Strategic Decoupling:
Building Legitimacy in Educational Policy Environments

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ABSTRACT

Decoupling is an emerging area of empirical work in organization theory. To date, however, it is been difficult to establish how decoupling may be conducted both consciously and strategically by organizational leaders. To study this phenomenon, this paper develops a case study of remedial education policy in Massachusetts during the late 1990s. Extended interviews and analysis of both confidential and public archival data found that policymakers engaged in strategic decoupling behavior in order to gain legitimacy with important external constituents. The following years have revealed this effort to be largely successful. The implications for studying policymaking and organizational theory are discussed.
On December 18, 1995, James F. Carlin strode into his first meeting as chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, a lay board responsible for the governance and coordination of the state’s public system of higher education. After over a decade as a trustee of the University of Massachusetts, Carlin was convinced that public higher education needed rapid and dramatic reform. In an “electrifying” performance, Carlin opened the meeting by declaring that the board would move expeditiously to increase admissions standards, to cut unproductive academic programs, and perhaps most controversially, to eliminate “unnecessary” remedial education programs (Dembner 1995: A1).

A policy to cut remedial education at four-year colleges was quickly passed the following year, but the policy’s impact became greatly attenuated over time. The policy induced intraorganizational conflict between Carlin and members of the Board staff who were committed to the access that remedial education programs facilitated for underperforming students. Board staff worked in concert with campus presidents to find creative means to subvert the policy. Finally, with the full cooperation of the chancellor and Carlin, Board staff eviscerated the policy by changing the definition of “remedial education” and strategically decoupling the policy from formal assessment.

Prior work in organization theory has attempted to explicate the dynamics underlying the decoupling of organizational units and processes. Meyer and Rowan (1977) theorize that organizations decouple their formal structures and processes from inspection to prevent any resulting losses in legitimacy. Although decoupling was one of the earliest articulated processes in the institutionalization of formal organizations, empirical research on decoupling has been extremely rare. Recently, a series of intriguing papers has investigated the decoupling of CEO’s long-term incentive plans (Westphal and Zajac, 1995; 1998; 2001). Nonetheless, the underlying dynamics of the decoupling process, and how it can be employed strategically, have yet to be described.

This paper analyzes the development of remedial education policy in Massachusetts. Although previous scholars have examined the contemporary politics of remedial education (Gumport and Bastedo, 2001; Mills, 1998; Shaw, 1997), and this controversial policy in particular, the political analysis has been only partial. By relying upon media reports and formal documents, observers have been led to believe that remedial education has been virtually eliminated from four-year colleges in Massachusetts. Interviews with key policymakers and more detailed analysis of archival data reveal, however, that very little has changed despite formal policy. How did policymaking for remedial education adapt so radically over time? And what role does formal policy serve when its substantive role has been eviscerated?

To understand this policy phenomenon, this paper develops a conceptual framework drawn from neo-institutional and strategic action theory. Institutional theory provides concepts to help understand the role of formal structure in organizational development, while strategic action theory can help us understand the role of leadership and decision making in organizations. Brought together, each theory helps to compensate for the flaws of the other, providing an opportunity to recognize that actors have agency in organizations while also recognizing that agency is powerfully shaped by institutions.
Conceptual Framework and Method

The traditional role of institutional theory has been to explain the powerful capacity of the environment to promote the similarity of structures and practices across organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio, 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The theory provides a compelling explanation for the pervasive similarities among organizations, and implies that the isomorphic process increases the stability of organizations over the long term and thus improves their odds for survival. Over the past fifteen years, however, institutional theory has been criticized for paying more attention to the roots of stability in organizations than to the sources of organizational change or the indubitable role of power in organizational development (Covaleski and Dirsmith, 1988; DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997; Hirsch and Lounsbury, 1997; Perrow, 1986; Powell, 1991).

Recent work in neo-institutional theory has provided a much-needed space for the role of strategic action within the institutional framework. Traditional strategic decision making models have tended to emphasize the unfettered ability of leaders to influence organizations and their environments within a specific set of constraints, but recently work has examined the role of external structures as well (Child, 1972; Hitt and Tyler, 1991; Hrebiniak and Joyce, 1985). Similarly, resource dependence theories have described the possibilities for strategic action by the successful manipulation of task constraints and organizational environments (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

Oliver (1991) laid the groundwork for future work in institutional theory by developing an influential taxonomy of possible strategic actions – acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation – that organizations could utilize in response to isomorphic pressures in the institutional environment. Subsequently, there has been a great deal of work conducted in the 1990s to try to flesh out this perspective theoretically, often with a focus on the role of isomorphism in the institutional environment in creating opportunities for change (Goodrick and Salancik, 1996; Kondra and Hinings, 1999; Suchman, 1995). Yet only a few have begun to look at the intraorganizational dynamics related to strategic action and organizational change.

Recent empirical work in institutional theory has been promising in developing our understanding of how actors within organizations engage in strategic action. Covaleski and Dirsmith (1988), in their groundbreaking study of the deteriorating relationship between the University of Wisconsin and its state benefactors during a budget crisis, articulated the ability of powerful state actors to mandate institutional compliance from the University when their interests were at stake. Edelman (1992) highlighted the ability of business leadership to maintain their managerial autonomy by mediating the impact of institutional pressures to implement civil rights law. Finally, Arndt and Bigelow (2000) used a content analysis of hospital annual reports to argue that senior administrators used evidence of pressures in the institutional environment to justify their decision making to shareholders. This work has moved far beyond strategic choice theory to develop nuanced models of the interactions between actors and institutions that produce strategic change.

The conceptual framework for my study thus draws upon concepts not only from contemporary institutional theories, but also from strategic choice perspectives. It views policy systems as arenas in which institutions and actors are engaged in dynamic processes that create and recreate social structures. There is room to understand the
agency of individuals and organizations as well as the powerful influences of social structure on policy development and implementation processes. Interactions between institutions and actors refine the structure the policy system and influence policy outcomes. Institutions help determine which policies will be selected, how it will be used, and whether or not various forms of implementation will be successful. Nevertheless, actors with interests and value commitments use their leadership skills and position to manage the transition from one metapolicy to another. It is a powerful process that has real impacts on the students and faculty in the higher education system.

This case study consists of more than 20 interviews with a wide range of participants, both within the Board of Higher Education and with campus presidents, senior campus administrators, and faculty leaders. Interview protocols were developed that operationalize the elements of the conceptual framework (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Interview tapes were transcribed verbatim and coded for relevant concepts. In addition to interview data, a rich array of public, private, and fugitive documents were obtained, including internal memoranda, letters, system reports, and budget data. Secondary literature and media reports were also used.

Remedial Education Policy in Massachusetts

After an admissions standards policy was passed in December 1995, the new Board of Higher Education chairman, James F. Carlin, made it clear that the next policy would be one that limited remedial education at the campuses. A natural supporter was Stanley Z. Koplik, the state’s chancellor of higher education, who had bemoaned the academic quality of students since he was appointed in 1993. The combination of the two men, one an experienced political leader, the other an experienced administrator, helped ensure that the policy would pass. Support from the other board members, the public, and the media soon followed.

Remedial education in Massachusetts was hardly a new or localized phenomenon. Students of the 19th century, often the product of weak secondary school systems, required a great deal of work in basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills (Cary, 1962). Indeed, even students at top universities were often found to be deficient in these skills (Rudolph, 1977). Remedial education became a national issue first at the K-12 level, when it became clear that some students were being promoted to higher grades without adequate achievement in their prior work. A Nation at Risk, published in 1983, focused national attention on education within an increasingly competitive and globalized world, arguing that inadequate education was putting the nation at risk of losing the Cold War. Concern over remedial education gradually drifted to the higher education arena, when it became equally clear that the college student population, now diverse in race, gender, and socioeconomic status, was now diverse in academic preparation as well.

In Massachusetts, the Board of Regents for Higher Education – a predecessor to the current Board of Higher Education – first addressed the issue in the late 1980s. In November 1987, the chancellor appointed working groups to address issues of undergraduate education in the public colleges and universities. The BOR recommended that all students be tested in reading, writing, and mathematics, and that all students should pass developmental courses in subject areas in which they received deficient scores (BOR, 1989). The courses would not be offered for credit, but all public colleges
would be mandated to provide them to the students who needed them. Remedial education was thus framed not as a failure of individual students, but as a failure of the educational system. “We have a social responsibility to ensure that people who are in a school system that does not prepare them appropriately receive remediation,” said BOR Chancellor Franklyn Jenifer. “The alternative is unacceptable” (Simon, 1989: 24).

The tenor of the conversation on remedial education changed dramatically during the ensuing years. When he toured all 29 public campuses during fall 1993, Chancellor Koplik became convinced that professors were being forced to “dumb down” their courses due to poor student preparation. Some faculty agreed. “Reading skills, writing skills, and general knowledge are really on the decline,” according to a philosophy professor at UMass Dartmouth. “Students are not adequately prepared. Inevitably you end up lowering the level of instruction” (Dembner, 1995a: 1). Carlin quickly made revising remedial education policy a top priority of his chairmanship, and his assessment was blunt. “It’s unfair to students, parents, faculty and taxpayers to admit kids who clearly are not prepared to do the work,” he said (Dembner, 1995b: 46).

The process was accelerated by a two-part series of investigative articles published in The Boston Globe in March 1996 (Dembner, 1996a; 1996b). Remedial students at public colleges were depicted as struggling with basic concepts such as decimals and percentages, topic sentences, and the correct use of conjunctions. The percentage of students who needed remediation had risen dramatically since 1987, rising as high as 62% at Fitchburg State College by fall 1994. Even at UMass Amherst, the system’s flagship, 17.5% of incoming students in fall 1994 were found to need at least one course in remedial math. Koplik called providing remedial education at four-year colleges “a gross mismatch of resources” and said that the board intended to eliminate remedial education at four-year colleges by fall 1998 (Dembner, 1996a: 26). The resource issues became salient in justifying the removal of remedial courses. “If we’re able to nail down the total cost of remedial work – direct and indirect – and channel it into the main missions of our four-year campuses, the impact would be significant,” Carlin said.

The day after the Globe series was completed – at a meeting where members intended only to discuss the remedial education issue – the board voted to limit remedial education to 10% of the freshman class at four-year colleges by September 1997. This limit would be cut to 5% by September 1998. The academic affairs committee had voted the previous week to table the issue, but was ultimately overruled after board members read the Globe series. Koplik described the vote as necessary to build a reputable system of higher education (Dembner, 1996c: 30).

I don’t think we’re denying anyone an opportunity. We’re channeling a student into what will be a better opportunity. Students needing extensive remediation will be encouraged to apply to community colleges. And in the end, you may not reduce remediation, but you will improve the strength of the system [Emphasis added].

Two council members, Jane Edmonds and the union representative, Edward T. Sullivan, voted against the measure. “We’re solving a problem no one in the damn room can identify,” Sullivan fumed, noting that he had taken remedial courses himself as an adult
Nevertheless, the move earned the council a glowing editorial in The Boston Herald, which hooked onto the system conception promoted by Koplik. “This is a long overdue attempt at a better fit of students and institutions,” they said (Editorial Board, 1996: 24).

It became the job of the board staff to interpret and implement the new policy, which many of the campuses considered virtually unworkable. The board staff tended to agree, according to the associate director of academic policy, Aundrea Kelley.

Q. So you were definitely here when remedial ed. was passed?
A. Oh, God, it was a nightmare.
Q. Why?
A. First of all, it was a nightmare because it’s a perfect example of how headlines and news articles can be used to rush an issue to the top of the policy agenda and force a response without necessarily any reasoned rationale for the shape of the response. You’ve just got to get something out there to satisfy [The Boston Globe]... That caused a lot of turmoil on the campuses once again, just after standards had been implemented, by the way. So it was, “OK, they have these high standards but now look at these students! 35, 40, 50%, they’re all requiring this remedial education.” So there was a rush.

In addition, the staff themselves often disagreed with the policy in principle. “I think policy got made by Carlin deciding what he wanted to have happen. And then it was up to the staff to figure out how you develop policy to support that action that’s already been taken,” according to associate vice chancellor Lynette Robinson-Weening. “[The staff] thought that the remedial education policy was ridiculous.”

Board staff worked to find a way to implement the remedial education policy without forcing large numbers of students to lose their admission to a four-year college. This largely took the form of encouraging campuses to develop innovative programs to reduce the number of students taking regular remedial education courses during the normal school year. Intensive summer programs (dubbed “remedial boot camps” by local media) were developed by state and community colleges located in the same area. Community college faculty were sent to four-year campuses to offer remedial courses, so that these students would be counted as community college students. A number of students went for tutoring to private providers as well. The policy “is kind of a Full Employment Act for Sylvan Learning Centers and the community colleges,” according to Bridgewater State College president Adrian Tinsley.

In May 1997, Carlin moved the debate to the next level, beginning an effort to get the state’s high schools to pay for the remedial education needs of their recently graduated students. “We’re tired of doing the high schools’ work for them,” Carlin said. “The taxpayers should not pay twice – first for the high schools and then for students to learn at the four-year colleges what they should have learned in high school” (Dembner, 1997: A1). Carlin was responding to the first College-to-School Report, a BHE analysis of the performance of state high school students at public colleges, including the percentage of students who enrolled in remedial courses (BHE, 1997). The Boston Herald quickly issued an editorial supporting the idea. School superintendents, in turn, angrily tried to focus the issue back on the college system. “The colleges are intimately
involved in the process of admitting these students,” said one superintendent. “They accepted a lot of students to keep their enrollments high.” Ultimately, legislation was filed in the House of Representatives, which quietly killed it in committee.

In the intervening months, UMass had decided to oppose the new remedial policy altogether. They found the policy not only unworkable but also unethical, according to UMass associate vice president Daphne Layton.

Our main issue with the remedial ed. policy was that the kind of assumptions on which it was founded, that were articulated both by Jim Carlin and by Stan Koplik, we thought were very flawed and unfair and very simplistic. One was that these are students who don’t belong on four-year campuses basically... all of our experience suggests that these students do fine. They belong here and we can take care of their needs perfectly well. And importantly, the vast majority were admitted through regular admissions. They were not special admits.

In September 1996, the UMass provosts appointed a task force to examine the remedial education issue. Their report, issued in April 1997, reaffirmed the current policy of offering remedial education to all admitted students who needed it, in direct contradiction to BHE policy (UMass Task Force, 1997). In May, the President’s Office announced that it would take no steps to implement the remedial education policy, arguing that forcing students to go to community colleges would simply increase the dropout rate and reduce minority enrollment. Koplik responded angrily that UMass simply didn’t want to give up the revenue associated with remedial courses. “Remedial is all about money,” he said. “Because campuses keep the student fees they collect, there is a very strong urge to keep as many chairs filled as they can, and if it takes remedial courses to do that, they want to keep offering them.” In August 1997, UMass president Bulger wrote to Carlin to inform him that the system would be out of compliance with the policy. Although he claimed to be open to collaborating on future policy and on assessment issues, Bulger made no promise of ever being in compliance with the policy as it stood.

The other campuses, who did not have the statutory or political authority accorded to the university, sought other ways to subvert the new policy. In the beginning, some campuses claimed not to have any remedial courses at all, by offering courses in English and mathematics for credit that taught subjects the board staff designated as remedial. Board staff, dubious of these claims, began cross-checking the data provided to them with course catalogs and even syllabi, revealing the true content of courses. Other campuses engaged in supplemental instruction, where students would be enrolled in college-level courses, but would also receive remedial education during extra sessions each week. Finally, campuses began sending students to community colleges to take remedial courses, while allowing them to remain enrolled at the four-year college, which was not permitted by board policy but privately supported by Chancellor Koplik. Still, however, there was almost no way for the campuses to meet the 5% cap without turning away students who had already been admitted. Vice Chancellor Jack Warner acknowledged that he often helped campuses find ways around the policy.

I often worked with campuses, quite frankly, on ways to allow them to deliver the instruction that students needed and still comply with the policy. So, for example,
I was able to encourage some campuses, for students who needed writing skills, to offer five contact hours in special sections that would give them more time to develop their writing skills, but they were for all ostensible purposes in a freshman composition course. You simply added the dimension of time so that it was not counted as a remedial section.

Warner, in the meantime, had begun working behind the scenes to find a compromise solution to the UMass conflict. At a June 1997 meeting between BHE and UMass representatives, he suggested that he would support revising the policy by capping students needing two or more remedial courses to one percent of incoming freshmen, but eliminating the other caps. In a letter from UMass academic vice president Selma Botman, this was called “a big improvement over current policy” but still problematic. What would happen, she asked, to students who had been admitted to the university and then found to require remedial work in more than one area? What about educationally disadvantaged students who were enrolled in noncredit pre-college programs? There were a number of issues that needed to be answered.

Board staff also worked on developing entry assessment mechanisms that were common to all campuses in the system, to ensure that the tests were fair and that data would be comparable. Previously, each campus used its own homegrown test, with its own standards for placement. As a result, there were wide variations in remedial course placement that were independent of student preparation. Identical students could be placed in remedial courses on one campus and college-level courses on another campus. In September 1998, when the 5% cap was to be implemented, the board issued a new policy mandating entry assessment tests in reading, writing, and mathematics, and those that failed would be forced to take remedial courses. Students with SAT verbal scores over 600 would be exempted from the reading and writing exams, while students with an SAT verbal score below 450 would automatically be required to pass the placement exams before they could be admitted to a four-year campus. This requirement in particular served to raise the stakes at a time where there was a consensus that the policy was already unworkable.

Table 1. Persistence of Students Enrolled in Remedial Education Courses in Public Higher Education, Massachusetts High School Class of 1996.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full-Time Students in Fall 1996</th>
<th>Persistence Rate for Students Needing No Remediation</th>
<th>Persistence Rate for Students Needing One Remedial Course</th>
<th>Persistence Rate for Students Needing Two Remedial Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UMass</td>
<td>4,517</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State College</td>
<td>4,282</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>4,691</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Board of Higher Education.
By February 1999, Koplik was finally convinced that the remedial education policy had to be changed. Board staff had discovered research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education on the performance of students enrolled in remedial courses (Adelman, 1999). It found that students who needed remediation in reading comprehension, or in two or more subject areas, were far less likely to graduate than students who needed only one course. Similar data from the Massachusetts system was analyzed and is reported in Table 1. Students from the high school class of 1996 who needed two or more remedial courses were about thirteen percentage points less likely to persist than students needing no remediation. But at the community colleges, students needing extensive remediation were only slightly less likely to persist. This analysis provided a way to define which students were “academic problems” and which students were not. Students needing multiple remedial courses were interpreted as demonstrably less likely to graduate directly from a four-year college, yet nearly as likely to persist at the community college level. Thus, the interpretation was that from an educational standpoint, community colleges did a better job at retaining students with multiple remedial needs than the four-year campuses did. Yet for students needing only one remedial course, the persistence rates were virtually identical.

Basing the policy on actual research on student performance was both credible and attractive to board staff. There was a serious political problem, however: How can the board back away from its existing remedial policy without seeming like they were retreating from standards? The solution came from the policy itself, which had been vague and easy to misconstrue from the very beginning, according to Chancellor Judith I. Gill.

When the policy was first developed and showed to Jim [Carlin] it basically eliminated remedial education from four-year institutions. We then had committee hearings, meetings with the presidents, and the motion was rewritten.... I had one understanding of what I was doing [writing the policy] and Jim had another. In the discussion at the board meeting, the arguments were never put forward to make it clear to anyone that people could be thinking two different things.... Stan had to call all of the board members throughout the day to talk to them about what they believed they had voted on.

Thus, while the campuses had one interpretation of the policy, based on what Gill had written, board members had adopted Carlin’s interpretation that a student requiring any remedial education would fall under the cap. But the text of the policy, limiting “remedial education” to 5% of students by fall 1998, did not change. This allowed the board staff to define what a remedial student was, without altering the text of the original policy. In February 1999, Koplik suggested to Carlin that the board define a remedial student as someone requiring two or more remedial courses. He also wanted to eliminate the requirement for pre-admission testing for students with SAT verbal scores below 450, because further research had shown that students with those scores did not persist significantly less than students with higher scores. Because so few students required two or more remedial courses – approximately 2% at UMass and 4% at the state colleges – accepting the new definition would essentially define the problem out of existence.
The result was a rather unusual board meeting where the members discussed the redefinition of remedial students, according to one witness.

Sitting back as a student and watching what was taking place, you could see that the policy that had been adopted was unworkable and that had backed the board somewhat into a corner. Campuses were screaming and yelling. There was no way they were going to stick to the 5% cap because 35% of students need at least one course, nationally and everywhere else... So there was a board meeting and the issue was brought up. “We’ve found this research.” And there clearly had been some calls made the night before. I can remember [a board member] looking down sheepishly and saying, “Well, we never intended that a student not be able to get remediation if they needed just one course. We never really intended that.”

To save the board from embarrassment – and because it was not clear that it was required – there was no vote on the policy revision. Instead, Chancellor Koplik issued a memo under his own authority in July 1999, allowing campuses to use the new definition for the coming fall semester.

The final move by the board staff was a quiet one. The *College-to-School Report*, which provided data on remedial education and student progress to the state’s high schools, was issued annually with intense interest on behalf of the media. The result was a high-profile article each year in the local press about the poor performance of the state’s high schools at public colleges that refocused attention on remedial education. Now that the problem had been reframed, the increased attention was no longer desirable. According to one board staff member, “When the remedial policy adopted a new definition of remedial student, which we hadn’t defined before, we also stopped collecting and reporting on remediation in the *College-to-School Report* for four-year campuses... So the problem was defined out of existence.” Today there is no public source of data on remediation in Massachusetts public higher education.

Chancellor Koplik nevertheless continued to inveigh against remedial education in the state and national context. In May 1999, Koplik was the keynote speaker at a conference of remediation hosted by the New England affiliation of the National Association of Scholars, a conservative faculty group (Koplik, 1999a). He argued that remedial education creates a poor fit between students and institutions, and reduces the academic “peer effect” of students on other students. Many courses, he said, are remedial in truth but college-level on paper. “A review of the college curriculum today would severely test our rhetoric about high-quality, rigor and scholarship,” he added. “What we often have is a hodge-podge to falsely boost student self-esteem” (Koplik, 1999a: 4).

Because of their redefinition of the remedial student, state college presidents believe that the ultimate impact of the policy on student enrollment was negligible. The same is true for UMass, according to Daphne Layton. “I can’t speak for the state colleges, but on remedial ed., very little has changed in the university as a result of this policy.” As a policy process, remedial education is viewed as somewhat of a debacle.

That policy was a good example, and this happened to some extent with admissions and it certainly happened with a number of others, a common
phenomenon with many of Jim Carlin’s “shoot first, ask questions later” policies, which was that the policy got enacted with very little advanced discussion and proved quite quickly to be unworkable in its current form, and therefore required the board, and particularly the staff, to go through contortions to rewrite it or rephrase it or revise it in ways that could make sense. So there’s been this process of, it’s out there, and then there’s a steady retreat over time from what is originally said into something more workable.

Yet there is also a widespread perception that the remedial education policy helped to develop the system and thus improved the state’s reputation with the public and the media. Despite the implementation problems, it is believed that it would now be difficult to write an investigative piece undercutting the state colleges like The Boston Globe did in 1996. “You couldn’t. It really helped us,” according to William O’Neil, the executive director of the State College Council of Presidents. “There were good things that spun off from it too. It defined the missions of the community colleges somewhat along the lines of helping people who need two or more [remedial courses], who have a real academic problem.... People are finally beginning to judge our colleges more fairly.”

Aundrea Kelley saw the policy acting as leverage to force the campuses to be less complacent, which in turn forced them to consider their appropriate place with in the public system of higher education.

I think the remedial cap was an extra incentive for campuses to try harder to get better students. I think that without that, maybe the shift into a higher profile of student would have been a bit slower and there would have been even more demands [for exemptions] from the special admissions cap. But I think that placing the remedial cap on campuses led to a reevaluation of what we are as institutions. What is our mission and our role? So I think some of that did take place and did seep onto the campus level.

Thus, although many were uniformly negative about the policy – especially state college faculty – all of the other informants were conflicted about its impact. It was widely seen as poor policymaking, and yet also recognized as a key element of the board’s efforts to raise the profile and credibility of the system. Indeed, most informants seemed pleased with the current situation, where there was a formal policy on the books that provided credibility with the governor and the legislature, but that in reality campuses had nearly unlimited discretion to handle the issue as they saw fit.

Discussion

To an extent, previous scholars who have investigated remedial education have been duped, led to believe that real change has occurred when, in fact, very little has changed in substance. Thus, this case study is consistent with the old institutionalism, which had an expose tradition that showed how the initial goals of organizations adapted over time (Selznick, 1949; 1957; Clark, 1970). This drift in organizational goals was often caused by the cooptation of the organization by local interests and powerful agents within the system. In this case, board staff acted strategically to manipulate the policy
implementation process in a way that was consonant with their own values and goals, but simultaneously maintained support from policymakers and the legitimacy gained when the policy was enacted.

Yet this study also draws concepts from the new institutionalism developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer, 1983). Specifically, the new institutionalism provides an explanation for why formal policies continue to persist even when they have been substantively eviscerated. Formal policy provides a signal to stakeholders that higher education shares their values, namely to find a way to efficiently and effectively sort students into their proper places in the public higher education system. The existence of remedial education students studying the basics of grammar and arithmetic in ostensibly selective colleges causes the public to seriously question their role and mission (Dembner, 1996a; 1996b). Establishing a policy that reflects a more appropriate conception of role and mission was a key tool in helping to restore institutional legitimacy. Thus, the policy myth that is being created serves a real and useful function with key constituents of the higher education system.

We also see the board staff engaging in decoupling behavior. Decoupling is a process by which institutions seek to protect their core processes from evaluation in order to preserve their legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Processes that are not evaluated rigorously, or that are evaluated in a vague or ceremonial manner, eventually take on a “taken for granted” quality that helps ensure their survival. In this case, we can see that board staff decoupled remedial education from performance assessment by redefining who a remedial student was, and then by removing remedial education data from its annual report to the state’s high schools. The board can thus make a credible claim that the number of remedial students has been reduced, while simultaneously ensuring that the media and lawmakers are unable to gather data that would undermine that claim. In this way the staff was able to define a potentially persistent problem out of existence.

Like many studies that take a neo-institutional approach to organizations, this research combines elements of both the old and the new institutionalism. The sine qua non of the neoinstitutional approach, however, is that there are agents who actively engage and help to transform institutions. In the new institutionalism, people within organizations are often characterized as pawns of institutional forces beyond their control, making change seem adaptive and inevitable. In this case, however, we can clearly see that board members, board staff, and the media were active and conscious participants in the policy development and implementation process. A persistent belief among policymakers and board staff that remedial education was a problem that needed to be addressed only became salient once it was matched with a leader who had the ability to harness the political resources necessary to get the policy passed.

That kind of charismatic leadership is hardly inevitable, but it is also not omnipotent. Political resources and leadership, when matched with entrenched, institutionalized ideas about mission differentiation and academic stratification, were a powerful combination for organizational change. But other institutionalized values were in play here as well, and board staff served as their agents. The staff was unhappy with the direction of remedial education policy in general, but were unable to alter it. When Carlin wanted to extend the policy by charging high schools for the remedial work required by their graduates, however, the staff helped to ensure that the proposal went nowhere.
Their real power came in the implementation process. Staff worked with campuses to provide ways to make end-runs around the policy by providing supplemental instruction in regular introductory courses, and by having community college faculty teach courses on four-year campuses. But the staff remained unhappy with the policy, because it was in contradiction to a strong tradition within public higher education that supported educating underprepared students. The senior staff, all of whom held the Ph.D. in higher education administration, also believed that academic research should influence rational policy development. Thus, when research from the U.S. Department of Education was discovered that supported redefining the policy, this had a great deal of legitimacy and provided leverage to change the policy.

As a result, in the degree to which this policy represented organizational change, that change came not from the inevitable adaptation to powerful institutions in the environment, but from the conflict of multiple institutions that compete for influence in the higher education domain. These multiple institutions all have agents within the domain that help to carry these institutionalized values. But we must also recognize that these institutionalized values are in conflict even within the agents themselves, who must find ways to resolve these sometimes contradictory positions in an integrated way. This is especially true for people in hybrid organizations like boards of higher education, where the staff are trained in academic organizations with academic values, but have professional positions in political organizations with an entirely different set of values that they must also internalize. Managing the conflicts among these values thus becomes one of the major tensions in policy development for public higher education.
References


