
The Language of Leaders: Executive Sensegiving Strategies in Higher Education

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This study explores how college and university presidents strategically negotiate institutional pressures and competing social norms in an attempt to maintain organizational legitimacy. It examines how presidents strategically frame organizational events in ways that help constituents make sense of their actions. Using archival and qualitative methods, I examine executive sensegiving strategies in the presidential communiqués of university magazines from eight tuition-driven universities during a 15-year period (2000–2014). Data revealed presidents employed three strategies—foundational, configurational, and transformational—driven by connecting different cues (i.e., events) with frames (i.e., institutional logics). Although prior literature has described actors draw on logics as a “toolkit,” this study illuminates how they modify those “tools” over time. In the transformational strategy, university leaders engaged in boundary work, acting as “institutional entrepreneurs” to change the microfoundations—or core elements—of an institutional logic over time and especially the meanings associated with its symbols and language.

We invent new terms, or apply our old vocabulary in new ways, attempting to socialize our position by so manipulating the linguistic equipment of our group . . . we invent new accounts of motive. (Burke 1935/1984)

I think of these changes as pieces of a kaleidoscope. . . . The kaleidoscope shows us that reality is only a temporary arrangement. If you creatively rearrange the pieces, you form a new reality. (Pepperell University President, 2004)

Higher education is facing significant changes as a result of increasing market pressures. Postsecondary leaders navigate a complicated and contradictory

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terrain as they attempt to ensure the survival of their universities amid multiple social and economic strains while also seeking to preserve the perceived reputation and integrity of their institutions. If leaders seek to expand student enrollments, they must do so in ways that will not stigmatize the college as a “diploma mill.” If administrators attempt to establish new sources of revenue, the efforts cannot appear to resemble the practices of for-profit universities. If university presidents endeavor to strengthen the performance of the endowment, the yield cannot be so high as to cause lawmakers to question the nonprofit status of the organization. And if schools do not creatively address their revenue needs, the institution quickly faces financial challenges. With the environmental challenges that presently confront all colleges and universities, it is important to understand how postsecondary leaders strategically negotiate broader institutional pressures and balance competing social norms.

Colleges and universities allocate significant financial resources to maintain a specific image or brand in the eyes of their constituents and the public more broadly (Drori et al. 2013; Geiger 2004; Tuchman 2009). The events, actions, and ideas of universities are strategically framed through marketing and reputation management strategies (Maringe and Gibbs 2008; Waeraas and Solbakk 2009). As universities expand enrollments and academic programs to shore up their financial resources, leaders must frame these strategies in ways that help constituents make sense of the action and view it as legitimate (Gioia and Thomas 1996; Weick et al. 2005). In other words, they must engage in a practice known as “sensegiving” (Degn 2015; Fiss and Zajac 2006; Smerek 2011). Given the importance and difficulty of these practices, this study asks the following question: What sensegiving strategies do university presidents employ to frame organizational events and actions? As maintaining legitimacy in this complex environment poses particular challenges to the growth processes of universities with limited financial resources, this investigation focuses on the case of religious tuition-driven universities, which have been understudied in previous research.

The primary public relations instrument for most schools is the university magazine, which is the centralized publication that showcases the branding and marketing content drawn from across multiple media forms (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). Thus, I focus on the sensegiving strategies employed by presidents in university magazines. These magazines traditionally commence with an official communiqué from the president wherein the chief executive provides commentary and framing of university events and strategic initiatives. I

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rely on archival and qualitative methods to examine presidential communiqués in the university magazines of eight tuition-driven religious universities during a 15-year period from 2000 to 2014. The patterns that emerged from the analysis revealed that university presidents employed three types of sensegiving strategies—namely, foundational, configurational, and transformational strategies—that varied based on how executives differentially combined frames (i.e., logics) and cues (i.e., events) to establish a legitimating narrative for constituents. In the foundational sensegiving strategy, executives framed traditional events that constituents expected to see from a university, such as collegiate athletics, community culture, and admissions. University leaders leveraged a hybrid logics frame in the configurational sensegiving strategy to legitimate emergent organizational events like new academic programs, new enrollment strategies, and new financial resources. In the transformational sensegiving strategy, presidents acted in entrepreneurial ways over time to frame divergent events that contradicted the normative (i.e., traditional) expectations of constituents.

This study makes several notable contributions to research and practice. It contributes to the organizational literature that describes logics as “toolkits” that actors may draw upon (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Thornton et al. 2012). This research specifies the processes by which university executives act as “institutional entrepreneurs” to change core elements—or microfoundations—of an institutional logic over time by persistently leveraging sensegiving strategies as a form of boundary work. The sensegiving framework put forth in this study also enhances the sensemaking and sensegiving literatures (Degn 2015; Fiss and Zajac 2006; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia and Thomas 1996; Kezar 2013; Smerek 2011; Weick et al. 2005), highlighting how actors construct multiple types of strategies using various combinations of frames and cues. This sensegiving framework underscores that in complex social contexts actors may not encounter a “paradox of embedded agency” characterized by a structure-agency dichotomy (Battilana 2006; Cardinale 2018; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Harmon et al. 2019; Seo and Creed 2002) but rather a “continuum of embedded agency” whereby they conform to multiple social structures and construct strategies with varying degrees of agency.

This study additionally examines a particularly complex social context by focusing on religious tuition-driven universities, as these understudied organizations possess a clearly identifiable logic of religion whose tension with the market provides a palpable environment to study instances where logics come into conflict (Brown 2016; Gümüşay 2020; Tracey et al. 2014). Furthermore, this research contributes to research on higher education branding (Drori et al. 2013; Ford and Patterson 2018; Hartley and Morphew 2008; Maringe and Gibbs 2008; Waeraas and Solbakk 2009) and the postsecondary presidency (Badillo-Vega et al. 2019; Cole 2020; Neumann and Bensimon 1990; Tierney 1989). Through the lens of university magazines—an increasingly vital component of a university’s media

toolkit—it examines executive strategies rather than personalities. In addition to scholarly audiences, the findings from this study will be of particular interest to higher education administrators who must navigate an increasingly competitive and complex environment.

Literature Review

Universities devote a significant amount of resources toward the strategic development of the organizational image or brand. These efforts are important attempts to shape the perception of the university held by internal and external constituents (Clark 1972; Geiger 2004; Tuchman 2009). Possessing a unique brand is vital for maintaining a competitive niche within the overcrowded higher education marketplace where organizational survival cannot be assumed, particularly for tuition-dependent universities, including women's, historically Black, Hispanic serving, religious, tribal, and vocational (Brint et al. 2016; Drori et al. 2013; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). Most colleges and universities have established entire public relations divisions to focus solely on the strategic advancement of organizational branding and impression management (Maringe and Gibbs 2008; Waeraas and Solbakk 2009). Negative framing about campus events can have a detrimental impact on student enrollments, as was the case at Evergreen State College and the University of Missouri, which experienced 25%–50% decreases in enrollment applications the year following student protests (Engber 2017; Hartocollis 2017). In contrast, positive coverage of university achievements can yield unexpected increases in student enrollments, such as those experienced by Butler University and Florida Gulf Coast University following stellar March Madness NCAA basketball performances (Glatter 2017). University leaders are attuned to the fact that how a campus event or action is framed influences the public perception of the university (Aula et al. 2015). More importantly, the perceptions individuals possess have very real consequences for the school.

An essential feature of a university's image is the president, who is increasingly associated with being the public face of the organization (Badillo-Vega et al. 2019; Bowen 2010; Trachtenberg 2009). Although the president ultimately provides oversight for the public relations and branding processes of the university, the president is also a component of the organizational brand itself (Gayle et al. 2011). As the most senior executive, the president is responsible for establishing a comprehensive strategy to sustain the mission of the university (Birnbaum 1992; Birnbaum and Eckel 2005; Neumann and Bensimon 1990; Tierney 1989). An important component of an executive strategy will endeavor to strengthen the reputation and image of the university. The identity of the university, particularly amid rebranding campaigns, is often shaped by the voice of the president, which

functions as an effective mechanism to strategically frame university events (Levin et al. 2018). The executive use of language is a critical element used to influence organizational responses to crises (Cole 2015, 2020; Jones 2019; Vitullo and Johnson 2010), conflict (Dee et al. 2004), institutional legitimacy (Rodriguez-Pomeda and Casani 2016), and entrepreneurial approaches to education (Leih and Teece 2016) as well as strategies of financial sustainability (Bastedo et al. 2014; Neumann 1992; Nicholson 2007). In this vein, university presidents often employ story and narrative to strategically frame the public perception of the organization (Birnbaum 2002; McClure 2018).

University leaders rely on strategic framing because competing interpretations of organizational events and actions exist (Fiss and Zajac 2006). For example, some individuals can perceive a university's particular financial approach as a positive entrepreneurial strategy, whereas other individuals may negatively perceive the same financial approach as undercutting the educational values of the university. The various framing approaches are vital in helping stakeholders to "make sense" of the university events and organizational change (Bucher et al. 2016; Weick et al. 2005). In this regard, university presidents are often the primary agents that "give sense" to university members and other constituents (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991).

The process of sensemaking refers to the construction of meaning to understand organizational events, actions, and environments that individuals encounter (Gioia and Thomas 1996; Gonzales 2013; O'Meara et al. 2014). Sensegiving processes complement sensemaking processes, whereby leaders strategically frame events or actions and disseminate these narratives to the organization's constituents (Fiss and Zajac 2006; Kezar 2013; Smerek 2011). Sensemaking and sensegiving processes are two sides of the same coin; the former focuses on creating understanding, whereas the latter focuses on communicating and engendering support. More importantly, the framing efforts in sensegiving processes are vital to help constituents understand and accept strategic changes inherent in navigating a university through periods of crisis, organizational change, and increased competition.

In sensegiving processes, actors strategically connect cues (i.e., events, ideas) with frames (i.e., mental models, institutional logics) to construct a legitimate narrative that is distributed to shape the perceptions of others. Sensegiving processes have two action-focused components: (a) the production of a legitimating narrative that is comprised of organizational cues and existing frames and (b) the distribution of the legitimating narrative with the intent to influence stakeholder perceptions (Degn 2015). Both components of the sensegiving process are necessary because strategic changes—particularly within an educational context—often involve struggles over deeply rooted social norms, values, and symbols. Consequently, strategic university changes (i.e., events) must include framing narratives that either sufficiently address the existing normative

expectations of their constituents or attempt to shift the normative expectations of constituents in ways that encourage them to accept the strategic change (Fiss and Zajac 2006; Smerek 2011). These normative expectations derive from broader social institutional logics (Barr 1998; Sharma and Good 2013).

Institutional logics are the unique organizing patterns inherent in broader social institutions, such as the market, family, state, professions, religion, corporation, and community (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton 2004; Thornton et al. 2012). An institutional logic is a socially constructed frame that provides individuals and organizations with a themed set of ideas that may be employed to order their social reality (Townley 1997). Succinctly, a logic is the way a particular social world works. Institutional logics are defined as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations *provide meaning* to their daily activity, organize time and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences” (Thornton et al. 2012, 2; emphasis added). A university operates in a complex environment comprised of multiple competing logics, each with its own configuration of social norms (Berg and Pinheiro 2016; Cho and Taylor 2019; Greenwood et al. 2010). For example, a particular Catholic university (i.e., guided by a religious logic) is an educational institution (i.e., guided by a professional logic) that must financially sustain itself (i.e., guided by a market logic). The complex environment of universities necessitates that leaders act strategically to provide meaning to constituents and conform to the multiple normative expectations.

By examining the composition of multiple logics confronting postsecondary leaders, scholars have recently begun to highlight the various ways executives exhibit agency while simultaneously confronted with the limitations of social norms and expectations. Researchers have delineated how university leaders leverage a “public good” discourse to justify their market efforts (Warshaw and Upton 2020), implement defensive media strategies in response to stakeholder criticism (Mampaey and Huisman 2016), and employ compartmentalizing strategies to comply with normative expectations (Canhilar et al. 2016). This vein of institutional logics research underscores that university leaders possess options in exercising agency amid broader social constraints and expectations.

Institutional logics are the frames used in sensegiving processes that provide actors with available content to be used as “tools” as leaders employ symbols to establish meaning, vocabularies to frame action, and rhetoric to fashion identity (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Thornton and Ocasio 2008). In connecting cues (i.e., events, ideas) with frames (i.e., institutional logics), leaders can employ the content of a dominant logic from among the multiple types of logics available (Haveman and Rao 1997; Reay and Hinings 2009). In other instances, leaders can connect an organizational event with a hybrid logic whose blended composition is configured from two different logics (Battilana and Lee 2014; Pache and Santos 2013). To manage the hybridity, some actors employ integration

strategies that blend the constitutive elements of the two logics (Glynn and Lounsbury 2005; Mars and Lounsbury 2009), whereas other actors employ differentiation strategies that separate the components of the logics (Battilana et al. 2017). For example, a university president might employ an integration strategy when contending that a profitable academic program (i.e., market logic) was established to improve educational access (i.e., professional logic) for students who cannot afford to live on campus. Similarly, a president might employ a differentiation strategy when suggesting the central purpose of a new online academic program (i.e., professional logic) is not to generate additional revenues (i.e., market logic). By connecting the organizational event with a hybrid logic through integration or differentiation, the leader can attempt to “give sense” to others regarding the multiple interpretations and different normative expectations that exist.

Institutional logics highlight the extant boundaries of normative expectations and cultural content within the multiple competing social institutions (Berman 2012; Murray 2010). Organizational scholars contend that logics are not static and incrementally change over time (Thornton et al. 2012). In this vein, the boundaries of a logic are dynamic. Thus, if a leader is unable to naturally align an organizational event with an existing frame because the event contradicts existing normative expectations, the individual can alternatively act as an “institutional entrepreneur” and attempt to shift the normative expectations or cultural content within the respective institutional logic as a form of boundary work (Battilana et al. 2009; Langley et al. 2019; Lounsbury and Crumley 2007). Put simply, institutional logics provide actors with a “toolkit,” but sometimes actors may seek to change the “tools” they use to achieve their desired end.

To get an understanding of the various sensegiving strategies that university leaders employ, it is necessary to examine the media toolkit they strategically leverage to frame organizational events and actions. Leaders use university websites to strategically frame characteristics of the school for different audiences (Holland and Ford 2020; Saichaie and Morpew 2014), develop mission statements to convey organizational aims and values (Morpew and Hartley 2006), employ slogans to engender support within the local community (Gonzales and Pacheco 2012), and design admissions viewbooks to entice prospective students (Hartley and Morpew 2008). More recently, university magazines have become the primary public relations instrument, as they are the centralized publication used to showcase the branding and marketing content across multiple media forms (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). The magazines are carefully crafted volumes that customarily open with an official communiqué from the university president in which commentary and sensegiving are provided to the university community regarding recent and future events. Given their essential public relations function for universities, the magazines are particularly important to examine how presidents employ various sensegiving strategies to frame organizational events and actions.

Methodology

Sample

I employ a comparative case study design that examines the sensegiving strategies used by presidents at eight different religious tuition-driven universities. The American postsecondary system possesses a variety of tuition-driven colleges and universities that include women's, vocational, Hispanic serving, religious, historically Black, and tribal. By selecting one type of school among the many tuition-driven categories of institutions, this research design holds the organizational variable constant across the sample (i.e., religious university). This sampling approach is used to establish a generalizable theoretical model in empirical case study research (Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Yin 2017). Given their sole reliance on tuition revenues to achieve financial sustainability, many tuition-driven universities adopted innovative forms of educational delivery or pursued nontraditional student enrollment markets at the turn of the twenty-first century that challenged existing social norms within the field of higher education. Although there are many settings within higher education that provide examples of logic conflict, the continued expansion of student enrollment in colleges and universities provides some of the most notable instances of opposition between logics.

The pursuit of new student enrollment markets and new mediums of educational delivery necessitated presidents of tuition-driven universities "give sense" to constituents to legitimate the organizational actions. Although all tuition-driven universities must navigate complex normative expectations within their institutional environments, faith-based colleges possess the additional normative element of religion as part of their institutional milieu. These institutions possess a clearly identifiable logic of religion whose tension with the market logic provides a palpable context to examine instances of logic conflict. The added social and normative complexity that confronts religious universities makes them an ideal organizational type to highlight generalizable strategies of sensegiving that will also be of use to other types of postsecondary organizations or nonprofit organizations beyond the higher education sector that similarly employ sensegiving strategies in complex institutional contexts. The generalizability of the sensegiving framework across multiple organizational types is explained in greater detail in the discussion.

The sample in this study was selected from the overall population of nonprofit Catholic and Protestant postsecondary organizations as self-identified in the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS; $n = 873$). For inclusion in the sample, schools had to have reported enrollment data to calculate

overall change in enrollment growth from 2000 to 2014. In addition, to equalize as much as possible their starting points, the sample was restricted on three factors: level of enrollment (>3,000 students), institutional type (doctoral/professional and master's universities), and selectivity (SAT twenty-fifth percentile \leq 1,000). These three organizational constraints aim to control for structural and resource conditions that may pose alternative explanations for variation in growth. This reduced the sample to 75 institutions.

Within this restricted sample, I divided schools into four categories based on enrollment growth: high (>100%), medium (60%–99%), low (1%–59%), and negative (<0%). All schools were distributed into specific cells within the four growth categories and examined for pairings on five dimensions relevant to the study: online learning, adult learning, graduate emphasis, organizational age, and demographic diversification. From the available organizations in each category of growth, I selected two universities for inclusion in the study as a matched pair based on the five dimensions (Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

It is important to note that the variance in university growth rate (i.e., negative, low, medium, and high) was only strategically used to establish a representative sample of institutions to examine. Growth rate is not used as an explanatory characteristic that correlates with the three dimensions of sensegiving that are illuminated in this study—namely, strategy, frame, and cue. The names of the eight universities, as well as some identifiable attributes herein, have been modified or paraphrased from their original sources to ensure anonymity of the organizations in this study.

Data

To empirically examine the sensegiving strategies of presidents, electronic copies of the university magazines during a 15-year period from 2000 to 2014 were collected from eight select organizations. At each of the universities, the office of public relations provided support in obtaining copies of the more recent volumes (2008–14), whereas the university archives provided support in obtaining copies of the earlier volumes (2000–2007). It is common practice that many university magazines publish an official communiqué from the president typically one to two pages in length. The content in the presidential communiqués is used in multiple communication settings such as public speeches, organizational reports, and social media.

Given their prominence within the publication, as well as their multiple uses within the organization, the communiqués are a fruitful setting to examine the

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sensegiving strategies of university presidents. Each collected volume was examined for a presidential communiqué. If located, the text was extracted, scrubbed, and converted to a .txt file for computationally aided coding and analysis. The rate of presidential representation per university was calculated by dividing the total number of extracted presidential communiqués by the total number of collected volumes. As highlighted in table 1, the rates of presidential representation per university ranged from 2.7% to 100% during the period of study (2000–2014).

The executives of the two negative-growth universities only published a single presidential communiqué after 2001—Boxborough College in 2014 and Havertown College in 2013. These two presidents did not establish strategies to increase student enrollments like the executives of the low-, medium-, and high-growth universities, who continually framed the events and actions they employed to sustain the schools using sensegiving strategies. In the single instance each executive emerges within the university publication, it is to address an urgent university circumstance. This phenomenon is further explained at length in the discussion.

Analysis

The analytic strategy for this study followed a three-part process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al. 2014). This approach was selected in contrast to other qualitative approaches (Erikson 1986; Strauss and Corbin 1994) because it specifically allows for the generation of codes based on a priori frameworks (i.e., institutional logics) and focuses on examining the sequences and regularities that link phenomena. The institutional logics framework situates actors and action as occurring in broader social institutions, including the market, family, state, professions, religion, corporation, and community (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton 2004; Thornton et al. 2012). The qualitative analysis software NVivo 11 facilitated the systematic coding of the documents (Bazeley and Jackson 2013).

The process of analysis began with data reduction, whereby the data were assigned codes in a first-cycle coding effort as shown in figure 1. During this phase, documents were systematically reviewed by priority of growth: negative-growth universities to high-growth universities. Analytic memos were generated throughout the coding process and organizational summaries were constructed at the conclusion of coding each university. In the second stage of analysis—namely, data display—the matrix function in NVivo was used to generate queries that informed code refinement and the examination of patterns across cases.

Given that codes for this study were applied by a single researcher, it was determined that the first two analytic processes—that is, data reduction and data

TABLE 1

Presidential Representation in University Magazines by Organizational Growth Type, 2000–2014

Organization and Growth Type	Total Volumes	Total Presidential Communiqués in Volumes	Rate of Presidential Representation (%)	Years of Presidential Representation
High growth (>100%):				
Pepperell University	55	43 ^a	78.2	2000–2014
Ardmore University	56	44	78.6	2000–2014
Medium growth (60%–99%):				
University of Winchendon	39	38	97.4	2000–2014
University of Malvern	36	36	100	2000–2014
Low growth (1%–59%):				
Stoneham University	36	36	100	2000–2014
Lansdale University	55	31	56.4	2000–2014
Negative growth (<0%):				
Boxborough College	54	8	14.8	2000, 2001, 2014
Havertown College	39	1 ^b	2.7	2013

^a Communiqués in 12 volumes were devoted to financial overview of the university and written by the vice president of finance (not included in count).

^b Communiqués in eight volumes were written by the university magazine editor 2013–14 (not included in count).

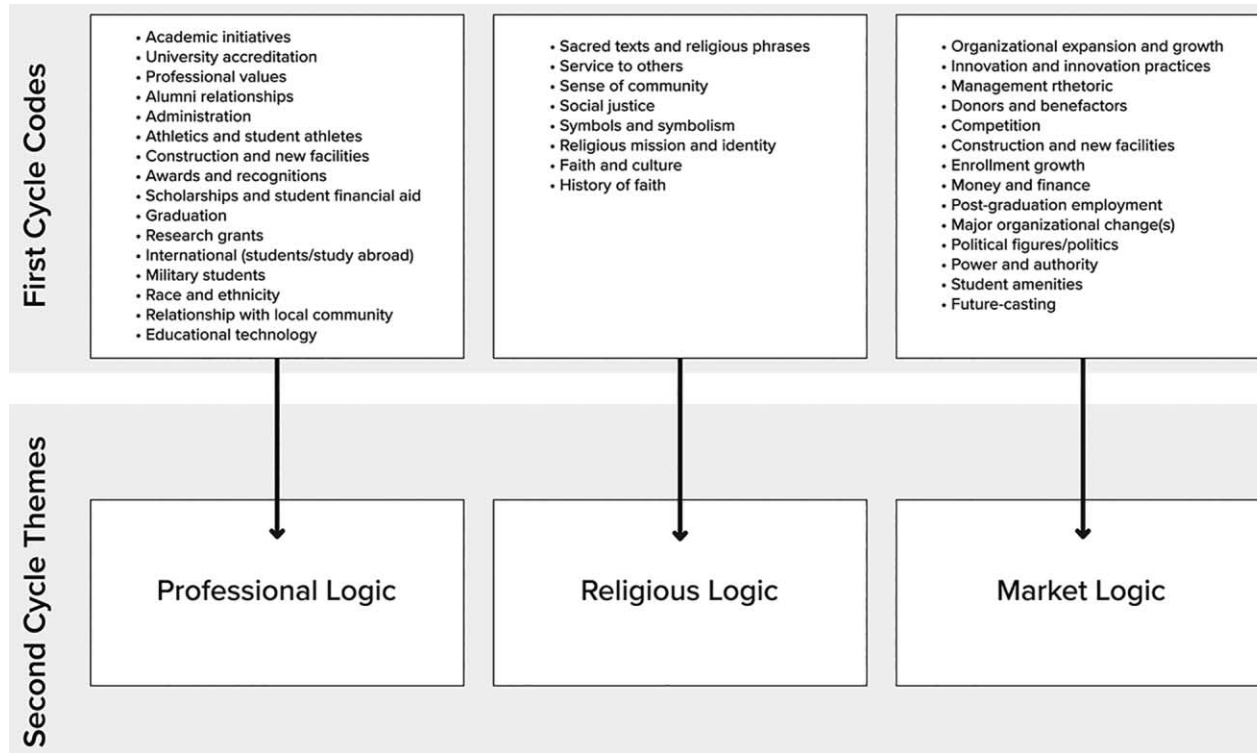


FIG. 1.—First cycle codes and second cycle themes

display—should be executed in a second coding effort that examined the refined codes to further reduce inconsistencies in application. Documents were systematically reviewed in an alternate order by priority of time: earliest published (2000) to latest published (2014). Matrix queries were conducted following the second-cycle coding for the purpose of summarizing the data to examine themes and explanations as well as behavior across organizational types and variation in presidential response rates. As figure 1 highlights, three second-cycle themes were generated from the first-cycle codes—namely, professional logic, religious logic, and market logic.

In the final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, the data were revisited to examine comparative and contrasting cases to verify conclusions made in terms of the research question. Data were advanced from matrix form to the conceptual framework shown in figure 2 that addressed the variation in sensegiving along three dimensions: strategy (i.e., foundational, configurational, and transformational), frame (i.e., professional logic, religious logic, and market logic), and cue (i.e., traditional event, emergent event, and divergent event).

Limitations

Thoughtful attention was given to the selection of universities, collection of archival documents, electronic conversion of data, and multiple iterations of qualitative coding. Nonetheless, there are limitations to the study, four of which warrant consideration. First, prior research has shown that institutional logics change over time (Thornton et al. 2012). For example, the logic of religion in 2010 is not the same as it was 50 years prior in 1960. As such, the bookends for this study represent a particular era for these organizations and any inferences beyond the time period should be carefully considered. Second, to ensure organizational anonymity, this study does not identify when presidential transitions may have occurred in a given organization during the 2000–2014 period of study. Consequently, the results do not speak to the ways in which specific persons or personality types might relate to the sensegiving framework. Third, given the archival nature of this research, it does not examine matters of strategy efficacy. Although the study does provide further illumination regarding the nuanced approaches of executive sensegiving, it does not examine the impact or consequences that the strategies had on the university constituents targeted by the publications. Finally, this study is unable to address the antecedent processes of executive sensegiving strategies. The content of university publications undergoes many developmental iterations before it is finally distributed to constituents. This research is unable to address the strategic decision-making processes that generate presidential communiqués.

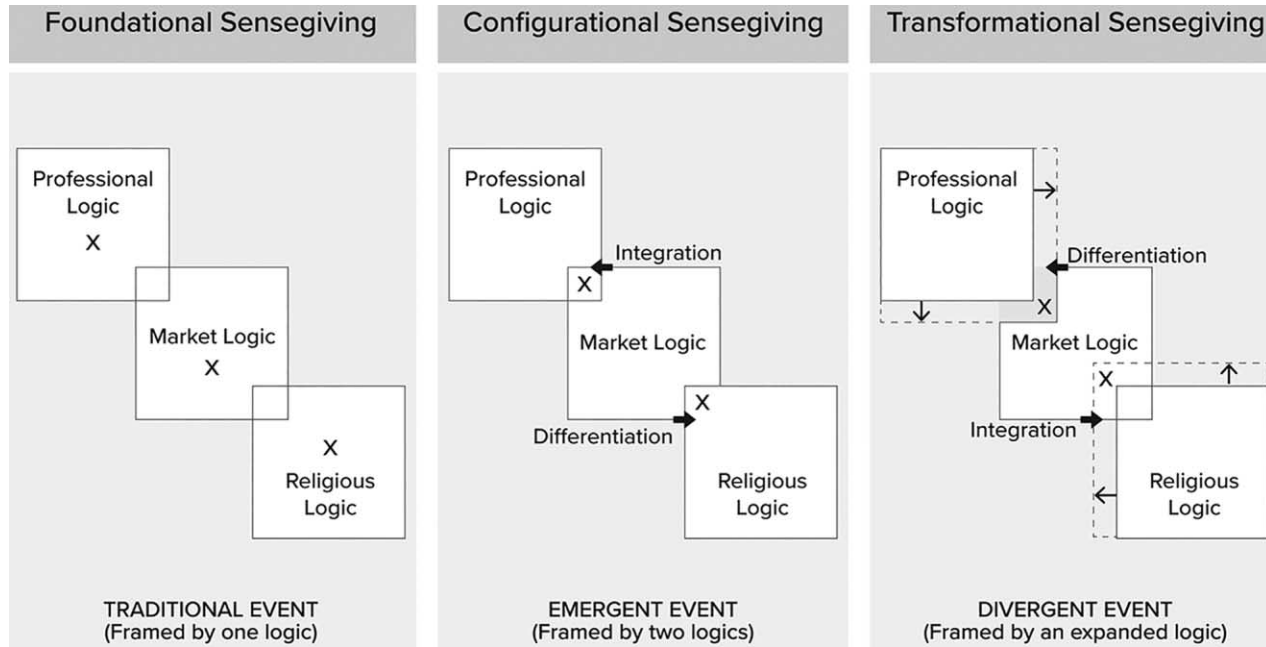


FIG. 2.—Sensegiving strategies for organizational events utilizing institutional logics

Results

With the environmental complexity that faces leaders of colleges and universities, it is important to understand how executives navigate broader institutional pressures and normative expectations in strategic ways. Although the social content of many broader institutional logics may be available to actors (i.e., state, corporation, and community), presidents predominantly drew on those logics that have customarily been accepted or expected by constituents. Data from the presidential communiqués revealed that the university executives leveraged content from three primary institutional logics in their sensegiving strategies—namely, professional, religious, and market logics (see fig. 1).

The sensegiving approaches of the university executives in this study varied considerably. I developed a sensegiving framework that addressed this variation along three dimensions: strategy (i.e., foundational, configurational, and transformational), frame (i.e., professional logic, religious logic, and market logic), and cue (i.e., traditional event, emergent event, and divergent event). The relationships across the three dimensions of the sensegiving strategies are shown in figure 2. The strategies highlight the process of sensegiving whereby actors connected cues (i.e., events) with frames (i.e., institutional logics) in an attempt to construct a legitimate narrative that was distributed to influence the perception of others.

Foundational Sensegiving Strategy

Foundational sensegiving refers to the efforts that leaders undertook to maintain the fundamental essence and taken-for-granted quality of their primary institutional logics. In the foundational sensegiving strategy, presidents connected a traditional event (i.e., cue) with one of the three dominant institutional logics—professional, religious, or market (i.e., frame). A traditional event or idea is one that constituents expect from a university setting, such as collegiate athletics, enrollment management, or community culture. The type of event is determined by its relationship to the setting and framing logics. Moreover, a traditional event or idea is exclusive to a dominant logic in the way that learning is associated with the professional logic or prayer is associated with the religious logic. To illustrate foundational sensegiving, an example of associating an event or idea with each dominant institutional logic is provided below.

The president of the University of Winchendon leveraged the foundational sensegiving strategy to address the newly created healthcare program. He connected the event with the professional logic of education:

In January we joined a small and very select group of universities in the state with [healthcare related] schools . . . Along with the School of Nursing, which contains the oldest nursing program west of the Mississippi River, the new [healthcare related] school gives us bookends in healthcare that further strengthen our historical ties to this field. Given our current student demographics—half of our student body is Hispanic—the program stands to make a substantial impact on increasing . . . the number of Hispanics in this important professional field, which presently has few minority practitioners. (2004)

The Winchendon president leveraged the foundational sensegiving strategy to assert that the establishment of the program was a prestigious endeavor experienced by only a few “select” universities within the state. Moreover, the executive employed an added demographic element to emphasize that the newly developed program would have an impact on the broader professional field on a national level.

The University of Malvern president employed the foundational sensegiving strategy in his attempt to frame multiple events—both past and present—with the religious logic. To accomplish this, the executive leveraged a common phrase used throughout the Malvern campus to bookend his sensegiving narrative, “It’s a God thing.” The president described how the phrase was frequently used around campus: “It’s an explanation that students use for things—good things—that they can’t explain otherwise. Annual reports, such as this one, are filled with facts and figures—all of them designed to show how much God truly has blessed the University of Malvern. And the past year has been no exception. The story of Malvern, not just last year but also for the past several years, could easily be summarized with that four-word phrase, ‘It’s a God thing’” (2008).

The president leveraged a cultural phrase common to the Malvern community to connote familiarity to constituents while simultaneously highlighting that many of the organizational events illustrated in the “facts and figures” give evidence of “how much God truly has blessed” the university. This approach was most commonly used by the Malvern and Lansdale presidents to highlight a season of divine involvement with the organizations to give sense to constituents with interests in the religious outcomes of the two schools.

The president of Stoneham University used a foundational sensegiving strategy when he framed the need for increased student enrollments with the market logic themes of innovation, service, and opportunity. He wrote, “Given our minimal endowment and relatively low fund-raising totals, enrollment growth provides the resources to develop innovative programs, enhanced services and greater opportunities for students. To fulfill our mission, we must continue to grow” (2005). The executive leveraged his sensegiving strategy using argumentation to assert that “given” its low financial resources, the university must grow

and “to fulfill” its mission, the university must grow. The sensegiving strategy used by the president was straightforward and aimed to appeal to market-oriented understandings about university resources and the sustainability of its mission.

All university leaders in the study employed the foundational sensegiving strategy to connect traditional events and ideas (i.e., cue) with one dominant institutional logic (i.e., frame). In some instances, a president sought to give sense about one event, whereas in others, a president attempted to frame multiple events over a period of years. Using a mutually exclusive framing focus that emphasized a dominant logic, the foundational sensegiving strategy provided executives with the opportunity to highlight the traditional elements of the university that constituents expect to see. However, because universities exist in environments comprised of multiple institutional logics, leaders also employed sensegiving strategies to address more than one logic at a time.

Configurational Sensegiving Strategy

Configurational sensegiving refers to the efforts executives took to simultaneously address the plural or hybrid normative expectations between logics. In the configurational sensegiving strategy presidents attempted to connect a new emergent event (i.e., cue) with two primary institutional logics (i.e., frame). An emergent event or idea is one that is new and novel to the constituents in the university setting because it previously had not been engaged, experienced, or implemented. The configurational sensegiving strategy was employed by executives to frame new modes of educational delivery, new forms of organizational identity, and new financial resources, among others.

When presidents framed an emergent event using the configurational sensegiving strategy, they managed the hybridity of the multiple logics by either integrating the components of two logics or differentiating the components of two logics from one another. In the configurational sensegiving process where leaders connected a cue (i.e., event) with a frame (i.e., institutional logic), the integration and differentiation occurred between the components of the two logics and not between the cue and the frame. These two different approaches to the configurational sensegiving strategy highlight the social complexity leaders navigated in their attempt to address multiple competing expectations and interpretations of university events. This configurational sensegiving section commences with two examples of integration and concludes with two examples of differentiation.

At the turn of the century, the president of Stoneham University announced that the university would pursue an emergent form of educational delivery supported by the internet. To give sense to the university community, he associated the new educational initiative with two logics—namely, the market logic and the professional logic—to convey that both innovation and quality would be

achieved: “Changing markets, customers and customer demands . . . threaten even the most secure institution. Unless higher education learns to change, Peter Drucker’s prediction that many colleges and universities will fail is certain to come true. Stoneham University may well be a leader in developing productive strategic partnerships and in offering e-commerce options. The University’s partnerships . . . provide a model of the traditional college transforming itself to meet the needs and demands of the twenty-first century workforce. These partnerships expand our mission well beyond the campus and state borders” (2000).

The president asserted that change was necessary to avoid the possibility of organizational failure. He sought to give sense by coupling two logics together, highlighting that the new form of learning via the internet would address market-oriented characteristics such as “changing markets” and “customer demands,” while also meeting the professionally oriented elements such as educating “the twenty-first century workforce” and using business partnerships to expand their operations. The strategic partnerships the president named are with online education companies that possessed expertise in educational technology and electronic curriculum design. By using the configurational sense-giving strategy, the president managed the hybrid elements of the two logics in an attempt to help constituents understand this new form of educational delivery.

In a second example of integration, the president of Ardmore University attempted to give sense to students, faculty, and alumni regarding the university’s new financial campaign (i.e., cue) by connecting it to elements in both the market and religious logics. He explained that a “large American charitable foundation, which desires anonymity, committed a \$9 million matching grant to Ardmore for the addition of floors two, three, and four to the Stanley Building . . . The foundation’s [double] matching grant was God’s provision to complete the ‘academic nerve center’ of the campus” (2000). At the time the university volume was published, the school was still \$1.9 million short in its own fundraising efforts required to receive the remaining double-match of \$5.6 million needed to commence with construction. The president urged individuals to consider the pressing financial matter as a religious one: “Please pray that Ardmore can go over the top by March. Our enrollment growth is so explosive right now that we need this building as quickly as it can be erected.” The university executive integrated the elements of the market and religious logics together to convey the large financial gift was “God’s blessing.” The configurational sensegiving strategy also provided the opportunity for persons to respond using religious means (i.e., prayer) or financial means (i.e., money).

In some instances when university presidents employed a configurational sensegiving strategy, they framed an organizational event by intentionally attempting to differentiate the constitutive elements of two institutional logics. The differentiation approach is an attempt to sever the relationship between an

organizational event or idea and one logic while simultaneously connecting the event with another logic. Two logics were concurrently addressed by an executive—one negatively and one positively.

In the mid-2000s, the University of Malvern established a new graduate school to train clergy for service within their denomination. The addition of the graduate seminary came amid a season of consistent enrollment expansion at the undergraduate level. In the communiqué, the president first gives sense that the organizational event was not about market emphases, stating “At the University of Malvern, beginning a [denominational graduate school] is not aimed at providing additional revenue to bolster other programs. Nor is the creation of a seminary an enrollment strategy—our enrollment is robust and growing at a challenging pace. Although we have a strong academic reputation, and we believe the seminary will enhance it, starting a seminary is not a tactic to increase our reputation.”

After attempting to sever the organizational event from market-oriented themes, the university president asserts that the organizational event was about the professional emphasis of practical training: “Our passionate desire is to create a seminary that is affordable, practical, accessible, and open to all who desire to study from a [denominational] theological perspective.” It is important to note that both institutional logics—the market and professional—are used to frame the organizational event, but their core elements are strategically differentiated from one another.

In a second instance of differentiation, the Malvern president attempted to construct a sensegiving strategy for prospective donors on the topic of estate planning by drawing on the logics of the market and religion. In the early 2000s, senior university leadership launched a new 2-year initiative to “ensure Malvern’s historic mission and core values never change.” Financial estate planning efforts would help achieve this initiative, but the president intentionally highlighted that it was not about a market-oriented emphasis: “I would like to invite each of you to join me in this great initiative and include Malvern in your estate plans. This effort is not about how much money we can raise.”

After severing the new university financial initiative from the market logic, the Malvern president purposefully connected it with the religious logic. He continued, “Rather, it is the opportunity to preserve your values and the Malvern experience for future generations. We believe your estate gift will make an eternal difference and pay the greatest dividends of any investment you ever could make.” The executive emphasized the religious values of the school and purported that the eternal religious dividends outweighed any alternative secular financial dividends. The differentiation permitted the president to address the hybridity of two logics in an attempt to help constituents understand how the organizational event was negatively and positively related to multiple logics.

Because universities are embedded within multiple competing social spheres, they face conflicting normative expectations and myriad interpretations regarding

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their events, actions, and ideas. The presence of competing expectations and interpretations necessitates that leaders frame university events and ideas in ways that meet multiple normative expectations. To accomplish this, university leaders employed a configurational sensegiving strategy that framed organizational events using a combination of logics rather than just one logic. However, some organizational events or actions did not readily align with existing norms and necessitated a transformational sensegiving strategy.

Transformational Sensegiving Strategy

When university executives employed the foundational sensegiving strategy, they framed a traditional event with a single dominant institutional logic, whereas when leaders employed a configurational sensegiving strategy, they framed a new emergent event with two institutional logics. Yet there were some instances in which an event or idea, although aligning with one logic, was divergent and did not “fit” the social norms and expectations of another of the primary institutional logics but rather contradicted it. In these instances, executives pursued a transformational sensegiving strategy to legitimate the divergent university event or idea by either (like the case with the configurational strategy) integrating the two logics or by differentiating and having the newly expanded logic lay sole claim to the event.

Transformational sensegiving refers to the efforts that executives undertook to expand the scope of an institutional logic by transforming the meanings of its constitutive elements over an extended period of time. In the transformational sensegiving strategy, presidents employed boundary work to incorporate a divergent event (i.e., cue) within new meanings of an expanded logic (i.e., frame). A divergent event is a proposed action or idea that contradicts or conflicts with the normative expectations of a dominant logic and poses as a dilemma within its setting. The efforts to change the meaning of specific constitutive elements within the logic—specifically its symbols and language—were part of the work to expand the boundary of a logic to encompass the divergent event within a new frame (see fig. 2). This transformational sensegiving section highlights how one president used rituals to change the meaning of religious symbols and another president used rhetoric to change the meaning of educational language.

The president of Pepperell strategically addressed the proposition to raze the iconic religious building on campus through transformational sensegiving. Shortly after founding the university in the late 1800s, the priests constructed Ignatius Hall themselves. The grand red-brick structure was a stately complex that housed both the sanctuary and monastery. In the nascent years of Pepperell, it was the whole university. One century following its construction, Ignatius Hall

required tens of millions of dollars in renovations and was situated on prime real estate at the center of campus. With limited funding, university leaders could either renovate the religious building or construct multiple state-of-the-art buildings in the same central location to catalyze residential student enrollment. Executives faced the challenge of how to tear down a university icon without violating the deeply held religious norms and expectations associated with the structure. To do so they integrated religious and market logics to explain their decision.

In an effort that spanned 6 years of university magazines, the president of Pepperell attempted to strategically transform the religious symbol—an element of the religious logic—using a series of rituals. On the anniversary of the university founding, the president narrated how he led the community in a founder's walk. Based on historical records, whatever the priests did a century before, the university leaders executed the same. Administrators rode the same train route, walked the same 1-hour route to campus in the summer heat, prayed the same prayers, offered the same written blessings, and more. The president explained the importance of the parallel ritual: "To celebrate the anniversary of this event, we walked in our founders' steps. I write this column for persons who were unable to march with us on this very special day and want to remember it. It is also penned for the purpose of creating a historical record of the ongoing 'founding' of Pepperell University." From the onset, the president claimed the many parallel rituals as part of the ongoing founding of the institution.

Additional rituals followed with the same emphasis on paralleled historical experiences. The cornerstone from Ignatius Hall was removed and placed in the foundation of the new building—Felton Hall—exactly 100 years to the day it was first laid. The president linguistically situated bricks and mortar around the cornerstone, noting that, "We are building on our forefathers' dreams. We lay our accomplishments next to theirs, brick by brick, with 1,500 years of [denominational] tradition as our mortar." In another ritual, senior administrators removed the time capsule from Ignatius Hall and explored its historical contents; among its artifacts was a Latin inscription from one of the founding priests. The president explained, "It was the same inscription that Father Frederick knelt and wrote into the dust before the first shovel full of dirt was removed. Those words [the Latin inscription] continue to be the banner cry of Pepperell." Like the founding priests, current members of the university community could march forward by faith as a unified tribe under a single banner (religious logic) while at the same time enter into a new realm of organizational growth and enrollment expansion (market logic). In a final parallel ritual, the stained glass windows were removed from the chapel and transported to New York to clean "nearly a century of dirt, dust, and smoke from candles." Just prior to the demolition of Ignatius Hall, the president ceremonially transplanted the light from the old into the new as the windows were installed into Felton Hall and throughout campus, infusing the entire grounds with the spirit of Ignatius

Hall. With each ritualistic step, each prayer, each brick, and each stained glass window, the president attempted to transform the meaning of the iconic religious symbol, integrating the religious and market logics into a seamless fabric enveloping the entire campus.

Over the course of 6 years, the president executed a transformational sense-giving strategy that attempted to establish a new meaning for the university's iconic religious symbol—Ignatius Hall. Following the opening of the new Felton Hall, its demolished counterpart was never again discussed in the presidential communiqués. What was presented instead was a new organizational narrative about the perpetuation of the university that hinged on a new symbol—that is, not a physical building but rather the continual process of founding—one that fully integrated the market logic into the religious origins of the school: “For a university to be the best it can be, the ‘founding’ cannot be a one-time event. Instead, it must be a continual process whereby modern day founders are needed as much as the original ones. . . . I opened this column announcing the largest enrollment in the history of Pepperell. Days like these were not always bright. A decade ago the enrollment was not good. I presented two proposals to the Board to act upon—one to close the university with honor, another to move ahead with a dramatic building campaign” (2008).

To proceed with the dramatic building campaign, residential enrollment growth, and expansion of the university in nonbrick and mortar avenues—all part of the market logic designed to catalyze residential student enrollment—the president strategically framed the removal of the iconic religious structure by reconstructing its symbolic meaning. Thus, members of the university community were reframed as “modern day founders” that embraced both religious and market logics through a series of parallel rituals. The faith of the founders to build became the faith of the modern founders to expand.

The president of Ardmore University also attempted to frame a divergent event using the transformational sense-giving strategy but, instead of integrating the conflicting logics, opted to differentiate and wholly embrace one extended logic. The decision to dramatically expand online student enrollments posed a challenge in that it ultimately eclipsed the school's residential student enrollment by thousands. The scaling up of online education enrollment was a normative practice in the for-profit higher education sector (i.e., market logic) but eschewed by the nonprofit higher education sector (i.e., professional logic). The Ardmore president faced the dilemma of how to introduce significant student enrollment growth in this realm without being perceived as a for-profit “diploma mill” that sacrificed educational quality for revenue. To accomplish this, the president of Ardmore attempted to strategically transform the meaning of key terms of higher education parlance—an element of the professional logic—while omitting any mention of market logic in the rationale for the decision. Through

repetitive rhetoric, the executive attempted to redefine and give new meanings to the terms “prestige” and “access” over a 3-year period from 2012 to 2014.

In one communiqué, the president of Ardmore University described his encounter with a newspaper reporter who asked whether the high-growth enrollment practices of the university were affecting its educational quality. The president stated, “I informed him that it was the goal of Ardmore University to redefine the essence of a prestigious university. In the future, a prestigious university will be determined by the number of students they admit and help to realize their potential.” In the next issue of the university magazine, wherein the president highlighted many of the university accomplishments, he noted one specific goal had yet to be fulfilled. The executive asserted that it was Ardmore’s larger goal to “redefine what it means to be a prestigious university.” He continued stating that even Bill Gates despised the system of prestige, calling it “perverse” and that Gates was willing to “invest his own funds to find ways to deliver education as Ardmore does.”

The process of selective admissions is one of the revered professional norms in the field of higher education maintained by prestigious universities. These types of universities educate select students by admitting a small percentage of those who apply, strategically increasing selectivity by limiting access. The open-access approach to enrollment that Ardmore adopted to achieve accelerated growth rates, while simultaneously claiming prestige, contradicted the professional norms maintained by the prestigious universities. As such, the president of Ardmore often discussed prestige and access adjacent to each other in an attempt to give sense regarding the university’s rapid expansion: “We run the university as a business focusing on students as customers and keeping costs low. At Ardmore University, we do not want to be a top-ranked school if it necessitates spending more than we take in or having to reject students. Rather, we believe a quality university should be determined by the number of students it accepts.” He explicitly adopted an expanded conception of the professional logic of higher education while eschewing any mention of market logic motivations.

The president noted in the next issue of the university magazine that “our goal is to keep a [denominational] education accessible and affordable. Our residential tuition is in the bottom quartile of private colleges, while our online tuition is much less than our for-profit competitors.” Here he explicitly rejected the market logic by highlighting the university’s cost-conscious emphasis on access and affordability, while simultaneously differentiating the approach from more elite and profit-seeking schools. Furthermore, he noted that providing educational access to the online student population was a service: “Serving this demographic (mid-30s and unable to relocate) has allowed us to fulfill Ardmore’s mission by making a religious education available to as many people as possible. It has also enabled us to improve the residential programs more rapidly. The massive online

population has provided us with the financial resources to completely overhaul the campus.”

The president’s efforts to redefine prestige and access are seen in his expansion of the professional logic of higher education. This transformational sensegiving was a continuous effort repeated across multiple communiqués and years.

In the transformational sensegiving strategy, an organizational event or action was divergent and did not “fit” with the existing norms and logics. More specifically, the divergent event fit too neatly with one logic, but it also contradicted one of the other two logics that were equally embraced by the school. Thus, university leaders worked in entrepreneurial ways to expand the boundary of the one logic by transforming the meanings of the constitutive elements—specifically symbols and language—over an extended period of time to incorporate the divergent event (i.e., cue) within an expanded logic (i.e., frame) while either integrating or differentiating the logics affected by the expansion. The elements of time and repetition were important components in transforming the meanings of the constitutive elements of institutional logics because of their strong normative and taken-for-granted quality.

To alter the meaning of the religious symbol, the Pepperell president implemented a series of parallel rituals over 6 years that encouraged constituents to be part of a “continual founding” of the university. In the case of Ardmore, to alter the meanings of professional educational language, the Ardmore president proposed new understandings of the terms “prestige” and “access” over a 3-year period, encouraging constituents to consider how the accelerated growth made higher education available and affordable to as many persons as possible rather than an elite monied few. These attempts to redefine the constitutive elements of symbol and language were strategic efforts to expand the boundary of one logic while either incorporating it or differentiating it from another so as to incorporate the divergent event and give sense to constituents.

Discussion

When considering broader implications, three essential characteristics of the data for this study warrant further discussion. First, the persistent absence of two presidents within the university publications followed by their selective emergence underscores the importance of coming out for the crisis to give sense. Second, although the religious focus itself may not apply to other organizations, the process of executive sensegiving in complex social and cultural contexts can be comparatively examined and warrants further empirical testing. Finally, by focusing on the core elements of an institutional logic, this research illumines how some university executives exhibited greater levels of agency in their attempt

to maintain organizational legitimacy when confronted with competing social structures.

Coming Out for the Crisis

The executives of the two negative-growth universities reported the lowest levels of presidential representation, only having published a single presidential communiqué after 2001 (see table 1). As previously mentioned, the presidents of Boxborough College and Havertown College did not establish strategies to increase student enrollments like the executives of the low-, medium-, and high-growth universities, who maintained persistent sensegiving strategies to frame the events and actions they employed to sustain the schools. Although the voices of the two executives are predominantly absent from the pages of the focal organizational publication, nonetheless their voices do emerge in a moment of urgency to strategically frame a significant university event.

In the sole instance where the Havertown College president emerges, he does so to inaugurate a new professional school. The emergent event is the first of its kind within the state in nearly 40 years. Havertown leaders spent tens of millions of dollars to establish the new school to expand their graduate student enrollment in new markets. In his opening statement, the president asserts that the founding of the professional school has been “a century in the making.” The first half of the communiqué underscores how the early history of the university was characterized by market and professional logics. It puts forth the story of an entrepreneurial university founder with a “pioneering spirit” who envisioned rural students in the state would be provided with an “opportunity to learn” notwithstanding the “limitations of their surroundings and circumstances.” The second half of the communiqué then shifts to the present and focuses on “this new initiative” and the substantial resources necessary to “bring this vision into reality.” The executive underscores how the continuous existence of the two founding logics can be found in “the same mission of extending opportunities to students and communities” and “leadership.” Throughout both halves of the communiqué, the president employs a configurational sensegiving strategy that blends two logics—that is, the market and professional logics—to frame an emergent event that becomes a primary enrollment thrust for the university.

Similarly, the Boxborough College executive emerges in the publication to frame a critical university event. For decades the school received national media exposure for its sustained athletic dominance, which strengthened student enrollment and the university brand. In 2014, one Boxborough team failed to qualify for postseason competition despite having established a long-standing tradition of preeminent postseason performance. To the Boxborough community, a loss of this magnitude was a new and thus emergent event. The university president pens a

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communiqué whose opening line immediately addresses the widespread dismay in the university setting, reminding the community that “the season ends well for one team and one team only” as other schools also experienced similar disappointment. The executive listed multiple achievements the program accumulated off the field, particularly an accolade by *Forbes* that showcased the program as one of the most financially valuable in the nation (i.e., market logic). He then highlights the notable off-the-field service the team that displayed with its commitment to Catholic social justice (i.e., religious logic). Having identified multiple off-the-field achievements for the season, the president then posits “beginning a new tradition” whereby postseason games would be “coupled with service opportunities” that Boxborough and its peer institutions might compete in achieving social justice outcomes. This configurational sensegiving approach highlights prior team achievements grounded in market and religious logics to propose a new athletic tradition wherein off-the-field accolades might be as desired as on-the-field accolades. Although his voice remains absent in the forthcoming volumes, the executive emerged in a critical moment to address the dashed expectations of the university community.

In these instances when leaders were compelled to emerge from years of absence, they drew on various logics in an attempt to help the university community make sense of major events that seemingly conflicted with core organizational tenets. The Havertown president reassured the community the costly new school was an extension of the foundational values of the university, whereas the Boxborough president reassured the community that winning off the field was just as important as winning on the field. Constituents seek to make sense of university events and actions, particularly in moments of notable change or crisis when the identity of the organization and its practices may be questioned. In turn, executives maintain organizational legitimacy by emerging to give sense while drawing on the multiple logics that exist in their complex social and cultural environments.

The Constant of Organizational Complexity

One of the distinguishing features of the American system of higher education is its rich institutional diversity. The system is inherently complex, comprised of many organizational types whose varied histories and missions reflect the many different institutional logics that exist. Public universities are financially supported by the state and adhere to a state logic (Bastedo 2009). Community colleges and regional comprehensives are informed by a community logic, having been established to provide an accessible education to citizens within a specific geographic region (Gonzales and Ayers 2018; Gumpert 2003). Many women’s colleges were established in earlier eras to educate women and continue to sustain a

feminist logic (Mackay et al. 2010). Similarly, the multiple classifications of minority-serving institutions that are determined either by their historical founding or minority student enrollment value a racial equality logic (Brown and Davis 2001; Smith 2019). And, finally, religious colleges and universities were founded by supporting denominations and maintain a religious logic (Brown 2016). Each institutional type possesses a unique logic that may not specifically generalize to other institutions.

Although the American postsecondary system is characterized by the diversity of its institutional types and logics, in recent eras two particular logics have increasingly influenced all colleges and universities—namely, the professional logic and market logic (Berman 2011; Brown 2017; Christensen and Eyring 2011; Cottom 2017; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). To maintain organizational legitimacy, university executives are expected to focus not only solely on the logic that characterizes their institutional type but also on the professional and market logics that broadly influence all institutions of higher education (McClure et al. 2020; Weisbrod et al. 2008). For example, the president of a minority-serving institution must not only give attention to the logic of racial equality but must also give attention to matters pertaining to the professional logic of accreditation and the market logic of enrollment. The university executive maintains organizational legitimacy by addressing the multiple logics as well as negotiating the space where the logics conflict.

To more accurately understand complex social and cultural environments, recent scholarly attention has been given to the constellation of institutional logics rather than a singular logic (Goodrick and Reay 2011; Greenwood et al. 2010, 2011; Smets et al. 2015). This study comparatively examined a sample of universities within a singular institutional type—that is, the religious college—to further illumine the processes by which executives construct various sense-giving strategies from a constellation of logics. The research design relied on a uniform sampling of cases that held the religious logic constant to establish a generalizable theoretical model (Eisenhardt 1989). Not only may the sense-giving framework that emerged from these findings be useful to college and university leaders in other institutional types, but the theoretical propositions can also be comparatively tested in different environments. Although the individual components of a given constellation of logics will change from organization to organization, the complexity that confronts executives remains constant for all institutions and their leaders.

A Continuum of Embedded Agency

By focusing on the microfoundations—or core elements—of an institutional logic, this study provides further insights regarding the strategies that actors

leverage to navigate the persistent tension between broader social structures and individual agency (Powell and Colyvas 2008). This dichotomous tension, known as the “paradox of embedded agency,” has been vigorously debated by scholars in an attempt to reconcile whether individuals have the freedom to act when they are embedded in broader social institutions that constrain their interests (Battilana 2006; Cardinale 2018; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Harmon et al. 2019; McPherson and Sauder 2013; Seo and Creed 2002). This study underscores that in complex environments the paradox of embedded agency is equally complicating, resembling a continuum comprised of multiple social structures and possible strategies for action rather than a dichotomy.

In the foundational sensegiving strategy, university executives *used the meanings* in broader social structures to frame a traditional event with one of three dominant logics: professional, religious, or market. Given the event was exclusive to a single logic, presidents could leverage the inherent meanings provided by broader social structures (i.e., logics) to give sense to constituents. In the foundational sensegiving strategy, agency was minimal, exhibited only in the act of framing an event within a logic, which is inherent to sensegiving processes.

Using the configurational sensegiving strategy to maintain legitimacy, presidents displayed greater levels of agency by selectively *choosing which meanings* to employ while still adhering to broader social structures. Executives framed an emergent event with two primary logics. Excerpts from the presidential communiqués illustrated how the Malvern president explained that the founding of a new seminary was not an enrollment strategy (i.e., religious and market logics). Rather, he asserted that establishing a new graduate school was about an accessible theological education (i.e., religious and professional logics). University leaders conformed to broader social structures by framing an event with one primary logic (i.e., religious) while at the same time they exhibited agency by selectively choosing specific meanings with which to associate the event through integration and differentiation (i.e., professional rather than market logic).

Using the transformational sensegiving strategy to maintain legitimacy, executives exhibited the greatest level of agency by attempting to *change the meaning* of one social structure (i.e., logic) while simultaneously adhering or rejecting another. Presidents employed boundary work to frame a divergent event within an expanded logic. In the case of Pepperell, the university leader used rituals to change the meanings of symbols in the religious logic while simultaneously adhering to enrollment practices associated with the market logic.

The various sensegiving strategies put forth in this study highlight that actors may not encounter a “paradox of embedded agency” solely characterized by a structure-agency dichotomy but rather a “continuum of embedded agency” whereby actors are embedded in multiple structure-agency dualities, each unique to a given logic. In complex social contexts, actors can conform to multiple structures and construct strategies with varying degrees of agency. In short,

embedded agency mirrors the complexity of the social environment in which the actors themselves are situated.

Conclusion

The patterns in this study revealed three primary strategies university presidents leveraged to frame the events and actions of the organization in ways that aimed to give a sense of legitimacy to constituents. The executive sensegiving strategies varied based on different combinations of cues (i.e., events) and frames (i.e., institutional logics). First, in the foundational sensegiving strategy, presidents connected a traditional event with one of three institutional logics: professional logic, religious logic, or market logic. Traditional events or actions were the core taken-for-granted activities readily associated with a dominant logic, framing academic programs with the professional logic and spiritual practices with the religious logic. The foundational sensegiving strategy provided executives with the opportunity to emphasize the traditional elements of the university that constituents would expect to see.

Second, in the configurational sensegiving strategy leaders connected a new emergent event (i.e., cue) with two different institutional logics (i.e., frame). New events or actions were those that had not been previously engaged, experienced, or implemented, such as new enrollment strategies, new academic programs, or new financial resources. Presidents employed the configurational sensegiving strategy when faced with possible competing normative expectations regarding university events and actions. In some instances, executives integrated the components of two logics to frame an emergent event and in other instances they intentionally differentiated the components of two logics to accomplish the same. These two different approaches to the configurational sensegiving—namely, integration and differentiation—enabled presidents to address various interpretations of a university event or action.

Finally, in the transformational sensegiving strategy, leaders connected a divergent event (i.e., cue) with new meanings in an expanded logic (i.e., frame). University presidents used the transformational sensegiving strategy when an event contradicted the normative expectations in one of the primary institutional logics and did not “fit.” To encompass the divergent event within a given logic, executives made repeated attempts over multiple years to change the meaning of the constitutive elements of a logic, specifically its symbols and language. These repeated efforts were an entrepreneurial form of boundary work with the aim of transforming or expanding an institutional logic—again either to integrate with another logic or differentiate from it.

The findings of this study contribute to higher education research on branding and the presidency. University branding research has emphasized a number of

practices universities employ to manage public images, which include marketing and reputation management (Drori et al. 2013; Maringe and Gibbs 2008; Waeraas and Solbakk 2009), public relations via websites (Ford and Patterson 2018), annual reports (Morphew and Hartley 2006), community advertising (Gonzales and Pacheco 2012), and admissions viewbooks (Hartley and Morphew 2008). This study instead examines presidential communiqués, which are an increasingly vital component of a school's media toolkit to illumine the processes that bolster multiple extant strategies. Through its comparative research design, this study also nuances the long-standing scholarly literature on university executives and the presidency (Badillo-Vega et al. 2019; Cole 2015; Neumann and Bensimon 1990; Tierney 1989) by revealing the specific approaches whereby universities leverage the voice of the president in differentiated ways to give a sense of legitimacy to its diverse constituents. It illumines an important aspect of the multifaceted nature of university leadership that has commonly focused on individual characteristics of leaders themselves (Bastedo et al. 2014; Breakwell and Tytherleigh 2010; Kezar and Eckel 2008).

Findings from the current study extend the organizational literatures on sensegiving and institutional logics. This research enhances the sensegiving literature (Degn 2015; Fiss and Zajac 2006; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia and Thomas 1996; Kezar 2013; Smerek 2011; Weick et al. 2005) by highlighting how actors can construct multiple types of sensegiving strategies through unique combinations of available frames (i.e., professional, religious, and market logics) and cues (i.e., traditional, emergent, and divergent events). The sensegiving framework highlights that the complex social context in which actors are embedded may not necessarily be characterized by a structure-agency dichotomy known as the “paradox of embedded agency” (Battilana 2006; Cardinale 2018; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Harmon et al. 2019; Seo and Creed 2002). Rather, the various strategies employed illuminate how actors navigate a “continuum of embedded agency” where they conform to multiple structures and construct strategies with varying degrees of agency.

This study also contributes to the organizational literature on institutional logics. Prior studies have emphasized that logics change over time (Thornton et al. 2012) and function as a “toolkit” for actors to draw upon (McPherson and Sauder 2013), but they have not empirically documented processes by which actors attempt to modify the “tools” or logics over time. This study offers novel insights by specifying the mechanisms of change actors can employ in their attempt to transform the core elements of institutional logics through boundary work (Battilana et al. 2009; Langley et al. 2019). Acting as “institutional entrepreneurs,” one president used a series of rituals to change the meaning of symbols, whereas another president used repetitive rhetoric to change the meaning of language. The university presidents leveraged the mechanisms of ritual and rhetoric across multiple years to transform the strong normative and taken-for-granted

quality of the broader institutional logics so as to encompass a divergent event and give sense to constituents that it was, in fact, legitimate. The use of these mechanisms shed light as to how actors shape meanings, which is one of the constitutive elements scholars have often cited when defining an institutional logic (Thornton et al. 2012, 2).

Future research could examine responses to the three sensegiving strategies outlined in this study and whether they are effective among various audiences. Additional work might also consider how executive sensegiving processes are related to leadership factors (i.e., duration of service, educational background, personality type, etc.) or organizational differences (i.e., elite, minority serving, vocational, etc.). For example, do presidents from different institutional types employ specific sensegiving strategies? Or do executives employ certain sensegiving strategies as the duration of their service increases over time? Future research might also focus on how the sensegiving of actors might be influenced through variation in environmental contexts such as national crises, federal education policies, or resource allocation. Finally, additional work is needed to examine logic complexity and sensegiving strategies in different institutional types that might more accurately model organizational complexity by including additional logics. By varying the characteristics of audience, leaders, contexts, and organizations, future research will help further illumine the social and cultural complexity university leaders navigate to maintain organizational legitimacy.

This research has important contextual implications for university administrators and higher education policy officials. As tuition-driven colleges continue to face sustainability challenges, executives are turning to emergent and divergent approaches to generate revenues. Given that university events can be interpreted differently across constituents, it is important that leaders establish strategies of sensegiving as part a broader implementation strategy when launching new academic initiatives or programs. This research also has implications for education policy officials and those with interests in higher education accountability (Brown 2018). The professional and regional accrediting bodies in higher education operate according to peer review norms whereby university leaders put forth framed arguments to evaluators that propose the university is in compliance with the norms and standards of educational quality. As accreditors evaluate the new programs proposed by colleges and universities, these executive sensegiving strategies can inform whether university leaders leverage existing norms and logics to frame their proposed programs or whether they attempt to change existing norms and logics to frame their proposed programs. The distinction between the two strategies is important for evaluators who rely on peer review norms of self-governance to regularly determine the acceptability of new academic programs or initiatives.

Colleges and universities increasingly leverage the voice of the president in strategic ways to maintain the image of the organization in a complex social and

cultural environment where crises, change, and competition are commonplace. Executive sensegiving strategies are particularly critical when events challenge or conflict with core values of the organization, engendering uncertainty among constituents. This was readily seen in early 2020 when college and university presidents employed a diverse array of logics to frame organizational responses in their published statements in response to the coronavirus pandemic (Gee 2020; Hartocollis 2020; Jesse 2020). The framework provided in this article offers a valuable resource for understanding and mapping presidents' sensegiving amid the cacophony.

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