



BETWEEN FORUMS

Cameron Fincher, *Associate Editor for AIR*

Is There an Institution in Institutional Research?

Henry Dyer once asked if institutional research could lead to a science of institutions. He took note of the published research increasingly available and the formation of a new professional organization, the Association for Institutional Research. Dyer was almost optimistic about the possibility *if* institutional research could determine where it was and where it was going.

From his perspective, institutional research was polarized around Nevitt Sanford's theoretically oriented, long-term studies of "inner-workings" and John Dale Russell's commitment to studies for "important decisions about policy and procedure." Dyer did not believe two conceptions of institutional research could be farther apart. If institutional research was to have "a positive and enduring impact on institutional quality," it must integrate the two points of view.

The dilemma could be resolved if institutional research could cope with "all types of problems, operational and theoretical," and involve the many academic disciplines found on college campuses. To become a science of institutions, however, institutional research must recognize the centrality of measurement. The numerous variables of institutional life—human, physical, fiscal—must be subjected to agreed-upon procedures that are rational and well-defined instead of "uncontrolled and vaguely impressionistic." More directly, measurement was indispensable to: (1) the definition of institutional goals, (2) the determination of their attainment, and (3) the identification of factors that facilitated or impeded an institution's efforts to reach its goals.

Twelve years later at the Seventeenth Annual Forum, at least one member of AIR believed that institutional research still suffered from an identity crisis. Measurement was but one of many perspectives that had promised at one time or another to integrate or unify institutional research and thereby gain its disciplinary or scientific respectability. Not only had institutional researchers shunned the integrative virtues of measurement,

they have shown a remarkable indifference to traditional modes of educational research, systems analysis, organizational theory, strategic planning, and management science. The latest conceptual framework to promise unification was policy research and analysis.

Further self-searching on the part of institutional research may suggest that its centrality could be found in theory and research about institutions as such. In brief, institution research may eventually be defined best by taking its own term literally. The need is surely documented by the difficulties institutions of higher education have had, and continue to have, in explaining their purpose, functions, and traditions to federal and state authorities, other societal agencies and organizations, and the general public. It is not impossible that many critics of colleges and universities have been mistaken because they were not cognizant of institutional distinctions or distinguishing features.

WHAT IS AN INSTITUTION?

There are many reasons to believe that an institution is more than an organization, association, or societal agent. No little harm has accrued from the equation of the university with the business corporation, and metaphors of the university or college as a public utility must surely intensify confusion instead of lessening it. Yet colleges or universities are social institutions and, as such, they are both similar to and different from hospitals, churches, welfare agencies, and commercial firms. In their role as employer, institutions of higher education are subject to federal regulations in matters of affirmative action and occupational safety. In their roles as taxpayer, citizen, and community leader, the institutions have many ties with their social and cultural environment.

Institutions have been distinguished from organizations in many ways. Berelson and Steiner (1967), in their inventory of behavioral science, regard institutions as more complex and longer-lasting than organizations. Crucial differences are seen in the norms, roles, and values that are called into play in the institution. Ross and Van Den Haag (1957), in their efforts to present the full sweep of the social sciences, believe institutions to be "distinctive behavior patterns" that are accumulated over generations and thereby acquire capability for "generating appropriate sentiments." Bertrand Gross (1964) distinguished an institution as a special kind of organization—namely, one "which is important in society, has lasted a long time, or has a strong sense of identity or tradition," and which is suggestive of certain practices or traditions such as marriage, family, and forms of worship.

An unusually helpful distinction between institutions and organizations

has been made by Philip Selznick (1957) in terms of the metaphors they invite. Organizations often come with mechanical metaphors and are expected to “run smoothly.” Institutions, to the contrary, are more likely to be regarded as a “responsive, adaptive organism.” They are often regarded as a “natural result” of social needs and expectations in a way that organizations are not, and they are more likely to hold “revered memories.” Selznick is aware of “institutionalization” as a process in which something happens to an organization over a period of time. He has written that when technically organized units become a social group—i.e., “a unity of persons rather than of technicians,” deployable forms of energy may be created. To institutionalize, therefore, is to infuse with value beyond the rational, technical, impersonal requirements of the system or task and to create a different level of personal involvement. No organization “of any duration” is completely free of institutionalization—but many organizations never become institutions.

INSTITUTIONS, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE

The rediscovery that business corporations have their own cultural rites, taboos, and talismans is not surprising in light of the emphasis that has often been placed on institutional image or corporate personality. Long ago, and more to the point, Thurman Arnold (1937) wrote that when men are engaged in any continuous, cooperative action, they develop organizations which acquire habits, discipline, and morale. The development of these characteristics, in turn, gives the organization unity and “something” which it is convenient to describe as personality and character.

In a chapter that can still be read for telling insights, Arnold gave 22 “principles of political dynamics” that describe organizational growth and development—i.e., the means and devices by which they acquire personality and character. Arnold believed that once the personality of an organization is fixed, it is as difficult to change as the habits of an individual. When organizations become institutions, their character is fixed by public expectations—or the folklore of the times—and is “necessarily a whole bundle of contradictory roles.”

Arnold says in delightful terms what others have often said with professorial stodginess. Institutions once formed tend to grow and to expand. And even when their usefulness has disappeared, they may still survive. Moreover, the creeds and belief systems of an institution need not be consistent, and they are under no compulsion to correspond to reality. Yet, the variance between institutional ideas and actual conduct must be reconciled through the use of ceremonies that are addressed to institutional members and not to outsiders. When the conflict between ideals and

institutional needs becomes acute, ceremonies will no longer suffice and the institution resorts to reorganization.

There is indeed much to suggest that institutional researchers, *qua* researchers of institutions, would do well to put aside their favorite organizational theorists and spend some time with scholars who reason by other analogies. Organizations may well be units of society, while institutions are best understood as components of a larger, more inclusive culture. Both business corporations and universities may be studied best as cultural institutions in which organismic metaphors dominate mechanistic ones. If society is regarded as the social structure that emerges from the dynamic relationships of individuals, groups, and organizations, culture will be a more amorphous and intangible concept because of the temporal dimension that appears so influential. Within the culture there is an endurance of values, traditions, and loyalties that are influenced by but not solely dependent upon society, social concepts, or organizational principles.

If the college or university is a function of time, place, and human experience, institutional research must be more attentive to the historical and developmental dimensions of institutional life. Tom Dyer (1978) has reminded us that historians were the first institutional researchers, and he emphasizes the mutual benefit of institutional research and institutional history. The continuing development of institutions of higher education implies, in turn, the urgency of understanding the developmental processes at work within our institutions and those at play in the sociocultural environment.

Cameron Fincher

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