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The Review of Higher Education, Volume 33, Number 4, Summer 2010,
pp. 569-592 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rhe.0.0155



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The Review of Higher Education

Summer 2010, Volume 33, No. 4, pp. 569-592

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Educational Consortia in a Knowledge Economy: Collaboration, Competition, and Organizational Equilibrium

Bethany H. Flora and Joan B. Hirt

Forces have coalesced over the past two decades to create a knowledge economy in which collaboration and competition are critical elements for success (Friedman, 2006). Some of these forces, like retrenchment and resource dependency, are market driven while others, like power acquisition and accountability, are relational; but both types induce competition and collaboration. Higher education has not been immune from these forces. Competition and collaboration have resulted in an academy that functions more like a private enterprise (Gilde, 2007; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). These same forces have led to the emergence of new postsecondary organizations, including higher education centers in which multiple institutions share resources and facilities to offer educational programs in areas underserved by traditional colleges and universities.

We defined a “higher education center” (HEC) as a facility where two or more postsecondary institutions deliver baccalaureate and/or post-baccalaureate programs along with other credit (e.g., associate, certificate) and noncredit courses. HECs are managed by administrators who are em-

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ployees of the center rather than of any of the participating institutions. As of March 2008, HECs meeting this definition were located in at least seven states: Colorado, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia. Maryland and Virginia are home to multiple HECs.

While competition and collaboration reflect the external forces that have led to the emergence of HECs, little is known about the internal dynamics that sustain these centers. In many ways, the HEC is a test case that can be used to inform our understanding of the higher education landscape since it represents a single unit comprised of partners who must both compete and collaborate to ensure organizational survival. In this case study, we explored the internal dynamics at one such setting, the Metropolitan Higher Education Center (MHEC), through the lens of center and institutional administrators who worked there.

BACKGROUND

A number of trends have catalyzed organizational change in the post-secondary sector in recent years, including shifting student demographics (Thielen, 2003), reduced support for public higher education (Ehrenberg, 2006), and the emergence of a for-profit institutional sector (Kinser, 2007). Globalization is arguably one of the most powerful drivers of educational restructuring (Stomquist, 2007; Teichler, 2006) and the impetus behind an increasingly competitive environment for universities (Lefrere, 2007). In fact, some argue that the system of higher education is becoming more like a private, market-driven industry in search of entrepreneurial ways to deliver educational goods while also turning a profit (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). As Gary Rhoades (2006) has noted:

Academic capitalism is not simply a matter of entrepreneurial colleges and universities seeking to generate more revenues in tight financial times. It's a matter of these not-for-profit institutions behaving more like private enterprises, as the relationship between public and private entities shifts. . . . This is not privatization. It is a shift of public subsidy to entrepreneurial activities, especially in new economy realms. (p. 385)

Paradoxically, these skyrocketing levels of competition have been juxtaposed against increasing demands for collaboration. Research centers (e.g., bioengineering, nanotechnology) that draw on the talents of faculty from multiple disciplines have flourished on college and university campuses, and federal policy has increasingly rewarded interdisciplinarity in grant programs. Indeed, Thomas Friedman (2006) argued for the need to consider the competitive intensity of the global environment while recognizing that the true winners will be those who are able to orchestrate collaboration (pp. 280–281).

As pressure has driven postsecondary institutions to be both more competitive and more collaborative, they increasingly have engaged in initiatives that blur boundaries between the public and private sectors. For example, corporate-sponsored research has immeasurably expanded funding opportunities for faculty members but often has constrained their ability to disseminate their findings. Some journals now require scholars to report any interests they hold in a corporation that has sponsored their research. This boundary-blurring, poststructural paradigm has led to the emergence of new organizational models (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, & Teichler, 2007) like baccalaureate-conferring community colleges and the ever-swelling ranks of for-profit institutions, and has prompted scholars to speculate about those structures. Teichler (2006) posited that "expansion and diversification" explain the increase in organizational species in higher education. Alternatively, Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983) argued that coercive isomorphism explains how institutions have adapted to external pressures from governments, agencies, and the marketplace. To be successful, institutions mimic external forces.

One of these new organizational models is the higher education center (HEC). The delivery of academic programs away from a traditional campus environment has been called many things in the literature such as "extended education" (Patton, 1975), "external degree programs" (Johnson, 1984), "continuing education" (Knapper & Cropley, 2000), and "distance education" (Tracey & Richey, 2005). To some degree, HECs are simply the latest iteration of institutional efforts to expand access to higher education. In general, research relating to off-campus education revolves around outsiders' perceptions of these endeavors and reveals skepticism, misgivings, and concern about the quality and rigor of off-campus academic programs (Johnson, 1984; Patton, 1975; Scully, 1977; Tracey & Richey, 2005).

HECs are unique educational entities, however. For example, there are professional associations for those who work in distance education, extended education, and continuing education, but there is no national association for those who work at HECs. Likewise, researchers have studied forms of extended education (Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, Glessner, Green, & Lara-Alecio, 2007; Ghezzi, 2007; Rix & Twining, 2007; Samarawickrema & Stacey, 2007), but research on HECs is very limited. There have been a few publications related to the building design of what some call higher education centers, but these centers are typically facilities for a single university or community college that are geographically distant from the main campus (California State Postsecondary Education Commission, 2002; Design Cost Data, 2003). There is no evidence in the literature that empirical studies have explored HECs. In fact, so little is known about HECs that often those who work on the home campus of an HEC member institution are unaware of their institution's partnership with the HEC. Thus, these entities exist in relative isolation.

In general, then, while the external forces (competition and collaboration) that led to the emergence of HECs are evident (Gilde, 2007; Teichler, 2006), much less is known about the internal dynamics that sustain them. Organizational dynamics can be explored by eliciting data about the nature of work for those inside the organization (Hirt, 2006; Hirt, Amelink, & Schneider, 2004; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006). No study has explored the organizational dynamics of HECs.

We adapted the conceptual framework guiding this study from Elizabeth St. George's (2006) work on systems of higher education. She presented two options for a national system of higher education; these options are not mutually exclusive and can be viewed along a continuum from statecentric to neoliberal.

The neoliberal model of higher education is characterized by decentralized governmental involvement in favor of institutional control, the use of performance indicators, increased nongovernment sources of funding, quality-control through the monitoring of goals, and funding linked to outputs. Governmental policy and financial mechanisms are used to control institutions from a distance. Universities operating in the neoliberal model are encouraged to compete with one another for government and private funding. In essence, the reduction in the role of government results in increased competition among institutions (St. George, 2006).

In contrast, the statecentric model is characterized by public investment in a higher education system that aims to increase human capital and meet public demand for social equality through access to higher education. Governmental policy and financial mechanisms are used to control institutions through a deliberate system of regulations and incentives. These regulations and incentives link higher education to the economy, with the goal of increasing the educational capacity of the whole system and meeting the economic development needs of a region or nation. In the statecentric model, the increased role of government leads to less competition and increased collaboration (St. George, 2006).

In many ways, the St. George argument aligns closely with the "public good versus private gain" debate. St. George concluded that those countries without a strong higher education system should consider spending more resources collaborating and less competing. This conceptual framework translates readily to our study because the MHEC is a state-supported entity, comprised of both public and private institutions, that serves a region without a strong higher education system. It represents a hybrid organization in which both statecentric and neoliberal models of delivering higher education are present. The purpose of this case study was to examine the organizational dynamics of the MHEC through the lens of administrators who worked there. Participants included center administrators (who worked

for MHEC) and institutional administrators (who worked for a member institution). Two research questions guided the study:

1. How do MHEC administrators describe their work and relationships?
2. What organizational dynamics drive the work and relationships of the administrators?

THE METROPOLITAN HIGHER EDUCATION CENTER (MHEC)

The Metropolitan Higher Education Center (MHEC) is a pseudonym for one HEC. In 1997, the senate in MHEC's state established the Metropolitan Higher Education Authority (MHEA). Its purpose was to expand access to higher education in the MHEA's region by providing adult and continuing education and degree-granting programs through partnerships with the state's public and private institutions of higher education. Participating institutions were encouraged to collaborate on the delivery of credit and noncredit programs through shared administrative functions and resources (including the facility), coordination of marketing and information dissemination, and the development of academic policies related to course transfer. The MHEC administration would serve as the coordinating and brokering entity for the partner institutions. Participating institutions were to pay for all direct costs of programs and courses, a fair-market rental cost for space, and the costs of essential center services. Private institutions would not receive any special state support for delivering programs at the center. Public institutions would adhere to standard state policies. The financial responsibility for the operation of the MHEC was to be jointly shared by participating localities and the state (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 1997). Thus, the MHEC is both a consortium of universities and an entity unto itself.

The MHEC operates from a single, seven-story building in Metropolis. In 2007, 14 institutions (public and private) were MHEC members, offering 59 undergraduate programs, 46 master's programs, one doctoral program, 42 certificate programs, and 66 other adult learning opportunities. Since the MHEC opened its doors in the fall of 2000, more than 2,700 students have completed programs at the center. During the four months of data collection for this study, the MHEC board of trustees approved two additional institutional members: one large public university and one private college. This, then, was the context in which our study took place.

METHOD

We selected a case study design as the most suitable qualitative tradition for the study. Researchers who investigate case studies examine a setting bounded in time and space and provide contextual and extensive informa-

tion from many sources (Creswell, 1998). The study was bounded by time (four months) and by place (MHEC) and used multiple data sources (social artifacts and interviews).

Site

We selected the site for this case study using a purposeful sampling method. The MHEC has more institutional partners than any other HEC within the seven states that utilize our definition of a HEC. The MHEC serves both an urban and rural population of students. Finally, the MHEC executive director advocated for research on HECs and provided documents and access for this study.

Participants

We used a purposeful sampling method and criterion sampling procedures to select the study's participants. Our sample includes two types of administrators: institutional administrators and center administrators. We applied two criteria when selecting the institutional informants. First, the center executive director must have designated the institutional administrators chosen for the study as "active," meaning that they visibly engaged in the center's postsecondary activities and regularly attended monthly program meetings with center staff. This characteristic was important in providing access to participants who could supply the richest data. The second criterion for selecting the institutional sample was to include only those administrators who had primary postsecondary administrative responsibilities, such as serving as their institutional representative or engaging in activities like allocating resources, providing administrative support to faculty or students, or marketing credit-bearing college programs to the MHEC community.

To select center administrators, we conferred with the MHEC executive director and examined rosters of center staff to select individuals who had programmatic (as opposed to facilities, maintenance, or clerical) responsibilities at the center. Four center administrators (out of four eligible informants) and nine institutional administrators (out of 14 qualified informants) met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study.

The majority (11) of the 13 respondents were Caucasian. Eight were female; five were male. Most (eight) respondents had been working in education for 15 years or more and had worked at the center five to seven years. Seven were younger than 50 years of age while the remaining respondents were older.

Procedure

We collected data through social artifacts and interviews with participants. Social artifacts are letters, documents, photographs, or personal representations that help qualitative researchers learn more about the personal experi-

ences of the participant (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales-Escoto, 2007). Researchers in educational settings have used social artifacts to gather data for many purposes (Isaacson & Wilson, 1996; North Carolina Vocational Education Study, 1988; Siegel, 2001). Diagrams, graphs, concept maps, and drawings are complementary additions to the traditional interview, encouraging contributions from interviewees that the interviews might not otherwise elicit (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006; Enger, 1998).

We used two social artifact exercises in this case study. Participants completed them prior to the interviews, supplementing data elicited from the interviews. The first social artifact exercise (Appendix A) was to chart a typical weekly activity log. Informants listed what they did each day during a typical week and this information was used to develop interview questions about the interests (public or private or both) served by their work. In the second social artifact exercise (Appendix B), we asked the participants to graph a concept map of their relationships. They were given a sheet of paper with a circle in the center that represented them. They drew additional circles, each representing a group or individual with whom they interacted. Circles closer to the center circle represented groups with whom the respondent interacted more frequently while those farther from the center reflected groups with whom the respondent interacted less frequently. We used the data from this exercise to elicit additional information about the MHEC's organizational dynamics, particularly work and relationships that led to competition (neoliberal) and collaboration (statecentric) and how these two competing forces were balanced.

Using the data from the two social artifacts, we customized each interview protocol to explore specific areas for discussion. The interview protocol was divided into two sections. Section 1 encouraged participants to revisit their typical work activities to further explain the nature of their work, including the public and private benefits of their work. Section 2 elicited additional information about relationships among those working in the MHEC and how those relationships reveal the organizational dynamics driving work inside the center. All interviews were audiotaped (with the participant's permission) and transcribed verbatim.

We took six steps to ensure data credibility. First, we designed exercises and interview questions that specifically related to the research questions (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Second, each interview was transcribed verbatim and shared with the respondent as part of providing due consideration to him or her (Creswell, 2003) and, third, offering the opportunity to ensure the accuracy of the information the transcript conveyed. Fourth, experts reviewed the exercise and interview protocols. Fifth, we conducted a pilot study at another HEC and used the data to refine the protocols. Sixth, all results in this study were peer reviewed.

Analysis

We characterize our analysis of this study's data as iterative, systematic, and emergent. Codes for the social artifacts and interviews were compared and contrasted across participants to look for emerging patterns and differences. This constant comparative method enabled us to identify themes and supporting categories (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We recorded notes and analytic memos in an audit logbook (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). We then clustered codes from the social artifacts and transcripts into categories, which we developed into overarching themes related to the organizational dynamics at the center.

FINDINGS

The MHEC administrators participating in this study provided data that we analyzed to address our study's two research questions. The first question focused on administrators' work and relationships, and the findings revealed one overarching narrative that focused on the beneficiaries of their efforts: MHEC administrators believe that their work has statecentric benefits for the community, both neoliberal statecentric benefits for students, and neoliberal benefits for member institutions. These administrators consistently identified three primary beneficiaries: the community (through economic development), adult students (through economic incentives and access to education), and member institutions (through various incentives).

Economic Development for the Community (Statecentric)

The first constituency that MHEC administrators identified as benefiting from their work is the community, which garners economic development benefits. Administrators described the advancement of education in the community as a positive influence on economic development:

The Promise [Metropolis] Initiative alongside the city of [Metropolis] and [Metropolis] City Public Schools is where we've leveraged our university resources, working with my colleague who is very engaged in community development work.

Another institutional administrator noted a collaborative degree program in engineering that is less about which institution gets credit for the degree and more about providing education with an economic impact in a high-need area:

But even the degree stuff is starting to change. The cooperative engineering that we do with other engineering schools . . . is an economic development kind of function and supported by the state because whoever you take 50% of your coursework through is who you get your degree from . . . just amazing stuff.

Working with corporate partners was another benefit to economic development that administrators described. One institutional administrator elaborated:

What I'm most excited about is—what energizes me—is the telephone call that comes from the [Metropolis] Regional Chamber that says, “Hey, we have a business that’s looking to relocate here and they want to know about corporate training opportunities or noncredit opportunities” or “Can we get some faculty members at the table to greet them to let them know the engineering expertise that we could help with their manufacturing processes?”

These findings support prior studies that have documented the economic benefits of higher education. Kevin Burr (2006) concluded that one way to build the economic base in rural communities is through science degree programs offered by state colleges. Richard Florida (2006) asserted that companies in search of creative talent purposefully locate in university communities because these areas are ecosystems of creative, talented, and entrepreneurial people (p. 27). Indeed, causality tests have concluded that a more educated workforce acts as a stimulus for more investment in higher education (Kumar Narayan & Smyth, 2006). Thus, the theme of economic development for the community is found elsewhere in the literature and our findings expand that theme by highlighting how HECs can play a role in such development.

Economic Incentives for Students (Neoliberal)

Administrators reported that their work benefits not only the economic development of the community but also the long-term economic well-being of individual students:

If you see a single mother of three kids who finally gets her bachelor’s degree and lands a job making five or ten thousand dollars a year more, that could only be just incredibly rewarding to know that you were able to help somebody.

Thus, administrators at the MHEC believe that their work provides economic benefits to the collective and to individuals. That economic development is predicated on the educational access that the MHEC offers.

Access for Students (Statecentric)

Every administrator in the study referenced his or her work as beneficial for creating access for students. This theme was so prevalent in administrators’ language that their commitment to access outweighed their institutional or organizational commitments. In other words, administrators at the MHEC are more concerned with offering students access to the academic program they need and less concerned about serving their own institution’s priorities.

For example, an institutional administrator called her guiding philosophy “purpose over politics.” She said, “That’s the reason I tell students, ‘It doesn’t matter to me sometimes if you come to my university or not. But promise me that when you leave my office, you will [enroll in some program].’”

The MHEC provides access to lifelong learning—from high school completion (GED) to doctoral programs—for K–12 students to adults age 50 and over. MHEC administrators were convinced that such access was a primary benefit of their work. “I just like being able to represent a facility—a center—that offers programming that provides access to lifelong learning no matter where an adult is in his or her experience. I really—I value that.” In fact, for many, working in a HEC was congruent with their personal philosophy about the role of education:

I really believe in lifelong learning and what’s so wonderful about the center is that you’ve got people earning their Ph.D.s sitting next to someone earning a GED and the synergy that it creates and the knowledge that: “I can go on, I can do more, and I can do it right here.”

In addition to creating access, many of the administrators conversed about the varied needs of adult students. An institutional administrator who also taught classes at the center said, “So it’s that understanding of adult learners and their busy lives being parents of four children and working on degrees and that kind of thing. We know we need to be flexible and accessible.”

Clearly, the administrators feel that their work directly benefits adult students and their access to education. These findings resonate with essays that have been written about higher education centers. Both Fred Baus (2007) and Lorna Peterson (2007) noted that higher education centers create access for students and also benefit the regions they serve. Adult students need part-time educational options and lifelong learning strategies (Knapper & Cropley, 2000) but traditional institutions have systems that are geared toward the traditional-aged (18–to–24) full-time student (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007). The opportunities and programs at the MHEC demonstrate programmatic strategies that benefit adult learners. However, there are also institutional benefits associated with the work of MHEC administrators.

Incentives for Institutions (Neoliberal)

When addressing the MHEC’s benefit to their college or university, administrators differed in their opinions depending on their institutional affiliation. Those who worked for smaller, private, liberal arts institutions discussed the financial incentives the center offered their institution:

And often, regional offices, adult ed, continuing ed, whatever you name you give it, are seen as cash cows. . . . Often, if things are slipping a little bit at the

mother ship, enrollments, or costs are going up, they're looking to these other programs to bring in the funds to support the whole program.

Another institutional administrator for a small private college echoed this sentiment:

And I can understand the budget side of it because, for my institution, the adult degree programs are pretty close to half of what they're doing on campus and that's scary because the campus needs to do more, to grow. And our budget here is trying to carry them.

On the other hand, institutional administrators who worked for larger, public institutions spoke about more altruistic, mission-related incentives for their institutions. These included the opportunity to collaborate with business and/or educational constituents in the community:

So I would say that we are probably an anomaly in this building because everyone else is looking at doing the associate degree, the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral programs. Not that that's not very important to us. . . . It is part of our work . . . but my daily work is looking at the university's assets through a very different lens and that's through outreach and engagement.

The center administrators also spoke about what they perceived as benefits for member institutions. The image incentive, or being recognized as a partner in this innovative educational environment, was important for institutions. A center administrator stated, "I think everybody knew the center was going to be amazing. They [small private institution] had an opportunity to become a member and they did."

These findings illuminate the work of previous scholars. Some, like Peggy Sissel (2001), have concluded that the financial benefits for institutions are the only reason traditional universities have accommodated adult students, a notion contradicted by respondents in this study who talked about outreach, engagement, and image incentives. Others have argued that innovative initiatives in higher education are sustained only when they are compatible with the goals of the university and also profitable for it (Levine, 1980; McMullen, Mauch, & Donnorummo, 2000). Nicholas Buys and Samantha Bursnall (2007) reported many benefits associated with the engagement in university-community partnerships. Our study confirmed that awareness. In summary, the three groups that benefit from the work of the MHEC administrators are the community, students, and member institutions. These groups exist in symbiotic relationship with each other. For instance, a student benefiting from access may also contribute to the community's economic development upon completing a program. An institution that benefits from image incentives may also benefit from the successful adult student who becomes a financial contributor to the university. See Figure 1 for a graphic

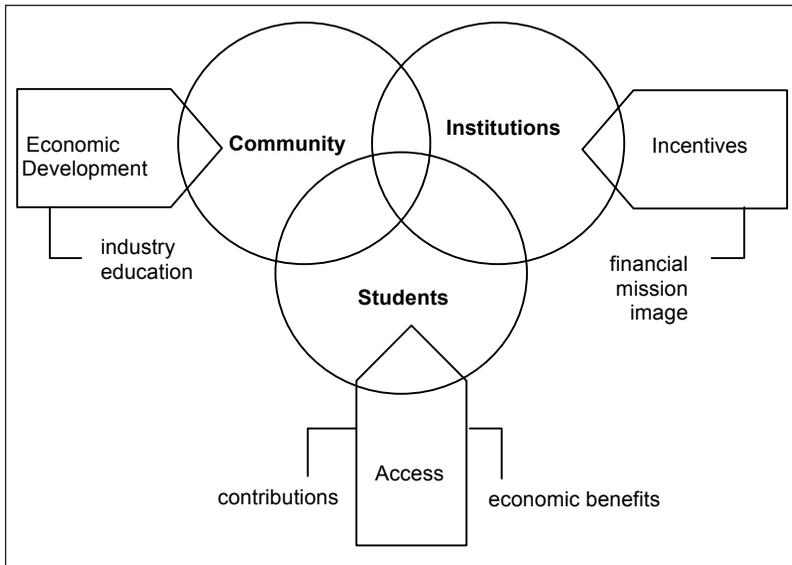


Figure 1. Beneficiary symbiosis.

representation of who benefits, how, and the symbiotic relationships among beneficiaries.

While the first narrative addressed those who benefited from the work and relationships of MHEC administrators, a second narrative emerged that encapsulated the findings related to the second research question: The organizational forces that drive the relationships of HEC administrators are collaboration (statecentric forces), competition (neoliberal forces), and equilibrium.

As an educational consortium, the message of collaboration at the MHEC is evident as soon as one walks through the doors of the building. The center's literature and kiosks display a "we are here together" theme. Our study had the goal of identifying whether collaborative organizational forces were at work beyond merely sharing a facility. In addition to conducting interviews and collecting social artifacts, we had several opportunities to observe the organizational force of collaboration. At a monthly program meeting we attended, center and institutional administrators sat around a table and discussed a policy for new institutional members. After the institutional administrators voiced concerns about the policy, center administrators agreed on holding more discussions. Clearly, the effort of the whole was driven by collaboration among the parts. Another opportunity to observe collaboration occurred at a holiday gathering. The institutional administrators contributed to the meal in the same way they provide education—each bringing a favorite

dish to share potluck style. The center administrators provided most of the plates, napkins, and drinks. These observations of collaboration confirmed the theme of collaboration that emerged strongly from the interviews and social artifacts.

Collaboration

The MHEC is an academic consortium of independent institutions collaborating to share students, facilities, scholarship, and best practices. Several of the administrators commented on a shared-student attitude in the center. “We have found that, being in the higher education center, if we do not offer a certain program that a student would want, we will refer them to another institution. The other schools do the same.”

Although marketing is typically viewed as competitive, another institutional administrator described the collaboration that occurs through the student-sharing concept:

But if you talked to the student about what their needs are—and not only what their interests are, but what their needs are—it is to be hoped that your school has something that would fit into that. But if not, then you don’t try to make it work through some kind of elaborate sales job. But rather, you say—and you have enough knowledge of the other schools to be able to say—“I can’t talk about it in detail, but let me show you what [another university] is doing and here is the site director’s number and you might want to call them because I think they can do a better job than we can do.”

In addition to collaborating to share students for academic programs, center and institutional administrators share facilities and resources. A center administrator described a classroom “credit pool” in which the center rents unused classrooms and splits the revenue with the member institution. Resources are also shared by hiring staff who work for several programs:

So the dean at [another university] and I established the fifth-floor consortium. We hired . . . two wage employees . . . paid by [six universities]. And what we did was figure out how we were going to use these people on the weekends and then we would pay in so much. . . . We shared job descriptions and keys.

The institutional administrators also collaborate on issues. As one noted, “I do know how to network and if there’s a concern that I don’t think that maybe my institution has the leverage, then I will go to my colleagues at one of the larger universities.” Another institutional administrator added, “And if there are issues or concerns for their students, we’re really kind of locked into one another. You know who your go-to people are because they share similar experiences.”

Finally, MHEC administrators collaborate to share best practices and scholarship:

We kind of use each other for best practice ideas. It's a very collegial, professional group. . . . Two years ago, we launched a lifelong learning program for seniors in this region. . . . So I invited seven people to sit down at the table with me and I said. . . . I would like to use our faculty members from our universities to come and to facilitate day-long kinds of experiences. . . . And our first launch included nine institutions here. . . . We administer it through my university, but all of us, we have a contract, a business plan.

Collaboration, or working across traditional boundaries defined by program, department, or university, is a well-documented organizational dynamic in higher education. Researchers investigating what makes collaboration successful concluded that there must be benefits for all parties (Connolly, Jones, & Jones, 2007). Collaborations among schools and workplaces facilitate the transfer of learning from one setting to the other, for example (Konkola, Tuomi-Grohn, Lambert, & Ludvigsen, 2007).

However, collaboration at the MHEC is unique in two important ways. First, resources are not typically shared across institutions in traditional college and university settings. Indeed, as Rhoades (2006) argues, the academy has become increasingly competitive as resource pools have shrunk. Students, facilities, and innovative ideas all represent limited resources that traditional institutions have actively sought to garner and have fiercely guarded once they have secured them. At the MHEC, however, sharing these resources is a driving organizational force. Second, there is a shared belief that collaboration benefits all parties involved in an action. That belief trumps actions that benefit a single institutional member. This inter-institutional collaboration, grounded in awareness of the larger good, is rare at traditional colleges and universities but is the norm at MHEC. This is not to suggest that collaboration is the only force present at the center. Indeed, the culture of collaboration coexists with a sense of competitiveness.

Competition

Rivalry does exist at the MHEC, because several institutions have competing programs. Two institutions even share a lab space and offer their nursing classes across the hall from one another. Additionally, the public institutions and the MHEC compete for funding from the state. But that competition is described as healthy, natural, and market-driven:

So people who are here as members from the beginning can pretty much do whatever they want. It's really market-driven. So we do have three MBA programs, but . . . they base their efforts on what they think the market will bear. And if there's enough of a demand for more than one program, we just don't consider that duplication.

Competition also occurs when institutions bring new programs to the MHEC. A center administrator offered this example:

I think some of our members saw competition there. We only had one Ph.D. program in the building until we [center staff] brought [new institutional member] on board, and they brought nine. And our job—the mission of the center—is to expand educational opportunities. That’s just the bottom line. And we certainly don’t want to bring programs in that are in conflict, and we don’t want programs that are going to create unnecessary competition. . . . I think it upset the [large member universities] of the world. I think they felt threatened because they could have done it. But they could have done it six years ago, five years ago.

It was also evident that the larger institutions may exert more competitive weight because of the sheer amount of resources their universities have or the amount of space they lease from the center. However, those working for these larger institutions were not perceived as negatively using that weight to their competitive advantage. An institutional administrator from one such larger institution stated:

And working for a big university, sometimes it’s like the 200-ton pink elephant in the room. It’s been fun to kind of balance that and let others know that they’re just as valuable and can make contributions to create economic vitality for others in the region.

An institutional administrator from a small college confirmed that competition was a healthy force between the large and smaller institutions:

I don’t sense any competitive angst on anyone’s part. . . . I’m always concerned, is somebody going to undercut us, but I think we’re all still each unique. . . . We decided, let the market determine that. That was one thing we wanted in place because we knew there were going to be people competing. And I think it’s been really very healthy. We sort of sense that some of the other institutions kind of figured out what we were up to because we’ve been the longest player in the adult learning field from anyone else. So in that sense of competition, we feel like we may have lost some students occasionally to other people doing things sort of like [what] we were doing. . . . But it’s never been adversarial that I’m aware of. I’ve just never sensed any friction or conflict with any other colleagues at other institutions or the facility.

In fact, on some issues, competition is “acceptable”:

The people that are overtly competitive are not as appreciated by their colleagues as those that are much more, at least on the surface, collegial. Now, I can’t give you any examples of someone that seemed to talk softly but did something else. But certainly people have their own ad campaigns; and when you read the advertisement, it makes it sound as if they’re the only game in town. But that’s marketing. That’s okay.

In addition to competition for programs, the public universities compete with the MHEC for state funding. A center administrator seemed to appreciate the need for this form of competition:

I wouldn't call it competitive so much as understanding that member institutions' priorities are their own and their priority of the higher ed center is to the extent that the higher ed center is helpful to them. But, you know, when it comes right down to it, they've got to look out for their own institution, particularly the public institutions in terms of funding.

At first blush, it might seem that the forces of collaboration and competition at the MHEC would create a constant tension, yet that was not the case. A third organizational force mediated that tension: equilibrium.

Equilibrium

Center administrators are independent facilitators who must delicately balance the interests of the collective as a whole against the individual interests of each institutional member. The institutional administrators spoke very highly of the center administrators:

They're [Center administrators] wonderful people to work with. They've been very kind to my college. Because most of the other schools are very well known. We're a small, little school.

When asked how important it is for the center administration to act as an independent facilitator, both center and institutional administrators agreed that independence was of critical importance:

I think it's [the center administration] very independent, and I would really frown upon it being associated with one institution. I think that would be a big mistake because there would be a lot of posturing going on at the table, and I think other institutions such as mine would really balk at that.

Another institutional administrator corroborated:

Pardon the expression, but I think you'd bastardize it if the higher ed center was in some way an institution's facility that other people were coming in and leasing. I think the whole thing would fall apart.

The center administrators referenced the type of equilibrium required in their positions. When asked if each institution had equal weight with the center administration, responses were equivocal. One center administrator replied:

I think that's our goal. I don't know if it always happens that way in reality. We have some of our members, just by virtue of what they do—the number of programs, the number of students—that probably carry more weight.

Another center administrator countered, "We can be a referee of sorts, but even at that, the place really runs on a free market system."

Regardless of any ambivalence on the part of center administrators, the role they play is viewed by member institutions as an equalizing force. This theme of equilibrium is found elsewhere in the literature, specifically the literature related to supply chains. In the late 1990s, scholars studied supply-chain networks in which large manufacturing consumers needed to enhance the performance of their suppliers but lacked the power to do so. An independent consultant was hired to facilitate and coordinate a supplier network. Each supplier in the network competed and collaborated to offer its best products to a manufacturer, but not all of the suppliers offered the same product. Instead, the consumer had a diverse array of product types to choose from, and each supplier maximized its own product competitiveness, based on the consumer demand (Stuart, Deckert, McCutcheon, & Kunst, 1998).

This same concept translates readily to the higher education market. A leveraged learning supplier network can develop when a large consumer (e.g., a metropolitan area) is faced with a shortage of higher education suppliers. The consumer (the metropolitan area) wants to improve supply chain performance (access to higher education) but lacks the power to leverage the necessary improvements. The leveraged learning supplier network depends on a consortium of independent suppliers (i.e., colleges and universities) who share resources and experiences. The goal is to work together so that each consortium member maximizes its competitiveness. The consortium uses an independent facilitator (center administrators) to balance and equalize member needs and to share information among the membership.

Similar to the leveraged learning supplier network, the MHEC depends on an independent facilitator to balance competition and collaboration. An institutional administrator said, "They [center administrators] try very hard to make everybody feel welcome . . . because everybody's driven differently. I think they're driven to keep everybody here happy, give them what they need."

In summary, the organizational forces driving the work of the MHEC administrators are collaboration, competition, and equilibrium. Collaboration is evident when administrators work together in a statecentric sense to serve the economic development needs of the community and access needs of the students. Neoliberal competition is ignited by programmatic and funding issues driven by incentives to institutions. The tug between these high collaboration and high competition times is offset through the independent center administration, resulting in a state of equilibrium. See Figure 2.

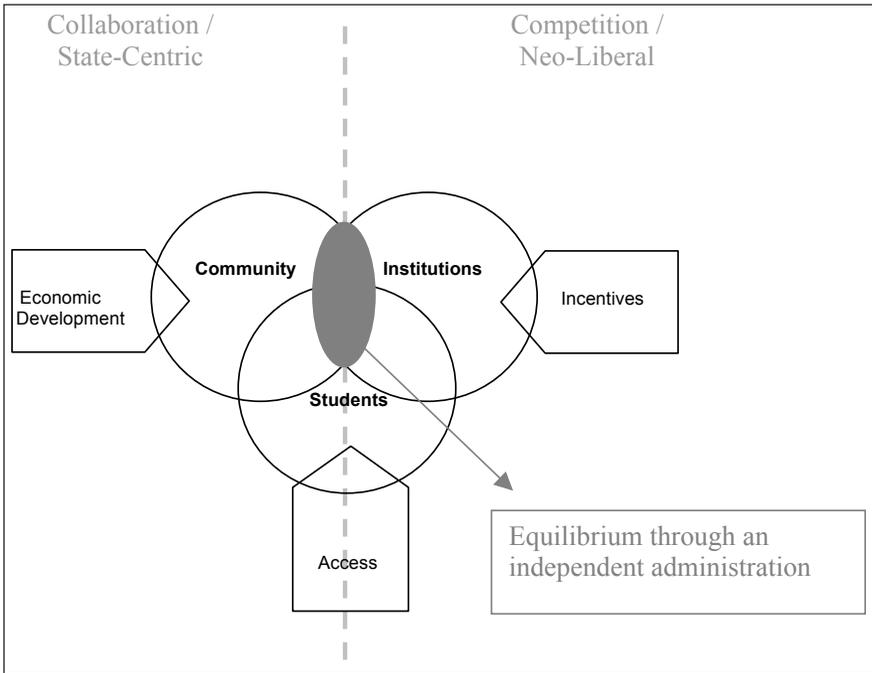


Figure 2. Organizational equilibrium.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study provided a baseline and plowed new territory: a hallmark of naturalistic inquiry. HECs exist across the higher education landscape. A state-by-state review revealed seven states that are using the HEC model employed in this study (i.e., multiple institutions sharing a single facility in a unit managed by an independent party). However, readers wishing to transfer these findings to other HECs should do so with caution. One element of case studies is that their settings provide information-rich detail (Patton, 2002). The findings from this study are anchored in the context of the MHEC. HECs have emerged at different times and for different reasons. For example, in at least one state, HECs charge students higher tuition and fees than counterparts at home campuses to cover the institutional costs of offering programs at the HEC. Clearly it is important to consider the organizational context surrounding each HEC.

Nevertheless, our findings might inform future research, practice, and policy. First, studies of other HECs might be undertaken to expand on this study. For example, another HEC in the same state as MHEC did not originally embrace a free-market concept. In fact, for several years, member

institutions at this other HEC were prevented from offering duplicate programs. Research is needed that explores how original operating policies at HECs influence the organizational forces that drive those entities.

Another future investigation might explore collaborative organizational structures in higher education and their impact on collaborative learning environments. Collaborative learning environments positively impact cognitive and affective development, and increase openness to diversity among students (Cabrera, Crissman, Bernal, Nora, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 2002; Cabrera, Nora, Bernal, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 1998). Researchers could explore whether collaborative organizational structures like those evident at the MHEC lead to collaborative learning environments for students.

In terms of practice, our findings provided an overview of the unique forces driving the work of administrators in one HEC. Both collaboration and competition are evident in the MHEC environment, supporting the assertion that the HEC is both a statecentric and neoliberal model of higher education (St. George, 2006). Our study adds to the neoliberal and statecentric framework through the notion of equilibrium that is sustained by an independent administration. Center administrators might use our findings as a catalyst to create a professional association or a special interest group in an established association dedicated to dialogue regarding organizations such as HECs.

Administrators and faculty considering collaborative degree programs might also benefit from the findings of this study. Robert Stein and Paula Short (2001) discussed the many barriers to developing collaborative degree programs; some of those barriers were accreditation issues, institutional red tape, and turf concerns. HECs could be ideal settings for collaborative degree programs. Equilibrium, a prevailing organizational dynamic at the MHEC, might inform those struggling to develop collaborative degree programs.

Additionally, both center and campus administrators might shape hiring practices around the findings. Knowing the internal dynamics of a HEC should enable administrators to hire staff whose skills and attitudes are compatible with those dynamics.

Findings from this study may also be used in policy discussions about competition and collaboration between and among states and institutions. These discussions are especially appropriate for the higher education policy arenas of access and economic development. Our results support the advancement of consortia organizational structures in education.

In conclusion, external forces of competition and collaboration led to the emergence of the MHEC and these same forces are evident in the organizational dynamics that sustain the center. At present, MHEC administrators perceive competition and collaboration as healthy and productive as long as they are mitigated by an equalizing force in the form of an independent

center administration. That sentiment, however, might be shifting. Several institutional administrators expressed concerns about the future—specifically, a drift toward a profit, or neoliberal, focus, “So I just feel like right now they’re [center administrators] driven more with trying to make a profit and I know that has to do with their assessments.” Any such concerns could be attributed in part to state budget cuts that were pending at the time of data collection, but they also demonstrate the tension in organizational forces when collaborative academic missions are weighed against competitive financial conditions. If equilibrium is reduced or mitigated, the health of the HEC is threatened.

As the academy has responded to external forces of competition and collaboration, creative boundary-blurring organizations have emerged. The MHEC is one such organization that mimics the external forces of competition and collaboration but adds an element of equilibrium to manage the tension between those forces. Similar to our respondents’ concerns about the sustainability of the center, many in higher education remain skeptical about the sustainability of collaborative initiatives in an increasingly competitive environment. Indeed, the MHEC exemplifies an organization that is confronted with the tension between statecentric and neoliberal ideals about the delivery of higher education, resulting in a greater push for collaboration and more incentives for competition. Beyond HECs however, administrators at all types of higher education institutions are engaging more frequently in collaborative and competitive initiatives. This is the new landscape of higher education in which external organizational forces have transported educational leaders across new organizational boundaries and those leaders must navigate a terrain in search of equilibrium.

APPENDIX A

SOCIAL ARTIFACT EXERCISE 1

Instructions: The purpose of this exercise is to elicit data about your typical weekly work activities. Please use your calendar for the last week or synthesize the past several weeks to describe your typical weekly work activities. List the activities you engaged in each day. Please use the back of this paper if you need more room. [The rest of the page is divided into a two-column grid with the left-hand column labeled “Day” and the right-hand column labeled “Activities.”]

APPENDIX B

SOCIAL ARTIFACT EXERCISE 2

Instructions: The purpose of this exercise is to elicit data about your relationships with others. [In the center of the page is a circle labeled “You.”] Please draw other circles and label them with the names of groups/people with whom you maintain

relationships in your line of work. Draw the circle close to your name if you work closely with this group/person and farther away from your name if you work less with the group/person. Try to make the size of the circle represent the importance of this relationship. Larger circles would represent the most important relationships.

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