolved challenges.

The article claims that the problem could hide behind the lack of enthusiasm in younger generations of scholars and scientists to pursue careers in academia, and thus, keep loyalty not only to their profession (as traditionally considered) but to their institutions as well. This fact, in its turn, accounts for the loss of essential human resources by universities. According to the article, it is not the low salary that presents a true obstacle to attracting young forces. After all, the issue of incentivizing faculty has been raised on numerous occasions and different solutions have been offered, like increasing benefits, or imparting a share from the overall revenue increase to the faculty

(as another article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of earlier date offers, September 12, 2008), and thus involving academia in income –generating activities more actively. ‘Furthermore, establishing prizes for faculty who have been especially successful in commercializing a technology in state or offering matching funds to leverage federal R&D dollars are examples of other ideas that could be of benefit’ (Powers, 2004: 19). Besides, faculty salaries and institutional prestige have also been linked (Melguzio and Strober, 2007). But as the article claims, the true cause of the problem is the long career ladder that young academics need to follow in order to achieve top leadership positions. As the article states, ‘Permanent junior faculty make up a diminishing share of the professoriate, and most of these individuals will not have time to earn tenure (at four-year institutions and some community colleges) and then rise up the traditional administrative ladder from department chair, to dean, to chief academic officer, amassing the kind and amount of experience typical of current leaders... Across higher education, young faculty who will have time and opportunity during their careers for an extended period of scholarly or administrative leadership are increasingly rare’ (Chronicle of HE, September 24, 2008).

Therefore, future leaders of higher education simply may not have time to touch every rung on this ladder.

Faculty are completing doctoral programs at a later age. Forty-seven percent of full professors in 2003 had completed a doctorate before turning 30; only 24 percent of assistant professors in the same year had completed a doctorate while in their 20s. Conversely, while only 20 percent of full professors completed their doctorates after turning 40, 40 percent of assistant professors did not complete a doctorate until after the age of 40. Similarly, 41 percent of full professors had earned a doctorate within six years of completing a bachelor’s degree. Only 22 % of assistant professors had moved so quickly through the educational pipeline. For half of assistant professors, 10 or more years passed between earning a bachelor’s degree and completing a doctorate. It is not clear whether the trend toward completing graduate education later in life is due primarily to students entering graduate school later or taking longer to complete a doctorate; most likely, both have occurred (ACE Brief, 2008).

These data present many possible implications for higher education. For example, how inspired will current undergraduates be to pursue an academic career if they see few young faculty? Or, how well can higher education keep pace with rapid changes in technology if so few of our faculty are part of the “net generation” (Chronicle of HE, September 24, 2008)? These questions naturally address the issue of the decrease of level of loyalty in academics.

The aging of junior faculty might not pose a problem for the future leadership of higher education if these individuals could rise rapidly to positions of authority. ‘However, findings from the ACE American College President Study suggest that the road to the senior leadership of colleges and universities is longer today than at any time in the past 20 years’ (ACE Brief, 2008).

In 1986, 42 percent of presidents were aged 50 or younger; 20 years later, only 8 percent of presidents fit this description. Conversely, in 1986, only 14 percent of presidents were aged 61 or older. In 2006, almost half of all presidents (49 percent) were in this age bracket (ACE Brief, 2008).

In response to the challenge, the article offers a novel solution to the traditional problem, ‘higher education’s career ladder may be broken’ by shortening the path to high leadership positions for young academics’. And truly, this claim sounds legitimate enough if universities are trying to rejuvenate human resources by attracting young academics like most present-day businesses do. ‘If the current model will not work for those entering the leadership pipeline today, then higher education must find ways to bring more young people into the permanent faculty and advance them through the academic ranks more quickly, alter the career ladder so that people can skip rungs and rise to the presidency with fewer years of experience, or become more open to individuals from areas other than academic affairs... As a result, higher education may be

required to re-examine its traditional career ladder that leads from junior faculty member, through the faculty ranks and various levels of academic administration, culminating in the presidency' (Chronicle of HE, September 24, 2008). The market may eventually drive these changes, but it makes little sense to wait to consider this problem until it is at our doorstep. Now is the time to begin discussing how the leadership pipeline might be altered to adapt to current demographic realities.

Besides, it should be noted that the process of shortening career path to leadership positions, could also serve as an example of *mimetic isomorphism* (i.e. imitating other organizations), where university tries to apply business-like quick result-oriented strategies (Gumpert and Sporn, 1985: 122). Therefore, this process could also be one step towards bringing academia and business closer: breeding academic loyalty through business-type strategies of quick promotion.

Finally, certain questions still remain open: What are the implications for the future administrative leadership of higher education? If these future leaders must demonstrate the level of experience demanded of those in charge today, is the current leadership model sustainable (as discussed in Mangieri and Arnn, 1991; Mech, 1997; Tucker, 1984)? And most importantly, considering all the positive sides of shortening career paths for academics and thus, increasing their loyalty to the university, might there still follow some unintended consequences of this 'short-cut' path that we do not see at present but may as well show up in the future?

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