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# Opposing Forces: Institutional Theory and Second-Generation SoTL

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# Opposing Forces: Institutional Theory and Second-Generation SoTL

**Abstract**
This essay suggests that institutional theory has much to offer the SoTL movement by identifying the specific forces that oppose teaching and learning initiatives and offering solutions for nudging cultural change towards the desired outcomes.

**Keywords**
Second-Generation SoTL, Organizational Development, Theory

**Cover Page Footnote**
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## Opposing Forces: Institutional Theory and Second-Generation SoTL

In the second century BCE, Chinese general Sun Tzu in his influential text, *The Art of War*, presented the well-known aphorism, "know your enemy." While the struggle to change academic culture is not a war in the strictest sense, the Carnegie scholars' recent appraisal of the state of SoTL integration suggests that there may be a need for different tactics for the second generation of SoTL initiatives. Their emphasis on the institutionalization and the need to consider the broader organizational context in which SoTL finds itself, suggests that ammunition may be found in the world of business. In 2007, one of the generals in the SoTL movement, Pat Hutchings wrote an article entitled "*Theory: The Elephant in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Room*" in which she reflected on her experiences at that year's ISSOTL conference. To put it bluntly, she called for SoTL practitioners to become increasingly mindful of the uses of theory and, in particular, the integration of theory derived from a variety of disciplines (Hutchings, 2007). This essay suggests that institutional theory in particular has much to offer the SoTL movement by identifying the specific forces that oppose these initiatives and offering solutions for nudging cultural change towards the desired outcomes. In other words, this body of theory may be suggestive in helping us to know more about what we are working against.

Management theories are not new to the study of higher education. Indeed, there is a battery of scholars who study the business of higher education (e.g. Bastedo, 2012). That being said, their work has been largely absent from the forefront of discussions of SoTL and/or Boyer scholarship more broadly conceived. There are some exceptions to this relative lack of communication. In its series on the business of higher education, Jossey Bass published a booklet by Braxton, Lucky, and Helland, entitled *Institutionalizing a Broader View of Scholarship through Boyer's Four Domains* in 2002. The bulk of the text focuses on recognition and reward systems (i.e. tenure and how such scholarship counts towards tenure) but the authors also offer up

some possible theoretical frameworks, derived from management and institutional theory, for readers to consider. In particular, they look at degree of penetration, or how far an innovation has moved into practice. Building on Curry (1991), they consider structural, procedural, and incorporation as measures of depth. They also pay attention to those forces that "foster or impede the attainment" of the highest level of integration. These included forces specific to individual institutions, such as economic or financial resources, faculty load, and university mission, to more global forces, such as disciplinary socialization, academic reward systems, and graduate education.

Institutional theory suggests, however, that a distinction needs to be made between the forces described by Braxton et al. and those that operate in time and space. Braxton's conception comes from the idea of an organization as essentially stable, with forces of change acting on it, while neo-institutional theory emphasizes the dynamics of institutional change. Complex organizations, particularly those characterized as relatively anarchical with shifting, ambiguous and/or conflicting goals like universities, are not static institutions, but rather ever-shifting fields of organizational behavior (Hanson, 2002). On one hand, this results in a lack of a consistent basis for decision making, but on the other hand it contributes to a view of the campus as a hub of conflicting, overlapping, ambiguous, and even irrational ideas and initiatives. In attempts to meld modern business principles to higher education, this trait is one of the most problematic.

The movement to institutionalize SoTL has some affinity with this intermingling of ideas and initiatives. First-generation SoTL scholars spilled quite a bit of ink defining the field, and in doing so, they chose to embrace the many different paths leading to and from SoTL and to stimulate rather than stifle disciplinary variations (Donald, 2002). This brings to light the differences in the forces acting on the movement for SoTL and Boyer, despite their heavy association with one another. While SoTL is an integral part of the Boyer model and serves, along with discovery, integration, and application/engagement, as one of his four pillars of scholarship (Boyer, 1997), the two

movements have to embrace some distinctive differences in scope, audience, and aspiration.

It is not an uncommon assumption among untrained faculty that SoTL is, in a sense, remedial. The 'systematic inquiry' into teaching is perceived as part and parcel of the learning-centered revolution that came out of a plethora of studies indicating that the tried-and-true teaching methods that had characterized higher education for decades were ineffective. Dialogues about SoTL often hinge on dichotomies based on this assumption, i.e. lecture vs. active learning, individual tasks vs. group work, and so forth. In many ways, though, this is a superficial reading of the movement. While there may be documented flaws in teaching in higher education since World War II, the important point is not simply to fix what we did wrong in the past, but rather to ensure that teaching (and learning) do not get stuck on any one particular method or approach. While new approaches, such as active learning, are certainly gaining ground with the current generation of both students and faculty, this does not mean that we can assume it will resonate similarly with future generations of either. In the grand scheme of things, the primary intent of SoTL is to make teaching and learning an iterative process, one of constant inquiry, analysis, and change. In sum, the foundation of SoTL is the aspiration that we should, and can, create a culture that combats the tendency for complex institutions towards inertia.

That may be easier said than done. Cohen and March (1986) suggest that organized anarchies, like universities, often employ a "garbage can" model of decision-making. Under this model, decisions are made constantly and the sum of those decisions does not necessarily result in directed action. They argue that while individual decision makers in higher education may be acting rationally, the results of the multiple, shifting decision making processes means that rational results are not always achieved in the long run (Olsen, 2001). This places the object of study not on specific impediments but rather moves the impetus to management, or how institutions can facilitate or shepherd intentional change. In this conception, the options are not change versus stasis, but purposeful change versus unintended, unwanted, or unfocused change. The realization of

profound institutional change requires moving many levers at once, i.e. sustained buy-in from a large, broad, and often very fluid group of university stakeholders.

While the heart of SoTL is the classroom, the heart of the Boyer model is the campus, which moves the frame of reference from individual classes or instructors, to the institutional context and the dynamics inherent in the organization. The Boyer model of scholarship was conceived to address a different problem than SoTL. This battle is not with inertia or anarchy, but institutional isomorphism, i.e. the tendency for institutions of higher education to become more alike over time. Boyer's primary plea was for diversity—of institutional type, mission, faculty load, scholarly activities, scholarly products, and more (Birnbaum, 1983; Boyer, 1997). In this organizational model, SoTL, while conceived to be potentially part of the entire landscape, is specifically intended to resonate with institutions with strong teaching missions, such as regional or state comprehensive universities. Indeed, studies of second-generation SoTL have shown that scholarly productivity in the field is sensitive, but not exclusively tied, to institutional type (Henderson and Buchanan, 2007). So, rather than forces that "foster or impede", this theoretical perspective proposes that the critical perspective for both Boyer and SoTL is to channel change productively and to align forces of change towards intentional goals. The goals include both innovation and diversity, both of which are specifically opposed to the forces drawing institutions towards the post-World War II research model.

The degree to which institutions of higher education demonstrate isomorphic tendencies is hotly debated, but the tendency itself is well-documented (Goedgeburre, et al., 1996). Prior to World War II, U.S. state governments had traditionally been the enemies of isomorphism and they resisted assimilation largely through political action. Since then, however, local and state governments have increasingly become proponents for the cultivation of a climate of assessment and accountability. That same accountability contributes to the strength of mimetic forces within higher education leadership, which are in some ways a reflection of external isomorphism (Morphew & Huisman, 2002). Mimetic forces reveal themselves in reliance upon best practice

adoption, imitation of already successful models, and an aversion to "reinventing the wheel". This view of higher education emphasizes the need for higher returns on investment and efficiency, particularly in light of shrinking financial support for public education.

In many ways, this culture of assessment and accountability seems antithetical to the diversity and innovation goals of both Boyer and the SoTL movement. That being said, advocates in both movements have worked to find common ground. For example, Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone (2011a) recognized the need to integrate SoTL with institutional assessment and this formed one of the major findings from their national study. Indeed, despite what appear to be major differences, the two movements share a common goal, that of improving student learning. Hutching, Huber, and Ciccone (2011b) put the "learning question" at the heart of their research into the institutionalization of SoTL and increasing student success is behind nearly all major funding movements to improve U.S. public higher education.

It seems indisputable that modern higher education has become increasingly consumer-oriented. The historical model emphasized the creation of knowledge, but today's university is focused on the student, a phenomenon sociologist George Ritzer dubbed "McUniversity" (Ritzer,1996) The obvious association with fast food may seem to be inherently pejorative, but Ritzer also saw it as constructive. Universities could benefit, he believed, from the practices of businesses with more experience in reaching their consumers. As he saw it, modern universities would be increasingly pushed to compete with each other for students, and the secret to success was a combination of reasonable costs and unique, consumer-oriented experience (Ritzer, 2006). Predictability is central to McUniversity, as consumers want to know what they are buying in advance. Put simply, the average consumer tends to be risk-averse when investing large sums of money, and the rising costs of a college education mean that tuition is often among the largest lifetime expenses for a family or individual, so consumers tend to gravitate towards known brands, even in their choice of education.

Taken as a whole, the McUniversity theory suggests that in order to remain relevant and viable, institutions of higher education will need to fundamentally change many aspects of their business practices in order to attract and retain students, but, ironically, that same transformation will drive them towards a model that provides greater predictability, and thus stronger resistance to further innovation, and, once again, at odds with many of the values of the SoTL movement. Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone (2011b) recognized that institutionalization of SoTL may, by necessity, result in some compromises on the original spirit of the movement. Current debates within SoTL circles revolves around the propensity for risk taking, both within the classroom and among the communities that are vying to fully integrate SoTL. No matter how you view the situation, the way forward seems fraught with opposing forces.

This essay has argued that understanding the theoretical models drawn from a relatively neglected discipline shed light on the struggle to integrate SoTL into the culture of higher education. The lens of institutional theory in particular suggests that at the same time the SoTL movement is pushing in one direction, there are a number of forces pulling us in a variety of different directions. While this theoretical lens can be useful in understanding the array of factors that influence the way forward, the adaptation of business models into higher education has decided pitfalls. Our public debates on the future of the university, no matter how contentious otherwise, have telescoped to articulating the value of education as a product, often at the expense of its value as a process. This unfortunate state of affairs did not come about, however, because the world of business is the enemy of higher education. If we do have something to learn from institutional theory, we should note again that universities, with their unclear definitions and goals, shifting stakeholders, and 'garbage can' decision making, have far outlasted other organizational types, at least so far (Manning, 2013). As these theorists no longer view institutions as static fields, but rather as dynamic and evolving frameworks replete with a multiplicity of creative forces, perhaps we can find new ways to articulate the enduring value of ambiguity, diversity, originality and chance in teaching, learning, and scholarship.

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