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10 Sociological Frameworks for Higher Education Policy Research

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The study of policy and politics is quickly becoming a central subfield in higher education research. As public policy becomes more salient in the evolution and development of higher education systems, research on policy, politics, and governance has increased concomitantly. Researchers and students are seeking new and compelling concepts and frameworks to help explain policy dynamics in higher education. However, of the available analyses, few have proved useful. Although policy process models from political science have recently been promoted to fill this gap, theories drawn from sociology and organization studies have enormous potential to advance our understanding of higher education policy. Just as theories of firms and nonprofit organizations have been invaluable to our understanding of the behavior of universities, comparable sociological theories can be used to analyze the policy process. Policymakers do not function in a vacuum; they are embedded in organizations—legislatures, boards, and agencies—all of which develop influences, practices, and habits that help determine policymakers' behavior. As a result, concepts derived from the sociological study of organizations can be used profitably to analyze political behavior and enhance our knowledge of the policy process.

This chapter looks at several concepts in organization theory and sociology that can be used to study higher education policy and politics. These include concepts of organizational strategy, the role of interests and agency in the organizational process, the use of symbols and symbolic behavior by organizational leaders, and the analysis of institutional logics applied to organizational fields. This is certainly not an exhaustive review of the possibilities, but each of these organizational processes is worth careful examination given its salient effects on the policymaking process in higher education. In order to establish a foun-

dation for considering sociological frameworks, I will first review some of the extant theories of policy process drawn from political science, beginning with those that have been strongly influenced by sociological theories of organization.

Policy Process Theories

Policy process theories are rooted in the institutional school in political science, which is related to but somewhat distinct from sociological institutionalism (March and Olsen 1984; Scott 2001). Both schools look closely at the impact of organizational structures, environments, and behavior on organizational decision making, as opposed to simply examining the interaction of individual actors or interest groups. For obvious reasons, political institutionalism is focused primarily on political behavior, while sociologists have a broader focus on a wide variety of institutional types, of which political institutions are only one special type.

In the study of higher education politics and policymaking, theories of policy process have gained ascendancy as researchers have attempted to fill this vacuum (McLendon 2003a; 2003c; Pusser 2003, 2004). Descriptive analyses of the policy process have been available for some time, but these emphasized a sequential, incremental approach (Bendor 1995; Easton 1965; Lasswell 1948; Lindblom 1959). A range of new possibilities have now also become available, from garbage can models to punctuated equilibrium theory and advocacy coalitions, to help guide education researchers in their studies of the policy process (Sabatier 1999). However, as these models have emerged so recently, the usefulness of their application to higher education policy has yet to be fully explored. These new theories will undoubtedly inspire more and significant new work to enhance our understanding of the politics of higher education.

Policy process theories are often rooted in theoretical frameworks or methodologies familiar to sociologists and organization theorists. One prominent case, a broad theory of political agenda setting, is quite familiar to those who study higher education. Michael Cohen, James March, and Johan Olsen (1972) developed garbage can theory to understand the process by which university presidents manage the complex dynamics of contemporary universities. It was then appropriated by John Kingdon for application to a compelling and enduring mystery of political science: how issues reach salience in political agendas (Kingdon

1984/2003). It has since been expanded, critiqued, and reformulated and is now commonly referred to as the "multiple-streams framework" (Mucciaroni 1992; Zahariadis 2003).

Garbage can theory, at the simplest level, saw various streams of problems, solutions, technologies, and people interacting with reference to organizational issues and recognized that certain combinations of these streams could yield choice opportunities—the chance to make an acceptable decision. In the case of college presidents, the more the president could control the interactions among those elements and create "garbage cans" to attend to specific issues, the higher the probability of a successful solution (Cohen and March 1974). (Or, taken from the cynic's point of view, garbage cans could be used to keep constituents busy while the real work was taking place elsewhere.) In the case of agenda setting, Kingdon saw problems, ideas (or policies), and politics as three streams coming together to yield similar choice opportunities for political actors.

Other policy process theories are less rooted in established organization theory. Punctuated equilibrium theory, for example, takes its inspiration from ecology models of biological development (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Jones, Baumgartner, and True 1998; True, Jones, and Baumgartner 2003). Evolutionary biologists—most famously, Stephen Jay Gould—noted that species transformations tended to occur in brief, intense periods of change rather than gradually over time. This process was called "punctuated equilibrium" to denote long, fallow periods of incremental change followed by dramatic, rapid change over short periods of time. Social scientists, seeking an alternative to the standard incrementalist theories of political change offered by Charles Lindblom, David Easton, and others, borrowed this theory to understand radical changes in policy development that failed to adhere to the incremental model.

Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (1991) consider that equilibria in political systems occur because "policy monopolies" have been created among the various overlapping subsystems in politics. These policy monopolies create established structures, political roles, and interest group mobilization efforts that lead to incremental change. Radical policy changes—called policy punctuations—occur when these policy monopolies are systematically destroyed. Baumgartner and Jones see these as occurring due to variations in public or policymaker interest in various issues, although the factors behind changes in public interest and the attention of political actors are still largely unclear.

The group behavior of political actors is addressed by Advocacy Coalition Theory, or ACT (Sabatier 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 2003; Schlager 1995). According to ACT, politics is generated by rival coalitions of political actors who share a set of normative and causal beliefs and engage in nontrivial, coordinated activity over a period of time. ACT is thus a kind of interest group mobilization that occurs *within* political institutions. Major policy change can occur only when the dominant coalition of actors is unseated through shifts in public opinion or other environmental conditions, but minor, incremental change occurs through routine shifts in opinion or attention among members of the dominant coalition.

A number of other political theories are available for policy researchers in higher education. Policy innovation and diffusion models use econometric models to analyze the translation of policy ideas across institutional, state, or international contexts (Berry and Berry 1990, 1999; McLendon, Heller, and Young 2005). Institutional choice theory examines the degree to which policy changes are influenced by the implicit selection of decision makers to implement them (Clune 1987; Gormley 1987). Political utilities analysis looks at how particular organizational structures or implementation strategies have usefulness for political actors beyond their substantive importance (Malen 1994; Weiler 1990). Finally, similar to garbage can models, arena models examine how participants, interests, and ideals contend for a place on the political agenda, but these models go further to examine how the arena itself legitimizes participants and policy ideas (Mazzoni 1991; Fowler 1994).

The application of these theories to higher education is a relatively new phenomenon and limited to a small but burgeoning set of researchers (McLendon 2003c). Nonetheless, the theories have wide applicability to problems in governance and higher education policy and could be profitably used alone or combined with other ideas (see below). The emergence of these frameworks will undoubtedly lead to demystification of the process of higher education policy and agenda setting, but as yet it is unclear which of the frameworks will prove most useful and provide the most understanding for higher education researchers and practitioners. Simultaneously, we need to consider other frameworks from alternative traditions that may enhance our knowledge.

The Policymaking Environment for Higher Education Organizations

To understand more fully higher education as an organization, we must first consider the university as an open system. An open-systems approach acknowledges that organizations are embedded in multiple environments, both technical and institutional, to which the organization must respond (Scott 2001). Organizations are not monolithic in their responses to the environment; part of the variance in their responses can be explained by differences in the degree of complexity and uncertainty of environmental demands (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Thompson 1967) and by the nature, quantity, and source of organizational resources (DiMaggio 1983; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Another part of this variance, however, can be explained by differences in individual and organizational capacity—enabled through leadership ability, interest mobilization, and value commitments—to engage in strategic action (Child 1972; Oliver 1991).

The technical and institutional environments for public higher education are exceedingly complex due to the multiple constituencies that higher education must serve, including parents, alumni trustees, state boards, legislators, and governors. Internal actors, including faculty, staff, and students, present their own demands for organizational adaptation to their needs. In addition, higher education must accommodate multiple, occasionally competing demands from the environment to increase access, lower costs, improve quality, and increase effectiveness (Gumport and Pusser 1999). A great deal of research was conducted throughout the 1980s and 1990s on the relationship between the field of higher education and its environment (Peterson 1998).

Societal demands regarding the role of higher education have shifted dramatically in recent years, pressuring campuses to think of themselves largely as an industry rather than as a social institution (Gumport 2000). As a result, academic restructuring and retrenchment efforts were prominent throughout the 1990s, as public universities responded to the demands of state governments to eliminate unproductive and duplicative academic programs (Gumport 1993; Slaughter 1993). While state-level attention to academic programs was hardly new, the degree of heat and attention increased dramatically since its inception, and the impact on faculty has been substantial.

In addition, we have seen increasing pressure to “systematize” public

systems of higher education, as state boards use their coordinating authority to eliminate duplicative programs and move underprepared students to lower levels of the system (Bastedo and Gumport 2003; Gumport and Bastedo 2001). The source of these demands is not only political and economic, as it surely is, but also institutional, the result of cognitive theories and preconceptions about the proper role of government in public higher education. Institutional actors, however, may engage in strategic action to manipulate these environments and their organizational impact. As the next section shows, power and authority play an important mediating role in the capacity to act strategically.

Policy as Strategy

In recent years, strategy has been considered an important component of institutional action. The traditional function of institutional theory has been to explain the powerful capacity of the environment to promote the similarity of structures and practices across organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio 1983; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The theory provides a compelling explanation for pervasive similarities among organizations and implies that the isomorphic process increases the stability of organizations over the long term and thus improves their odds for survival. Over the past fifteen years, however, institutional theory has been criticized for paying more attention to the roots of stability in organizations than to the sources of organizational change or the indubitable role of power in organizational development (Covaleski and Dirsmith 1988; DiMaggio 1988; Fligstein 1997; Perrow 1986; Powell 1991).

Recent work in neoinstitutional theory has provided a much-needed space for conceptualizing the role of strategic action within an institutional framework. Traditional strategic decision-making models have tended to emphasize the unfettered ability of leaders to influence organizations and their environments within a specific set of constraints. Another line of scholarship, however, has tried to recognize the role of environmental pressures on the process of strategic action (Child 1972; Hitt and Tyler 1991; Hrebiniak and Joyce 1985). Similarly, resource dependence theories have accounted for strategic action by the successful manipulation of task constraints and organizational environments (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Christine Oliver (1991) integrated the institutional and resource dependence perspectives to identify a con-

tinuum of strategic action ranging from acquiescence to manipulation. She argued that variation in the degree of institutionalization provides room for varying degrees of “resistance, awareness, proactiveness, influence, and self-interest” in organizational decision making (Oliver 1991, p. 151). Nevertheless, from this perspective, strategic action is still completely dependent on external factors—namely, the degree of institutionalization in the organizational field—that are outside the control of individual actors.

A role for leadership and power within institutional theory can be buttressed by insights from theorists of strategic choice. Strategic choice theory developed in direct response to the highly deterministic organization theories that predominated during the 1960s (Child 1972, 1997). Organizational design, structure, and performance were seen as determined by the operational demands presented in the environment. An organization’s size, governance, technologies, and resource constraints severely limited the choices that could be made by its managers. Strategic choice theory, on the other hand, has emphasized the role of organizations and individuals within organizations in engaging actively to construct organizational structures and processes. Strategic choice is defined as the process whereby those with authority and power within the organization decide upon courses of action. The focus is therefore on the political process developed among organizational actors that leads to strategic decision making by the organization. Thus, according to John Child, “strategic choice articulates a political process, which brings agency and structure into tension and locates them within a significant context” (1997, p. 44). Effective strategic choice requires the exercise of power and directs attention toward those who possess power and toward the limits upon that power imposed by the environment.

Criticisms of this new perspective have inevitably emerged, and they have been substantial. Although the theory was perhaps ahead of its time in focusing upon agents and their relationship to the organizational environment, decision making was seen as determined by how agents could preserve their own autonomy by meeting performance expectations. This conception of agents’ ability to actively manipulate the organizational environment was therefore severely limited, an artifact of the deterministic theories that strategic choice theory was designed to confront. In addition, strategic choice was seen only within the limits of constraints imposed by the environment, not in relation to the limits imposed by the actors themselves. This has led some theorists to

posit that organizations fully “select and interpret their environment, respond to those elements that are fixed, and attempt to shape the remaining elements to their advantage” (Hitt and Tyler 1991, p. 331; see also Keats and Hitt 1988). As a result, Child, the founder of strategic choice theory, has acknowledged that “organizational actors often create choice possibilities through their relationships with people who are formally outside of the organization” (Child 1997, p. 57).

Oliver, in 1991, laid the groundwork for future work by developing an influential taxonomy of possible strategic actions—acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation—that organizations could utilize in response to isomorphic pressures in the institutional environment. Subsequently, there have been attempts to flesh out this perspective theoretically, often with a continued focus on the role of isomorphism in creating opportunities for change (Goodrick and Salancik 1996; Suchman 1995). Only a few have begun to look at the intra-organizational dynamics related to strategic action and organizational change.

Recent empirical work in institutional theory has been promising to develop our understanding of how actors within organizations engage in strategic action. Mark Covaleski and Mark Dirsmith (1988), in their groundbreaking study of the deteriorating relationship between the University of Wisconsin and its state benefactors during a budget crisis, articulated the ability of powerful state actors to mandate institutional compliance from the university when their interests were at stake. Lauren Edelman (1992) highlighted the ability of business leaders to maintain their managerial autonomy by mediating the impact of institutional pressures to implement civil rights law. Jerry Goodstein (1994) demonstrated that organizational response to institutional demands in the environment varies depending on the nature of the pressure and the organization. Finally, Margarete Arndt and Barbara Bigelow (2000) used content analysis of hospital annual reports to argue that senior administrators were using references and evidence of pressures in the institutional environment to justify their decision making to shareholders. This work has moved far beyond strategic choice theory to develop nuanced models of interactions between actors and institutions that produce strategic change.

Strategic planning models have been quite popular in the higher education literature since the early 1980s, perhaps reaching their zenith with the publication of *Academic Strategy*, still widely considered a classic in

the field (Keller 1983). Organization theorists also played with the concept, developing models for strategic planning and conducting empirical research on the effectiveness of strategic orientations for colleges and universities, particularly in response to scarce resources (Cameron 1983; Cameron and Tschirhart 1992; Chaffee 1985; Leslie and Fretwell 1996). None of these works, however, has seriously considered the institutional environment or the role of campus leaders in managing it. Almost uniformly, these authors see strategic planning as a highly rational, top-down process by which leaders consider alternatives, make hypotheses, conduct feasibility analyses, make decisions, and see that organizations carry out their decisions per their instructions. A neoinstitutional perspective, however, encourages us to consider the myriad cultural, cognitive, regulative, and normative pressures in the environment and to investigate why behavior that is ostensibly nonoptimal persists.

Policy as Entrepreneurship

Leaders can play an important role in institutional processes. Radical organizational change requires leadership in the early stages of the institutionalization process, through the building of organizational sagas, the development of resources and legitimacy, and the migration of new organizational models (Clark 1970; DiMaggio 1991; Kraatz and Moore 2002; Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence 2004; Rao 1998). Leaders must also successfully negotiate the institutionalization process, by recognizing that institutions constrain the choices that are possible or legitimate (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Selznick 1957). During such times of radical change, staff often play an important and disproportionate role in the institutionalization process, as discontinuous change upsets existing hierarchies and forces leaders to rely upon staff for expertise (Barley 1986; Bastedo 2005a).

Early formulations of institutional theory—now usually regarded as the “old institutionalism”—acknowledged that organizations could have leadership and engage in strategic action within the limits of the institutional structure. According to Phillip Selznick (1957), institutional actors may act as leaders by providing a “guiding hand” that steers the organization among the multitude of institutional constraints. While the organization would undoubtedly be buffeted by these existing constraints, and may well drift among them in the appropriate direction, a leader can guide the organization more smoothly by developing its

mission and distinctive competence, and by personally acting as the embodiment of institutional purpose (Selznick 1957). This tradition is strong in higher education research, from Burton Clark's case studies of a junior college and three unusual liberal arts colleges (Clark 1960, 1970) through to Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel's (1991) more recent account of the transformation of the U.S. community college.

The "new" institutionalism that developed during the 1970s, however, tended to treat institutional constraints as so deterministic that the concept of strategic action was hardly credible (Meyer and Rowan 1977). According to R. A. Colignon (1997, p. 8), the behavioral assumptions underlying the new institutionalism were that "people are irrational, affectively driven, cognitively and morally diminished, and lacking in interpretive competence and practical consciousness." While this critique is undoubtedly exaggerated, institutional analysts began to conceptualize a role for individual agency that allowed organizational change to occur beyond routine adaptation (Covaleski and Dirsmith 1988; DiMaggio 1988; Perrow 1986; Powell 1991). In a particularly influential essay, P. J. DiMaggio (1988) argued that the concept of institutional entrepreneurs—derived from Stuart Eisenstadt (1980)—could provide leverage for understanding the role of strategic action in creating new institutions. Although the concept was barely mentioned by DiMaggio, it has been used as a conceptual framework in a number of subsequent articles (Colomy 1998; Fligstein 1997; Rao 1998). Also, the concept of "policy entrepreneurs" has gained ascendancy in political science literature (Kingdon 2003; Mintrom 1997).

Indeed, the concept of institutional entrepreneurship can also provide leverage for understanding the role of leaders in creating new institutions (DiMaggio 1988; Fligstein 1997; Selznick 1957). In the case of higher education governance, multiple institutions hold sway, each with its own set of embedded values, interests, and shared norms. Legislators, campus and system administrators, and faculty all have institutionalized sets of values and norms that must be negotiated by policymakers in the higher education field. Statewide governing and coordinating boards themselves have a set of institutionalized values and practices that have become legitimate over time in the field (Berdahl 1971; Richardson et al. 1999). Successful institutional entrepreneurs are able to use their social capital, political power, and leadership skills to negotiate these multiple and often conflicting institutional demands. As Hayagreeva Rao, Calvin Morrill, and Mayer Zald have said, institutional entrepreneurs "spear-

head collective attempts to infuse new beliefs, norms, and values into social structures" (2000, p. 240). They are disproportionately influential in setting policy agendas, framing events, and managing political conflict, thus reinforcing the legitimacy and credibility of their actions. Nevertheless, the role of leaders and policy entrepreneurs is underdeveloped in institutional theory to date.

Policy as Symbolic Action

Like all organizational actions, policy must be understood as having both substantive and symbolic components. This is not to say that the only role of institutions is to engage in "impression management" of organizational behavior through the use of symbols or other nonsubstantive actions (Arndt and Bigelow 1996; Powell 1991). Rather, it is to emphasize that organizational action often has an important symbolic component, and those components may have real importance, even primary importance.

On a substantive level, policy decisions are often the result of political exigencies, resource allocation dilemmas, and other practical issues that play a part in the political process. All organizations face similar dilemmas of external constraints, resource and power dependence, and other aspects of the organizational environment that contrive to restrict decision making. Indeed, it is often the case that competing environmental demands and associated resource constraints result in situations where it is impossible for the organization to produce outcomes that are desirable to constituents. In the case of policy, disappointed constituents are usually the public or powerful political actors.

In such cases, symbolic behavior is often the result (M. Edelman 1962; Pfeffer 1982). These can be attempts at managing the impressions of external actors or may simply signal an attempt at meeting needs. The success of all symbolic behavior is measured by the degree to which it serves to maintain organizational legitimacy. This can be viewed cynically, as public relations—or even worse, as fakery or lies. But from the point of view of the organization, symbolic behavior reflects an attempt at survival or a need to maintain resources or values in the face of untenable environmental demands.

A fascinating series of studies by Lauren Edelman at the University of California at Berkeley has explicated these processes in various legal contexts (Edelman 1992; Edelman, Uggen, and Erlanger 1999; Edelman

and Petterson 1999). In studies of federal civil rights law, Edelman found that managers used symbolic compliance to create the impression that they were in accord with affirmative action mandates while maintaining maximum managerial autonomy in personnel decisions (Edelman 1992). The establishment of EEO (equal employment opportunity) offices and written affirmative action plans bears no statistical relationship to changes in workforce composition at those corporations (Edelman and Petterson 1999). The hiring of affirmative action officers at colleges and universities yields similar results (Edelman, Petterson, Chambliss, and Erlanger 1991). Edelman concludes that organizations use various structures and established positions to maintain symbolic compliance with legal demands while maintaining the organization's resources, legitimacy, and autonomy.

Symbolic compliance often occurs through a process of decoupling, the process by which certain organizational behaviors are disassociated from core organizational activities. (This is not to be confused with loose coupling among subunits of an organization.) Early work in organization theory attempted to explicate the dynamics underlying the decoupling of organizational units and processes. John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) theorized that organizations decouple their formal structures and processes from inspection to prevent any resulting losses in legitimacy. Meyer and Rowan saw many of these decoupling procedures acting as "rational myths"—symbols of efficiency and effectiveness that actually lack those qualities under closer scrutiny. Organization charts, academic grades, and degree structures all may have these qualities.

Although decoupling was one of the earliest articulated processes in the institutionalization of formal organizations, empirical research on decoupling has been extremely rare. Recently, a series of intriguing papers has investigated decoupling in corporate finance structures, finding that business firms often adopt innovations viewed favorably by shareholders and boards of directors, like CEOs' long-term incentive plans, stock repurchase plans, and poison pills, but then fail to implement them (Westphal and Zajac 1995, 1998, 2001). C. E. Coburn (2004) found that although the classroom is widely viewed as a structure that decouples instruction from environmental pressures through teacher autonomy, a more nuanced process occurs in which teachers use their preexisting beliefs about quality instruction to translate environmental pressures into instructional behavior. In the field of higher education, Robert Birnbaum (2001) argues that whereas management fads, like

Total Quality Management (TQM) and Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB), were considered and used by various colleges, most cases resulted in only "virtual adoption" of these practices until the fad subsided. Despite these excellent studies, however, our understanding of the underlying dynamics of the decoupling process, and how it is often employed strategically, has yet to be fully developed.

Policy as Logic

Policy change can also be seen as a form of institutional change, which emphasizes the powerful and adaptive role of norms, values, and beliefs in the process of institutionalization (e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Recently, the concept of *institutional logics* has become a popular means for scholars to articulate the dominant theories of action underlying institutional processes. Institutional logics are the "belief systems and associated practices that predominate in an organizational field" (Scott et al. 2000, p. 170). These are the "organizing principles" that organizations use when making decisions within a specified arena (Friedland and Alford 1991, p. 248).

Analysis of institutional logics is increasingly common in the organizational literature, and education has often been the context for analysis. Scholars have recently examined the role of institutional logics in changing conceptions of the higher education publishing industry (Thornton and Ocasio 1999; Thornton 2002), on an urban school's response to state accountability standards (Booher-Jennings 2005), on academic health center mergers (Kitchener 2002), on performance assessment in Canadian colleges and universities (Townley 1997), and on the responsiveness of community colleges to environmental demands (Gumport 2003). Further studies have looked at institutional logics in market reactions to stock repurchase plans (Zajac and Westphal 2004), in the deinstitutionalization of the nineteenth-century thrift industry (Haveman and Rao 1997), and in a novel study, in the *nouvelle cuisine* movement in French restaurants (Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003).

Institutional logics convey the idea that a single idea or approach dominates a policy system. But logics can also be a template for action, a set of characteristics that identify the theory of action to be used in policy development. In this way, the work of Royston Greenwood and C. R. Hinings (1993) is very helpful. They develop the concept of an archetype, "a set of structures and systems that consistently embodies a

single interpretive scheme" (Greenwood and Hinings 1993, p. 1053). An archetype is an array of multiple, interrelated features that need to cohere in order to provide direction for strategic action by the organization. The development of an archetype is the result of intraorganizational processes, as advantaged groups or individuals consolidate their political position and gain control over organizational resources. Policies can thus be analyzed in a dual manner. At once they are a logic that is compelling to policy actors in the organization, and they are a set of organizational characteristics that are adapted to support the emerging logic (Bastedo 2005b).

Institutional logics can draw upon concepts not only from contemporary institutional theories but also from power and strategic choice perspectives. This would view policy systems as arenas in which institutions and actors are engaged in dynamic processes that create and recreate social structures. There is room to understand the agency of individuals and organizations as well as the powerful influences of institutional structure on policy development and implementation processes. Interactions between institutions and actors refine the structure of the policy system and influence policy outcomes. Inside the organization, actors with interests and value commitments use their leadership skills and power. Logics thus provide space both for institutional constraints and for human agency.

Conclusion: Doing Research in Higher Education Policy and Politics

This chapter has sought to provide at least a taste of the various sociological theoretical and conceptual possibilities open to researchers in higher education policy and politics. For the graduate student seeking a conceptual framework for a dissertation or a practitioner seeking greater understanding of seemingly mystifying political behavior, these frameworks can guide us to more nuanced understandings of the political process and models for predicting future behavior. Nonetheless, a great deal of work remains to be done, methodologically and conceptually.

The complexity of political behavior requires study that uses a wide variety of research methodologies. In higher education, case study methods have been used predominantly, with the state as the usual unit of analysis (e.g., Bastedo 2005a, 2005b; McLendon 2003b; Pusser 2003; Richardson et al. 1999). Further qualitative work is needed, particularly

work that uses different levels of analysis. Research at the federal level is still needed (e.g., Cook 1998; Parsons 1997), as is work looking specifically at legislators, governors, and other important policymakers (e.g., Berdahl 2004; Conklin and Wellner 2004; Ruppert 1996, 2001). Unfortunately, international and comparative work on policy formation in higher education is still very rare (Enders 2004). Across all levels of analysis, studies that are methodologically ambitious, with large numbers of cases and subjects, would be most welcome.

Quantitative work on policy formation, politics, and governance remains highly descriptive in nature (e.g., Ruppert 2001; Schwartz and Akins 2005). As a result, this work lacks the methodological sophistication of quantitative studies of policy outcomes, although some exceptions are notable (Hearn and Griswold 1994; McLendon, Heller, and Young 2005). This is not simply a question of interest; existing data is often poor, establishing new datasets is both time consuming and expensive, and policy formation is not a topic that generally attracts substantial grant funding. Nonetheless, numerous research questions can be addressed only with better data and sophisticated quantitative methods.

Regardless of the method used, the politics of higher education is a growing field, attracting new researchers and conceptual frameworks from across the social sciences. The sociological concepts and frameworks reviewed here provide opportunities to leverage new and important insights into the policy formation process. An enhanced understanding of the political environment facing colleges and universities will provide both researchers and practitioners with better tools to address the complex tasks facing contemporary higher education.

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IV LOOKING AHEAD