University Goals

An Operative Approach

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*The purpose of this essay is to offer a new way of concep-
tualizing university goals. Several explanations are given as to why univer-
sities are not characterized by formal goals, and the concept of "operative
goals" is advanced as a more useful concept. Operative goals are viewed as a
function of the various "constraints" that affect the university, with special
attention given to the environment-organization interface. Eight major con-
straints on university goals are identified and briefly discussed. The advan-
tages of such a conceptualization are considered, and lastly, two general
methods of identifying operative goals are suggested.*

Social scientists have produced a substantial body of knowledge about
different aspects of organizational behavior. Yet there are relatively few
studies of goals in complex organizations. This paucity of research on goals is
especially reflected in the study of complex universities; either the official
statements of goals are taken at face value [16] or the goals are taken for
granted, in which case the most effective ordering of resources and personnel
is seen as the only problematical issue.

Given this lacuna, a number of reasons can be advanced as to why goals
should be studied, particularly university goals: First, for a more complete

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understanding of organizational behavior. Identifying goals will allow social scientists to devote more attention to the function that goals play in an organization. In the case of universities, for example, is there a relationship between clarity of goals, number of goals, and other goal characteristics on the one hand and university performance on the other? Do university goals explain organizational behavior, or, as David Silverman [14] argues, are they chiefly legitimating symbols? In statistical parlance, to what extent are university goals powerful independent variables in explaining and predicting behavior and processes within the university?

Secondly, goals may serve a variety of purposes for the organization. They may (1) serve as standards by which to judge its success, (2) constitute a source of legitimacy, (3) define organizational needs and priorities, (4) define production units or "outputs" for the organization, (5) define its clientele, or (6) define the nature of the relationship between the organization and society. In most universities, goals are often implicit, residing in an extended body of collective understandings rather than in explicit statements. If university goals are to serve the purposes listed above, they must be identified more precisely.

Administrators, the most frequent interpreters of organizational goals, have a sizable stake in identifying the goals of their organizations. Given the rising demand for accountability in universities, the very legitimacy of institutions may hinge on their willingness and sincerity in providing specific goal statements for their various constituencies. As those formally entrusted with the reins of power, administrators must bear the burden of responsibility for clearly identifying the goals of their institutions.

The central purpose of this essay is to offer a new way of conceptualizing goals, especially those of the university. Several explanations will be offered as to why universities do not have formal goals. The concept of "operative goals" will be suggested as a more useful characterization, and this conceptualization will be clarified through an illustration of how operative goals are defined in the university. The advantages of this conceptualization are discussed, and lastly, several ways of identifying university operative goals are suggested.

I

As used in most organizational theories, the concept of goals refers to a more or less explicit and consciously recognized value system that lists and ranks in value order the objects or conditions to be produced by the ongoing activities in the organization and serves as a criterion for decision-making

[11]. Formal goals in the Parsonian sense are not characteristic of universities; we do not find a more or less conscious value system that is utilized in university decision-making processes. There appear to be several factors that militate against the existence of such formal goals: (a) Many decisions that affect the character and major activities of the university are directly influenced by a number of constraints from both inside and outside the organization which are more important than any a priori goal scheme, and which force upon the university a continual process of adaptation to the environment producing those constraints. (b) Control and authority in the university are diffuse and indirect. Faculty members are generally quite autonomous with regard to the content and orientation of their courses, tenure, and similar practices — which makes it difficult for any central officer in the university to exert pressure upon the allocation of faculty time or direction of effort. Similarly, students have considerable autonomy in selection of programs. (c) There is generally no central, single body of individuals that makes decisions on resource allocation, course and curricular programs, and university personnel. In some cases a particular decision involves the joint approval and support of a number of different individuals. (d) The various individuals and groups participating in the numerous university decisions often use quite different criteria and sources of criteria for judgments on important policy decisions.

If formal goals are not characteristic of universities, universities nevertheless appear to have a directionality and continuity of activities over time. The concept of "operative goals" can fruitfully be employed to refer to the ends sought through the recurring activities of the organization.[1] These operative goals of a university emerge out of the daily decisions, conscious and unconscious, as to what is to be done and how it is to be done that are made by a wide variety of individuals. Operative goals can be identified through what universities do, especially what they do in a systematically recurring fashion.

As alluded to earlier, the programmatic characteristics of what is done in organizations — the operative goals — are a function of a variety of constraints that define what is done, how it is done, and the expected consequences. and that are, furthermore. more important than any a priori goal scheme. Herbert Simon [15] uses the term "constraint" to analyze the parameters of the decision-making system in formal organizations. Simon contends that decisions are made by reference to a set of requirements or constraints rather than to formal goals, yet formal goals are included as one

[1] The phrase "operative goals" is borrowed from Charles Perrow [12] but our definition is different; whereas Perrow distinguishes between official and operative goals, our definition doesn't preclude official goals. More important, our definition is made in terms of constraints, while Perrow particularly emphasizes unofficial goals, multiple goals, and alternate ways of achieving official goals. The concept of "operational goals" suggested by James March and Herbert Simon[8] is similar to this but is never defined systematically.

constraint on the decision-making process. Building upon Simon's framework, the operative goals of a university can be seen as a function of constraints — the category of factors that determine the direction of activities in the organization. These constraints are sometimes introduced deliberately by individuals, but they are often introduced unconsciously through choices, selections, and decisions of which no organizational participants are aware. For analytical purposes, "operative goals" will be defined as the totality of "constraints" on the ongoing activities of the organization.

We are particularly interested in accounting for stability in the activites of the organization. The stability of the operative goals, the fact that the university continues to perform "functions" in a particular direction, comes from two aspects of these constraints: (a) the continuity of each of the constraints — that is, each of the constraints may have continuity and directionality over time, imposing the same kind of directionality on action — and (b) the stability over time in the relative importance of particular constraints. It can be assumed that individual constraints generally direct action somewhat differently. Thus, if there is to be stability of functions performed, it is necessary that the different constraints maintain continuous importance. Therefore, we would expect that the organizational activities would remain stable over time as the constraints are, individually, continuous over time, and as their relative importance remains the same.
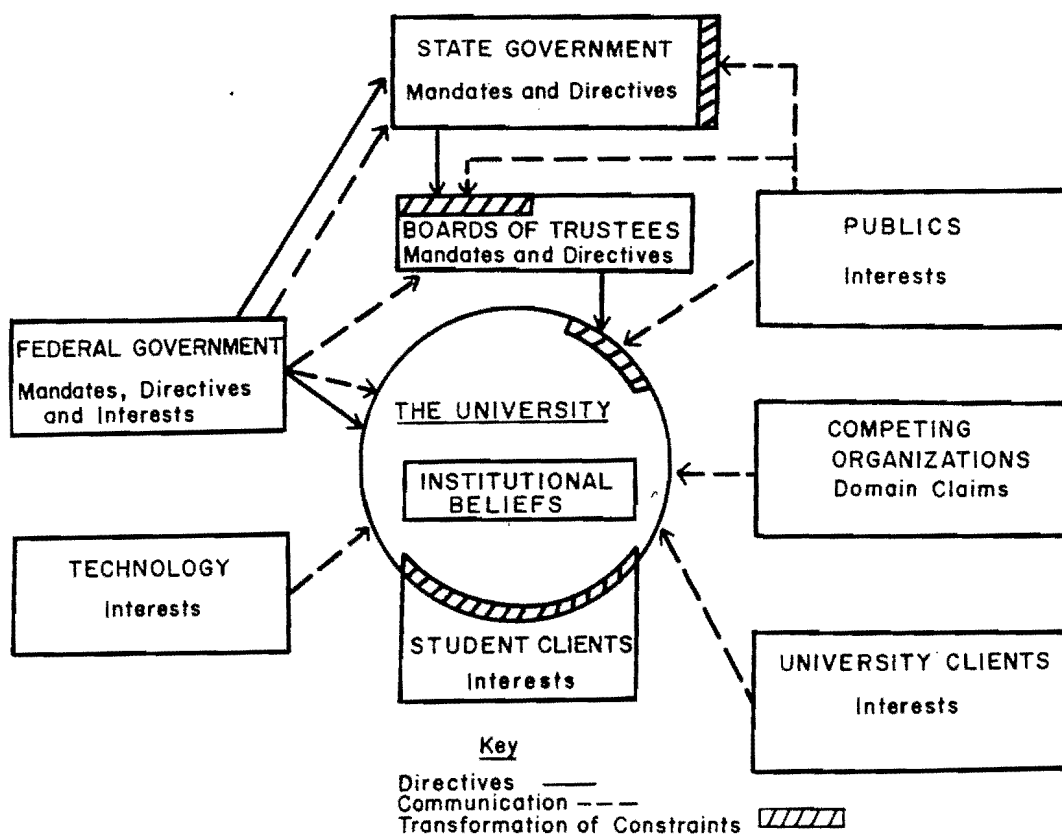

FIG. 1. Constraints on University Operative Goals

507

It is highly probable that we are dealing here with an equilibrium among the constraints that has continual potential for change as the individual constraints change in either direction or relative importance. Furthermore, it is likely that the character of this equilibrium differs from time to time. At certain times it appears that the equilibrium is unstable even though the resulting patterning of action may remain fairly constant.

In summary, central to this proposal is the concept of constraints as the category of factors that influence the directions of activities in the organization. Just as essential is some conception of the processes through which constraints perform this function. A tentative listing and discussion of the major constraints on activities in universities will be helpful in illustrating the concept and in identifying the processes of their operation. Figure 1 summarizes these constraints and the general nature of their impact on the university goals.

II

The major constraints on university operations include:

Institutional Beliefs. Within an institutional sphere, such as higher education, there are broad assumptions as to what are the "functions" of a university. These assumptions as to the appropriate, proper, and necessary "functions" may be implemented by laws which make distinctions between institutional types (e.g., tax laws distinguish educational, religious, and other nonprofit organizations from profit-making organizations); by licenses and other legal protections embedded in charters; and by the actions of outside organizations (industrial concerns act toward universities in different ways than they do toward other industrial concerns).

Most important, however, it is the conceptions of a university's functions by members of a university which determine the parameters of the institutional beliefs. The major work activities of a university are performed by the faculty. As members of the professional staff, they hold norms and values as to what they should do and how they should do it. The importance of these professional norms and values is expressed in the idea of faculty autonomy. Individually and collectively, faculty members resist any action that implies a violation of these norms and values. Similarly, as professional persons, the faculty have a variety of interests stemming from their professional training and identification with a professional establishment. Lastly, the faculty as a professional staff has a particular capacity for certain kinds of functions but not for others.

508

In summary, the institutional beliefs identify the range within which university operative goals may vary through the identification of the "functions" appropriate to universities. These assumptions of what are the functions of universities provide the major determinant of university operative goals. While the constraints hereafter discussed are variously important, the institutional beliefs provide the basic parameters of university operative goals.

State Government and Boards of Trustees. If an organization is primarily dependent upon the external environment for its resources, for its license to act, and for protection, then mandates and directives become important constraints on organizational operative goals. When an external body is superordinate and has some degree of power over the organization, its attempts at influencing operative goals are called mandating. Mandate statements may be rhetorical and directed toward some other public, may be criterion statements ineffectively implemented, or may be explicit and expressed only in control decisions. State universities, and many private institutions, are subject to mandates and directives from state legislatures and boards of trustees. Mandates and directives are often meant to have a coercive effect on university operative goals. Usually broad and vague, they are not always crucial to the functioning of the institutional goals and are almost always transformed as they pass into the organization; therefore, they are usually treated as an "opinion" to be taken into account, rather than as an absolute imperative. Increasingly, however, state governments and boards have exercised legal constraints over state universities which, coupled with the increased emphasis on state planning, may have important implications for future university operative goals.

Federal Government. Because the federal government and its various agencies are a major source of resources for the university and have numerous interests in the university, they exercise constraints in several ways, influencing operative goals through mandates and directives. Mandates have been used coercively by the federal government to insure the implementation of federal policies, e.g., the affirmative action program. In the immediate future, new federal guidelines may take the form of directives.

Especially since World War II, government has influenced university operative goals through its multiplicity of interests, which are commonly manifest in enormous quantities of federally sponsored programs. While few perceive federal aid as a threat of governmental control over education, it nevertheless seems clear that many universities have adjusted their operative goals to federal interests in academe. Federal priorities in research, for

example, have encouraged many upwardly mobile institutions to adjust their operative goals to include more emphasis on research-related activities. In light of its previous involvement, the mandates. directives, and interests of the federal government may continue to exert an important constraint on university operative goals.

Competing Organizations. External to organizations such as universities are other competing coordinate organizations which attempt to influence the operative goals by claiming domains of activity. These domain claims may be in terms of types of clients, geographical or social regions, types of activities, or types of consequences. Sometimes entire universities make domain claims in each of these areas. The University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, for example, with its emphasis on ecology, makes claims in terms of all the above.

Domain claims may be implemented by agreements among the organizations or by appeals to mandating bodies. In either case, the respective domain claims of competing organizations may directly (through mandates) or indirectly (by directives) affect the operative goals of universities.

University Clients. In addition to the federal government, the values produced in universities have other direct and indirect clients. Attempts by clients or customers to influence university operative goals are expressions of vested interests. They are often expressed by the purchase or failure to purchase the university's product or service. Clients may organize as a special group to express their interest, appealing directly to the university or to its mandating bodies. Clients may also organize and gain status as quasi members of the university and attempt to influence operative goals from inside.

University clients might include: (*a*) industrial and financial organizations that use knowledge services; (*b*) other kinds of clients that might benefit from auxiliary services; and (*c*) the local community. While the impact of clients on university operative goals is unclear. they must be included in any listing of constraints.

Publics. Universities have a number of publics who have varied interests in the university. Interest may be expressed in some specific activity (such as teaching methods), in the resources (taxes) required by the university, or in any number of organizational activites affecting the operative goals. The interests, opinions, and judgments of publics — such as alums, parents, and local communities — are transformed as they pass into the university; hence, though they are often taken into account, they seldom exercise a direct constraint. Interest expressions of publics are often implemented through mandating bodies (such as legislatures) or, more recently, through direct

510

withholding of support for the university. In the latter case, the threat of such action provides a more direct constraint upon operative goals within the university.

Student Clients. Students are the major clients of universities. Their interests may become an important constraint on university activities either through their relationships with individual faculty members or through active participation in the decision-making processes of the university. Although there is almost a complete turnover of students every four or five years, the interests of students have historically tended to remain the same, as incoming students have usually been recruited from the same general population. However, many of the new students of the 1970s have differing population characteristics, e.g., unlike the students of the 1950s and 1960s, many of these students are "poor students academically" [2]. There is presently a scarcity of research on the potential impact of these new students on university activities and operative goals. At least a handful of observers has suggested that these new students — with their differing needs and motivational and ability characteristics — may provide a constraint of no mean proportion. But that prognostication must be tempered by the fact that student interests are seldom directly represented: rather the faculty, collectively and individually, transform expressed interests into needs. It is likely that these transformed statements of client interests change more slowly than do client interests themselves.

Technology. Although material technology has historically played a role in educational organizations, it has generally exerted a peripheral effect, either being developed to meet specific educational needs or only gradually being accepted from the external environment. However technology has been adapted, it is generally agreed that universities as organizations have probably affected more than they have been affected by emerging forms of technology; hence technology has not historically been a major constraint on university operative goals.

Recent innovations in material technology, coupled with corporations which are very adept at applying technology to the educational environment, have forced a reexamination of the impact of technology on universities. Major American companies, for example, the Control Data Corporation, have been promoting the possibilities of instructional computing. Moreover, since the technology employed in universities is relatively flexible, goals may be revised or adjusted quite easily to the technological resources available [17]. For these reasons, emerging forms of technology may increasingly serve as a major constraint on university operative goals.

To summarize, the operative goals of a university emerge out of the daily decisions, made by a wide variety of individuals, concerning what is to be done and how it is to be done. These decisions mark a continual adaptation to a variety of external and internal constraints. The stability of functions in a university comes from the relative stability of each of the constraints and the relative stability of the importance of each with respect to the others.

III

In this section, the advantages of our conceptualization of operative goals will be discussed. First, our definition doesn't preclude formal goals, yet it views the totality of constraints as more important than any a priori goal scheme. Put differently, our definition views constraints — which can include formal goals, but are not exclusively bound by them — as the major factors determining operative goals. Therefore, our use of operative goals avoids reification of organizational goals as synonymous with organizational behavior.[2] Furthermore, by viewing operative goals as problematic, dependent upon various constraints, we don't preclude looking at subgoals, multiple goals, and goal displacement — as does the usual use of "organizational goal." Indeed, our earlier illustration of constraints on university operative goals suggests the potential utility of our conceptual framework as a way of handling the shifting and complex nature of university goals.

There is a second and more compelling advantage of our concept of operative goals. In the past decade, several theoretical works on organizations have emphasized the interface between organizations and their environment [5,6,7]. When organizations must carry on transactions with their environment, they are viewed as open social systems. in which organizations are in turn influenced by their environment. Unfortunately, as Lawrence and Lorsch [6] point out, there has been a dearth of research on the organization-environment interface.

Unlike most definitions of organizational goals, which view goals as relatively static and uninfluenced by the environment, our definition of operative goals incorporates environmental inputs through the concept of constraints. Goals are viewed as continually being adapted not only to internal but also to external constraints.

Our earlier illustration suggests that external constraints are a potent factor in shaping the operative goals of universities. Inasmuch as most of its

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[2] Most of the literature assumes that goals explain organizational behavior. To avoid reification, however. we have used the term "operative goals" which. by definition, avoids this crude determinism.

512

resources come from outside,[3] the university is subject to mandates, directives, and communications which influence its operative goals. By defining operative goals as a function of constraints, our concept includes the various external factors which may have an impact on the goals of the organization. In the case of universities, the impact of these constraints appears to be considerable.

IV

Thus far, our analysis implies that there is no single phenomenon that identifies the operative goals of a university at a particular time. It is necessary to seek indicators of goals and ultimately to construct an index of operative goals out of these several indicators. While a wide variety of phenomena might be used to assess operative goals in universities, we will offer two general approaches to the identification of university goals.

First, and following from our analysis, identification might involve the assessment of constraints on the organization. This would require identifying and measuring particular constraints as well as assessing their relative importance for the operative goals. The few studies of goal identification in universities have focused on organizational goals or "organizational climate" exclusively from inside the university and primarily from the standpoint of faculty and administrators. This focus is equivalent to the constraint we called "institutional beliefs."

There are a number of studies which identify and attempt to measure this constraint. The research of Gilbert [3] using administrators of a single large university and of Uhl [19] in five different types of institutions suggests the usefulness of a Q–sort technique with forced choice responses and of the Delphi approach. The college member's perception of his institution through the Institutional Functioning Inventory (IFI) [13] represents another attempt to measure this constraint. The Educational Testing Service has produced an Institutional Goals Inventory (IGI), which is a measure of how members of a college community (students, faculty, administrators, trustees) see the institution in terms of 90 goal statements. The most comprehensive attempt to measure university goals was the extensive survey by Edward Gross and Paul Grambsch [4] of faculty and administrators at 68 major universities. Their study conceptualized 47 output and support goals in five major categories and asked respondents to identify their perceived and preferred goals. While this instrument has generally been used to assess goal congruence among con-

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[3] In a suggestive article, James Thompson and William McEwen [18] argue that the university "competes as eagerly as any business firm, although perhaps more subtly." Also see Warren Bennis [1].

stituencies (faculty, students, and administrators) or congruence between perceived and preferred goals, it can also serve as a useful instrument for simply measuring the perceived goals as a measure of institutional beliefs. The IGI and the Gross and Grambsch instruments seem to be particularly good indices of the conceptions of a university's functions by members of the university — what we have called institutional beliefs.

While institutional beliefs identify the ranges through which operative goals may vary, they are only one constraint. Unfortunately, there are few, if any, available instruments for measuring the other aforementioned constraints on university operative goals.[4] If we have correctly identified several key constraints, the immediate task is to construct valid instruments for measuring these various constraints. Only then can we broach the problem of determining the relative importance of constraints and offer judgments as to their functional import for the operative goals.

A second way of assessing operative goals is by inference through indirect indicators.[5] Captured in the institutional beliefs of universities are a number of beliefs about the connections between means and consequences. For example, it is assumed that for a university faculty to engage in scholarship it must have available a large and active library with professional librarians to provide access to the collections. These beliefs may give us clues to a number of indirect indices that can be used to assess operative goals.

If we are correct in thinking that the beliefs of institutions identify the ranges with which university operative goals may vary through the identification of the functions appropriate to universities, then it follows that the operative goals of a university are some mix of these functions. Therefore, universities will differ from each other in the relative importance given to certain functions and relative neglect of others. Therefore, our problem is (a) to identify these several functions and (b) to find reliable indices.

Because the institutional beliefs include beliefs as to means for achieving these functions, beliefs that are used by universities, then the functional operative goals might be indicated by the relative presence of the means required for that function. For example: (a) scholarship and scientific research require access to the current work of other scholars and scientists; therefore, an organization oriented toward research and scholarship will have a higher number of journals and serials than an organization oriented toward teaching; (b) physical science research requires research laboratories and

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[4] There have been attempts to measure students' perceptions of the general social and intellectual atmosphere of universities as reflected in Pace's College and University Environment Scales, CUES [10]. These "organizational climate" measures focus on student development and thus are an inadequate measure of the constraint we have titled "student clients."

[5] Miller and Rice [9] argue that the best method of determining "primary tasks" (goals) is for the observer to "infer" them through examining the behavior of the various parts of the organization.

equipment; therefore, the research orientation will be shown by a high proportion of budget allocation for such supplies; (c) good undergraduate teaching requires the participation of senior faculty in that instruction; therefore, a teaching-oriented institution will have a high proportion of undergraduate instruction handled by full professionals. Once we have identified functions, agreed upon the means necessary to realize those functions, and developed valid instruments to measure the means, we can inferentially determine the operative goals of universities.

V

In conclusion, the basic purpose of this paper has been to offer a new way of conceptualizing goals, especially university goals. The lengthy illustration of constraints on university operative goals suggests the potential utility of such an approach. Although our conceptualization of operative goals is relatively complex, that complexity is necessary in light of the phenomena we are discussing. Finally, we have tentatively suggested two general methods of identifying university operative goals.

Because the theoretical understanding of organizations is dependent upon sound conceptualization, we must seek to further refine our concepts. This paper is primarily an attempt to refine the concept of organizational goals within the context of the university.

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