

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

Patricia Gumport, Project Director

Theory-based and driven by empirical goals, this project pursues two concurrent research projects: (1) the development of a conceptual framework to advance analyses of restructuring and (2) case study research to identify how public universities and colleges are changing academic programs in response to contemporary environmental pressures.

The primary audiences for this research are campus leaders and higher education researchers. The proposed impact for campus leaders is twofold:

- To provide information about the contemporary context. This will be accomplished by the development of a conceptual framework depicting several levels of the accountability context and by providing information about national financial trends within public higher education.
- To assist in understanding academic change. The data analysis will identify how different types of public universities and colleges have been responding to pressures, how the landscape of academic program offerings has been changing, and the way in which campus-level data have been used when considering such changes.

Framework Development

Patricia Gumport, Principal Researcher

This activity established a conceptual framework for analyzing organizational responses to environmental demands. This research activity also mapped the terrain of published material on adaptation and organizational/environmental interdependence. The major activities included literature reviews, focus groups, and essays.

Focus Group Findings:

Nature of Environmental Pressures on Public Higher Education

Campus leaders identified four major sets of pressures: to expand access, meet workforce training needs, cut/contain costs, and adopt/upgrade technology.

Nature of Organizational Responses

Campus leaders identified three types of responses: programmatic, curricular, infrastructure.

Perceptions of the Roles of Public Higher Education Leaders

Competing imperatives to reshape the academic landscape may conflict with enduring organizational legacies. Campus leaders showed thoughtful reflection regarding how to reconcile them.

Analysis by organizational type suggests that leaders of comprehensive universities face the greatest challenge of reconciling highly divergent expectations.

Campus leaders can play an active role in reshaping environmental pressures including advocating for public higher education, cultivating demand for specific programs, and serving as a moral compass.

Case Study Research

Patricia Gumport, Principal Researcher

The objective of this activity is to identify patterns of academic restructuring across institutional settings in public higher education. Case study data anchor an analysis of how environmental pressures have affected academic landscapes.

Both on campuses and in policy circles there has been much discussion about academic change in public higher education, but little data on the contemporary period is available. Whether one seeks to construct a defense of higher education or to offer prescriptions for improved institutional performance, higher education researchers, institutional leaders, and policymakers alike could benefit from a greater understanding of contemporary academic adaptations developing within public universities and colleges. This project aims to contribute to those discussions with an in-depth, two-decade analysis of academic adaptation in nine public universities and colleges clustered in three metropolitan areas.

The analytical focus is both descriptive (what has occurred in terms of stability and change?) as well as interpretive (how do campus actors account for change over the last two decades, and how do they view prospects for the future, and what are the social and educational implications of the shifts?).