

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

WILLIAM G. TIERNEY, *The Impact of Culture on Organizational Decision Making: Theory and Practice in Higher Education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008, 175 p., index.

For the past two decades, William Tierney has conducted research about the organizational cultures of institutions of higher education. This book is a compilation of that work which focuses on rising costs, increased competition from for-profit educational institutions, the impact of technology, and the changing desires and needs of students. This volume, however, is not a treatise on higher education policy and the practice of its administration. Rather, undergirding the above-mentioned foci is the importance for higher education scholars and administrators to understand the culture of the university in order to affect change.

Culture, for Tierney, means several things. Culture is grounded in the shared assumptions of individuals participating in the organization. It is the symbolic and instrumental sum of activities which exist in the organization and create shared meanings. Culture is a “set of symbolic processes, ideologies, and socio-historical contexts that are situated in an arena of struggle, contestation, and multiple interpretations” (105). Ultimately, Tierney demonstrates how university culture is an outgrowth of a tension rooted in the nature of organizational reality. Organizational reality, for the higher education scholar, is addressed by considering three facets of the cultures of higher education: the importance of approaching the study of university culture from an interpretive perspective, the manner in which universities define knowledge, and the idea of universities as institutions of socialization.

A scholar or administrator who approaches the study of culture in institutions of higher education from an interpretive perspective does so in two ways: from the understanding that the organization can play a role in creating its environment, and from the perspective that the purpose of any theoretical model is not merely to describe the organizational world but to change it. According to Tierney, organizations – or rather the people who make them up – “interpret” their environments effectively only when they look at the organization as an anthropologist would study a particular village or clan. In other words, when one grasps the power of culture to influence organizational decisions, he or she can move from a reactive mode of crisis management into a mode of reasoned reflection and consensual change.

The second facet to consider is the manner in which universities define knowledge. It is defined through the various academic disciplines and through cultural interpretations. Within disciplines, knowledge is assumed to be the

accumulation of facts around a common intellectual discourse. Thus the norms, beliefs, myths, and work of academics – a university’s culture – are determined within the disciplines. On the other hand (although not to the exclusion of the disciplines), defining knowledge from a cultural interpretation assumes that knowledge is socially constructed; that is, participants define knowledge according to their social and historical contexts. In this view, knowledge is produced and interpreted, not merely accumulated and described. “Knowledge, then, is not simply the accumulation of objective facts that can be taught in a classroom or advanced in a laboratory”.... Rather, “knowledge has political consequences that shape the way we interpret and exist in the world” (52).

The idea that universities are institutions of socialization is the third aspect important to the study of organizational reality in higher education. In organizations, particularly universities, goals and objectives are met as people are socialized to those goals and objectives. This socialization process results in the reformulation of one’s identity within the organization. An organization’s culture becomes coherent when the knowledge of each person is caught in the socialization process, and it develops out of the work these people do together. In this way culture is constantly being recreated; meaning is created, not transmitted through a planned sequence of learning activities where people learn one fact and then another.

A necessary caveat, and one that Tierney addresses, is that cultures in universities differ significantly from cultures in traditional organizations. For example, traditional organizations are evaluated on the bases of production, customer service, and the bottom line. Colleges and universities, on the other hand, are more difficult to assess due to a focus on their stated mission, which emphasizes the nebulous notions of serving the public good and the generation of knowledge. In addition, whereas traditional organizations are generally characterized by hierarchical levels of reporting, universities are less stratified. The result of this decentralization is a distinctive faculty culture that is attributed to the phenomenon of shared governance. In other words, faculty in universities typically have input and decision-making authority into several areas of the university.

It is for this reason – cultures within universities are unique – that knowledge is defined differently in university contexts. Rather than knowledge production being objective, autonomous, and free-floating, the specific interests of university members help define how knowledge is conceptualized. And these interests are examined not by disinterested observers but by subjective, active participants.

What distinguishes Tierney’s book from other treatises on organizational culture is its emphasis on the future organization of universities, particularly through a focus on the above three factors. Subsequently, Tierney’s perspective of the future of universities is decidedly postmodern. For readers who believe that organizations are closed systems which people simply strive to join, this book gives reassurances that members can change their environment by playing a significant role in creating it. Accordingly, leaders should strive to socialize all its members into the cultural fabric of the university because each member’s

specific interests contribute to the construction of knowledge and, therefore, to the cultural life of the university.

Tierney's book is also significant because it is formulated in opposition to approaches which see universities managed optimally as traditional organizations. To approach the organization of a university as one would a business, Tierney implies, is to objectify its organizational reality; to limit it to a series of inputs and outputs where disinterested onlookers simply pursue their work. Tierney asserts that universities are ideological hubs where members contribute their beliefs, actions, and expectations with the goal of creating knowledge which will shift the university in the direction of future societal contributions.

In order to accomplish this cultural approach to organization and decision making in universities, Tierney suggests three tangible considerations. First, if the cultural precepts which define a university are not in place, it will be difficult to determine if governance processes are working effectively. For example, if a university cannot come to terms with how it defines knowledge, then it will have difficulty in articulating and disseminating that knowledge to its various constituents; and it will also struggle to socialize new members into the knowledge construction process. Second, while socialized members of the university are encouraged to contribute to the knowledge construction process, the procedures of university governance need to be fluid enough to move issues to their conclusion. For Tierney, an unsuccessful university campus is one where structures exist in which nobody participates or where dialogue does not focus on important disputes. Third, rather than assume that there is one best system for organization, the university needs to provide for active involvement so that individuals are dealing with the actual issues which confront the university rather than the procedural mechanisms used to resolve them. Once these three topics have been taken into consideration, university members can then approach rising costs, increased competition from for-profit educational institutions, the impact of technology, and the changing desires and needs of students. These are challenges which are typically examined before considering institutional culture.

For the higher education student, scholar, and administrator, this book offers useful cultural tools for making and interpreting decisions. It provides helpful insights into the social construction of culture and meaning in university contexts, and the role individuals play in this process. For the reader unfamiliar with Tierney's previous work on higher education, this book is a compilation of his most significant contributions to the field. For the general reader of organizational culture, Tierney's unique insights into the future of university organization, lucid style, and compilation of literature make this a must read.

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