

Exploring the Changing Academic Profession: An Ecology of Academic Labor

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Abstract: *This scholarly paper introduces a theoretical framework that addresses the unbundling of the faculty role. Using organizational ecology and resource dependency, this framework incorporates the interdependencies among the environment, the institution, and the worker populations within institutions to capture the influence of resource constraints on the distribution of academic workers. Building on the literature surrounding the academic profession, this conceptual framework renews understandings of the nested nature of the faculty and how that positioning influences academic hiring decisions. This reconceptualization has implications for future research and practice about academic work and faculty careers.*

Keywords: faculty, organizational ecology, academic hiring

Faculty members are responsible for the creation and distribution of knowledge, through research, teaching, and service, and serve many stakeholders including students, the academic community, and society at large. Given these roles, faculty members are central (or should be) to the missions and work of colleges and universities (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Metzger, 1973). Schuster (2011) stated that “the extent to which higher education is effective (or not) in accomplishing its missions turn

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[especially] on the quality of the faculty” (pp. 4-5). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework for understanding academic hiring decisions considering the current climate of higher education and academic workforce trends.

The professoriate is perpetually influenced by the current postsecondary climate. Calls for greater efficiency abound in colleges and universities across the country and administrators and academics seek new ways to do more with less, while simultaneously maintaining high quality educational services and extending access (Doyle & Delaney, 2009; Kezar et al., 2019; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). This is a challenging endeavor given that universities are not the nimblest organizations (Meyer et al., 2007). However, these pressures to cut costs and change the way institutions function have long-term implications for the future of higher education in terms of day-to-day operations, academic outcomes, and those who work to carry out the missions of colleges and universities, including academics.

Institutions have attempted to increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness by breaking down what was once the all-encompassing role of professors into smaller parts that are carried out by several employees – unbundling the faculty role (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). In the past few decades, this unbundling process has expanded variation across the professoriate, adding another complicating factor – appointment type (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006).

Often, these large shifts in the academic workforce are considered foregone conclusions – due to the fiscal constraints of higher education institutions. Consequently, reliance on non-tenure track faculty members and the growth of other academic professionals is positioned as an institutional issue – an organizational behavior that is necessary rather than deliberate (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg, 2011; Gappa & Leslie, 1993). This argument centers on the idea that the increase in non-tenure track appointments and unbundling of the faculty role is an indirect consequence of larger budgetary decision-making.

In light of this labor trend, there have been calls for new models of academic work that promote equitable treatment for faculty members and the support the numerous responsibilities of the academic workforce. For example, Holcombe and Kezar (2017) explored the possibilities and

challenges of developing new mental models about the future of the professoriate among various higher education stakeholders. However, to reconceptualize the academy in this way necessitates greater understanding of the factors that influence the decision-making processes in faculty hiring decisions, including fiscal resources, which facilitate the departure away from the use of tenure-track appointments and movement towards non-tenure track appointments and other academic professionals.

To that end, in this article, I introduce a conceptual framework informed by three theoretical components, to guide our thinking about faculty hiring decisions. Hiring decisions are centered here because I argue that it is the mechanism by which change occurs across the academic profession. Prior work on academic hiring focused on its exclusionary nature (Bailyn, 2003; Gregory, 2001; Ware, 2000), efforts to diversify the professoriate (Kayes, 2006; Smith, 2004), and descriptions and perceptions of the academic workforce (Kezar & Gehrke, 2014). In contrast to those approaches, the framework presented here addresses the influence of environmental resources on institutions and the implications of fiscal constraints on the distribution of workers within those institutions. Guided by resource dependency, microfoundations, and organizational ecology, this framework strengthens our considerations of the multi-level interdependencies within and across the environment, the institution, and those who work within the institution, emphasizing how institutional resources can diminish or increase certain categories of workers within higher education institutions.

This framework leverages an ecological systems approach to gain new insights about faculty hiring processes and, consequently, the changing academic profession. Organizational ecology accounts for the “interdependence of organizational structure, technologies used in organizations, and the collective and individual attributes of the people who inhabit the organizations” in the context of their larger environments and the availability of resources (Bidwell & Kasarda, 1998, p. 85). Drawing on this ecological theory of organizational structuring, as well as resource dependence theory and the sociological concept of microfoundations, this approach addresses the compounded nature of the individual, institutional, and environmental aspects of academic hiring decisions. This framework builds on the scholarship surrounding the growth of non-tenure track appointments and the unbundling of the

faculty role to better understand the contributing factors that influence decisions around appointment type in faculty hiring decisions.

Literature Review

The academic profession is a diverse occupation, the scope of which cannot easily be condensed given the wide differentiation within and across the academic workforce. The title of “faculty member” applies to a part-time community college instructor who teaches five courses every semester as well as a research university professor who rarely teaches, spending most of their time managing a research lab. Despite the range of those considered faculty members, the centrality of their role for institutions of higher education cannot be ignored as Gappa et al. (2007) described:

The faculty in American colleges and universities have always been the heart of the institutions where they work, the intellectual capital that ensure those institutions’ excellence. The quality of the faculty relates directly to the effectiveness of a college or a university in facilitating students’ learning, creating new knowledge, and linking research and practice in ways that benefit society. (p.xi)

The importance of academics within higher education cannot be understated; however, the movement away from the tenured and tenure-track workforce may change the purpose of the professoriate across the higher education landscape.

Unbundling the Faculty Role

One of the more recent changes to the academic profession is the unbundling of the faculty role. The unbundling process is not a new concept; however, its effects have become more pronounced given that unbundling is often discussed in tandem with institutions’ more pronounced reliance on non-tenure track faculty members. The unbundling process itself refers to the disaggregation of academic work into distinct parts (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). Previously, academic work was primarily the responsibility of tenure track faculty members, or the “prototypical scholar” (Boyer, 1990).

However, the unbundling process redistributes a portion of that work to other university personnel or to services external to the university (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). For example, in the past decade, academic advisors in some colleges and departments have adopted advising responsibilities in addition to and sometimes in place of faculty members. In this way, unbundling is an outsourcing of tasks and responsibilities away from tenure track professors towards non-tenure track faculty and other academic professionals.

Smith (2008) suggested that there are three types of unbundling—professional, instructional, and institutional. The most relevant for this project are professional and instructional unbundling, which refer to the disaggregation of professionals' (i.e. faculty members) responsibilities and the splitting up of instruction-related activities. The unbundling of both instruction and faculty members' responsibilities creates a much larger academic workforce when considering curriculum developers, instructional designers, graduate assistants, and those who work in sponsored programs offices among those responsible for the academic work of colleges and universities (Macfarlane, 2011).

In this era of accountability and doing more with less, unbundling the faculty role is one option institutions pursue to offset the costs of tenured faculty lines (Doyle & Delaney, 2009; Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). In part, this shift in thinking is related to institutional efficiency and external resources, but it is also related to the split between research and teaching, especially among professors at research universities and the multiple roles of faculty members. Given the Bayh Dole Act of 1973 and the subsequent commercialization of research, faculty members became "catalysts of industry" through their research and this change led to the prioritization of research for many professors and exacerbated the divide between teaching and research (Slaughter, 1985; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

The resulting prioritization of faculty research contributed to a portion of the instructional unbundling and the surge of academic professionals who assist in non-research responsibilities such as advising and creating content for courses. Research and teaching now seem to be opposing tasks. Whereas, in most tenure track faculty roles the two tasks were viewed as complimentary, they are now increasingly viewed as separate and competing responsibilities (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). This division

between teaching-focused non-tenure track faculty and their more research-focused tenure track and tenured colleagues persists (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). This is partially due to the revenue-generating opportunities of research (i.e. patents, licensing, research grants, etc.) compared to teaching which is a more local endeavor aimed towards educating undergraduate and graduate students (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Gehrke and Kezar (2015), in their literature review of faculty unbundling, chronicle how the unbundling and rebundling of the faculty role has occurred since the inception of American higher education in various forms. Ideally, the unbundling process, with the assistance of other academic professionals, would free up faculty members to do what they are best at and create a more efficient means of carrying out academic work (Gehrke & Kezar, 2015). In practice, though, duplication of work may add to the resource needs of an institution and exacerbating its financial constraints. The potential fiscal limitations of unbundling are concerning, especially when considering other preexisting budgetary challenges that hinder faculty members from fully enacting their research, teaching, and service roles (Riffe, 2018; Rosinger et al., 2016; Volk et al., 2005).

Appointment Type

Often, the perception of a faculty member is one who is either tenured or on the tenure-track, conducts research, teaches classes, and contributes to the day-to-day operations of the institution through service responsibilities. However, in the past few decades, this “typical” faculty member is no longer representative of the professoriate at large. Kezar and Sam (2010b, 2010c) documented the rise of the new faculty majority, which consists of a larger proportion of non-tenure track faculty members than tenure track and tenured faculty members. These non-tenure track appointments are wide-ranging, including instructors and lecturer positions, adjunct (part-time) positions, and clinical faculty to name a few of the more common positions (Kezar & Sam, 2010b, 2010c).

This shift toward more non-tenure track appointments may be the most prominent feature of unbundling across colleges and universities and has been well-documented in recent higher education research. For example,

Hearn et al. (2012) highlighted the growth of non-tenure track appointments across private non-profit and for-profit institutions in their longitudinal study (1988-2008). In addition, Kezar and Maxey (2012) outlined the ways that the distribution of the professoriate by appointment type has changed across different institutional types (i.e., regional comprehensive university, liberal arts colleges, research universities). Other studies address the experiences and satisfaction of non-tenure track faculty and the consequences of using a more casual labor force on student outcomes such as college completion and retention (e.g., Hearn et al., 2017; Kezar, 2013b). As Gappa et al. (2007) stated, “Some institutions have shifted the pattern of appointment types without carefully considering the long-term impact on faculty members and the academic workplace” (p. 15). Likewise, Kezar and Sam (2010b; 2010c) documented the rise of the new faculty majority, which consists of a larger proportion of non-tenure track faculty members than tenure track and tenured faculty members. In this way, the shift toward more non-tenure track appointments may be the most prominent feature of unbundling across colleges and universities.

Colby and Fowler (2020) described the composition of the professoriate in terms of appointment type, stating that the academic workforce consisted of 51.6% part-time faculty, 17.6% full-time non-tenure-track, 8.9% full-time tenure track faculty, and 21.9% full-time tenured faculty. This shift away from tenure-line appointments and towards more non-tenure track appointments has been well-documented in recent higher education research. For example, Hearn et al. (2012) highlighted the growth of non-tenure track appointments across private non-profit and for-profit institutions in their longitudinal study (1988-2008). In addition, Kezar and Maxey (2012) outlined the ways that the distribution of the professoriate by appointment type has changed across different institutional types (i.e. regional comprehensive university, liberal arts colleges, research universities). Other studies around the contingent movement address the experiences and satisfaction of non-tenure track employees and the consequences of using a more casual labor force on student outcomes such as college completion and retention (e.g., Hearn et al., 2017; Kezar, 2013b).

Non-tenure track appointments are called by many different titles including instructors, lecturers, adjuncts, part-time faculty, and clinical faculty (Kezar & Sam, 2010b, 2010c). While there has always been a

considerable portion of non-tenure track faculty members since the beginning of higher education in the United States (Cain, 2015), many argue that this more recent shift is significant because of its rapid pace. However, the amount of contingent faculty has significantly changed in recent decades, resulting in 69.2% of faculty members in non-tenure track positions as of 2020 according to IPEDS (Colby & Fowler, 2020). Schuster and Finkelstein (2006) argued that the academic profession has always been changing and evolving; however, this shift from primarily tenured appointment types to more precarious appointment types is one that happened quickly and may be a more permanent change overall.

This shift from tenured positions to contingent appointment types has taken place throughout the academy, but the extent to which this shift permeates different institution types and academic disciplines is not uniform. Schuster and Finkelstein (2006) as well as Kezar and Maxey (2012) explored the changing composition of the faculty. In both cases, the authors found that non-tenure track positions are most common at broad access institutions. In addition to this differentiation by institutional type, there are also differences in the number of contingent faculty positions by academic discipline given differences in content, courses offered, and disciplinary norms (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

The institutions and academic disciplines that employ more part-time adjunct instructors have greater resource needs than those who do not and therefore, rely on the costs saved by employing temporary faculty to address their financial constraints (Doyle & Delaney, 2009; Marginson, 2000). The pervasive resource constraints of colleges and universities, especially at broad access institutions and within traditionally low-resourced academic disciplines lend themselves to greater use of non-tenure track faculty appointments and unbundling the faculty role (Kezar & Maxey, 2012; Rosinger et al., 2016). The institutions and academic disciplines that employ more part-time adjunct instructors have greater resource needs than those who do not and, therefore, rely on the costs saved by employing temporary faculty to address their financial constraints that exist in other areas (Doyle & Delaney, 2009; Marginson, 2000). Often times, higher education research suggests that the use of non-tenure track faculty is not a conscientious decision on the part of administrators, deans, and faculty members (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg, 2011). Instead, researchers argue that the use of this precarious labor is the consequence of other issues within

institutions such as changes in enrollment numbers, the protection of tenured faculty, and the challenges of graduate education programs (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Cross & Goldenberg, 2011).

In the wake of this fast-paced growth, some argue that decisions surrounding contingent faculty members, their working conditions, and their role within the larger academy were made quickly out of necessity rather than deliberately (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001; Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Kezar & Sam, 2010b, 2010c; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). For this reason, many non-tenure track faculty members struggle with negative work environments, plagued by isolation given their lack of participation in governance and not fully occupying the role of their tenured and tenure track colleagues (Bland et al., 2006; Kezar & Sam, 2013). These negative consequences, though, do not necessarily stem from individual contingent faculty members since they are typically very committed to instruction and contribute to positive gains in student success in the classroom. In contrast, the negative outcomes associated with non-tenure track faculty point to the lack of sustainable and inclusive policies within institutions that allow for contingent faculty members to thrive in their positions (Gappa et al., 2007; Kezar & Sam, 2013).

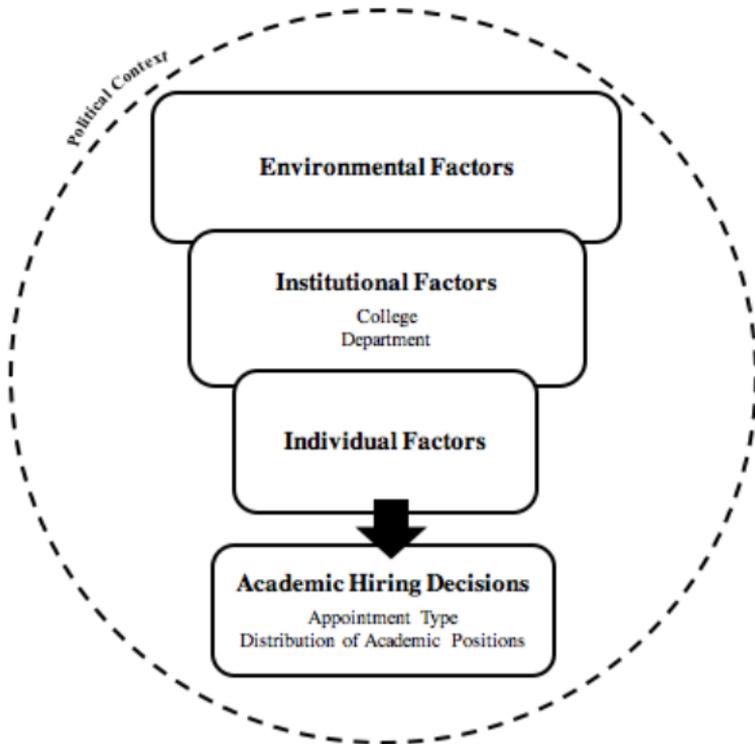
This discussion of previous literature highlights how the academic profession has changed in recent years. These significant shifts to the professoriate, including the unbundling of the faculty role and the growth of non-tenure track appointments, necessitates a renewed conceptualization of academic hiring practices that addresses the current context of academic work, specifically, and higher education more broadly.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented here, builds on previous scholarship on the changing academic profession and the unbundling of the faculty role, incorporating the contributing factors involved in academic hiring decisions which, in turn, perpetuates the ever-changing profession towards a more varied, disaggregated, and redistributed workforce. Given the diverse and nested nature of the professoriate, a conceptual model is needed that emphasizes the interdependence of the external environment, organizations, and the populations of workers

within them. To that end, this conceptual framework (Figure 1) relies primarily on the theory of organizational ecology and incorporates resource dependence theory and the sociological concept of microfoundations.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



The rapid growth of contingent academic appointments across higher education necessitates a systems perspective. The fact that this trend is widespread across institutions suggests that the factors that influence faculty hiring decisions are not only a product of intra-organizational factors, rather they are the products of interactions among three levels – environment, institution, and individuals. The combination of these three

theoretical concepts allows for the conceptualization of the broader system in which faculty hiring occurs, especially when universities are theoretically conceptualized as organizations open to external pressures.

This framework situates academic hiring decisions as strategic opportunities to mitigate compromised resource flows, especially those associated with decreased funding for higher education (Doyle & Delaney, 2009). In this way, faculty hiring decisions and the use of varied faculty appointment types seems to be the result of interdependencies among environments, organizations, and intra-organizational individuals. First, organizational ecology directly addresses that interdependency and how changes in environmental resources influence how organizations function, as well as the growth and reduction of intra-organizational populations (i.e. part-time adjuncts, full-time lecturers, non-tenure track faculty members, and tenure track and tenured faculty members; Bidwell & Kasarda, 1985). Second, resource dependence theory emphasizes the need to reduce organizational uncertainty by broadening the number of resource flows to ensure survival (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Finally, the concept of microfoundations highlights the importance and value of individual actors and their everyday actions as drivers of gradual organizational change (Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

Guided by organizational ecology, resource dependence theory, and microfoundations, this framework strengthens our considerations of the multi-level interdependences within and across the environment, the institution, and those who work within the institution. This emphasizes how institutional resources can diminish or increase certain categories of workers. Together, these three theories highlight the complexity and nuance involved in academic hiring decisions and the multiple and, at times, competing factors that potentially influence institutions' increased reliance on non-tenure track faculty members in response.

Open Systems

Implicit in this model is the conception of organizations as open systems. Essentially, this study is an extension of questions posed by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), who examined the "intricate problem of how what happens inside the organization is related to market and technical conditions outside the firm" (pp. 5-6). Thinking of colleges and universities as open systems presumes that organizations break into

smaller, interconnected parts as they grow, resulting in a more porous boundary between the institution and its environment. This permeable barrier (represented by the dashed lines in Figure 1) makes the organization vulnerable, requiring adaptation to reduce uncertainty (Baron, 1984; Birnbaum, 1988; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Scott & Davis, 2007). Based on this premise, universities do not operate in a vacuum, and are subject to environmental pressures that necessitate a response. These adaptive behaviors take different forms. Most salient for this project, the open systems perspective serves as a foundation for thinking about how constraints and uncertainty that stem from universities' environments prompt adaptation, which creates shifts among the distribution of workers within them.

To address the different facets of this conceptual model, each of the theories and concepts that inform this approach, and their relevance for addressing academic hiring decisions are discussed below.

Organizational Ecology

Charles E. Bidwell and John D. Kasarda (1985) developed an ecological theory of organizational structuring that deals directly with organizational interdependence. Underutilized in higher education research, Bidwell and Kasarda's work grew out of the population ecologists, the formative use of ecology in organizational theory. Hannan and Freeman (1977) are well known in this area for examining selection and competition processes among organizations; however, their work focuses primarily on the interplay of organizations and their environments, with little thought given to what that might mean for populations within the institution. To address those concerns, Bidwell and Kasarda (1985) outlined organizational ecology, which better acknowledges interdependency at three levels – environment, organization, and inter-organizational populations. In doing so, the authors bridged the internal/external binary of organizational change processes to holistically address the interplay of influences on institutional decision-making.

In this line of thinking, Bidwell and Kasarda (1985) situate organizations as human ecological communities that house populations within them. Similar to the open systems perspective, organizational ecology also highlights adaptation at every level. Bidwell and Kasarda elaborated on

prior work by human ecologist Amos Hawley (1968) who noted that “the community has an environment, defined as all phenomena external to the community’s populations that potentially or actually affect the form or size of these population and, therefore, the structure and size of the community itself” (p. 330). Organizational ecology also notes the importance of resource flows (i.e. time, human resources, and fiscal resources) from the environment. Changes in those resource flows, in terms of volume or the way they are distributed among populations within the ecological community, have implications for the growth and reduction of populations within the community (Bidwell & Kasarda, 1987).

Under the ecological theory of organizational structuring, Bidwell and Kasarda (1985) acknowledged the potential for shifts in environmental resources and the repercussions of those changes on the populations within that organization. Consequently, this theory addresses how changes in state or institutional budget could hypothetically influence the growth or reduction of university employees (i.e. tenure track professors, tenured professors, full-time instructors, and part-time adjuncts). In this way, organizational ecology accounts for fluctuations of resources including time, finances, labor and the subsequent effects on a populations’ (i.e. different groups of university employees) ability to persist in that environment. Additionally, organizational ecology captures the nested position of academic hiring decisions – situated at the intersection of the broader environmental pressures, institutional climate, and groups of university employees. This process culminates in a reciprocal system made up of the environment, university, and employees, from which resource inputs turn into outputs and a symbiotic relationship ensues through the university and its employees.

Resource Dependence Theory

The second theory that frames this study is resource dependence theory. Resource dependence theory conceptualizes the varied nature of higher education institutions in both form and function and the consequent differences in resource inputs necessary to carry out their missions. Resource dependence theory highlights the relationships between organizations (in this case, colleges and universities) and their sources of their financial, human, and other resources embedded in the context of the organizations’ environmental conditions, allowing for variation of

this framework across institutional types (Froelich, 1999; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These dependencies are primarily represented by the Environmental Factors in Figure 1, which names several factors that exert external pressures on many colleges and universities.

The current environmental conditions, fraught with diminished funds (proportionally) for higher education from the state and federal government and a more neoliberal context overall, emphasize the need for financial flexibility as they seek out new external funds and adapt to fiscal constraints (Baron, 1984; Barringer, 2016; Kezar et al., 2019; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The need to find new funding sources differs across institutional types given the different missions, norms, and needs in terms of financial flexibility (i.e. resource dependencies) across the different sectors of higher education institutions (Barringer, 2013). That is, there are different financial challenges faced by community colleges and regional comprehensive universities than by large public research universities. To that end, distinct institutional types employ different strategies to combat or adapt to these financial constraints and limit the uncertainty surrounding them.

Given these varied resource dependencies, there are differentiated adaptations for workers across institutional types. One way in which institutions may seek to lessen the sting of limited fiscal resources is by increasing the number of contingent faculty appointments. As previously stated, this tactic is undertaken across sectors and institutional types but may be most prominent at broad access institutions (Kezar & Maxey, 2012).

Microfoundations

The previous two theories address institutional behaviors and changes in higher education institutions. In addition, they address college and university responses to environmental pressures, addressing changes in how institutions carry out their missions, evolve over time, and compete for finite resources (i.e. time, money, prestige). In this way, these theories frequently focus almost exclusively on macro-level issues and neglect an emphasis on the individuals whose actions and decisions collectively constitute those organizational behaviors and responses.

Consequently, the incorporation of microfoundations into this framework adds the individual-level component to this approach to understanding academic hiring decisions. The concept of microfoundations theory asserts that since organizations are highly institutionalized (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), the actions of individuals that operate within them contribute to overall organizational behaviors and changes. Exploring the microfoundations of organizations answers calls for more research “on how the local affairs of existing members of a field can both sustain and prompt shifts in practices and conventions” and the need for “more attention to everyday processes” (Powell & Colyvas, 2008, p. 277) within organizations.

For the purposes of this conceptual framework, microfoundations alludes to the individual actions of administrators and faculty members in the academic hiring decisions. It is their actions that collectively alter (over time) the academic workforce within their institutions via their decision-making. By examining what Colyvas and Powell (2006) referred to as the “principles and practices” (p. 310) of an institution, we can better understand the driving forces behind organizational change, in this case, academic hiring practices.

The purpose of this conceptual framework is to theoretically capture the complex nature of university decision-making process, which is positioned at the intersection of three distinct levels – the external environment, the institution, and the employees within the institution—represented by the rounded rectangles within the model. These three interconnected components, consequently, influence the decisions of those who have the ultimate say in academic hiring (e.g. deans, associate deans, provosts) and, ultimately, the distribution of workers and categories of workers (e.g. advisors, faculty development professionals, tenure track professors) across institutions. Within each of these components, several of the most salient issues are listed at each level of the model that contribute to changes in the academic profession. The dashed line surrounding the entire model represents the political context in which this whole process is embedded. It is this political context across states where the external factors – competition, fiscal resources, labor market – originate. Ultimately, this framework serves to guide our thinking about those factors which drive changes to the professoriate and, subsequently, other academic professionals as a result of hiring decisions.

Applications and Future Research

The conceptual framework presented here addresses the complicated context of academic hiring decisions since they can be opportunities to mitigate financial uncertainty by providing flexibility. In institutional climates where it is difficult to easily find additional revenue sources, universities and their administrators may reduce uncertainty through other means, which includes increasing reliance on non-tenure track faculty, spending less for their salaries while still filling courses with quality instructors. This conceptual framework may be most useful for considering academic hiring decisions across universities in that it captures the complexity of those processes, incorporating the three contributing theoretical concepts.

Organizational ecology uniquely addresses how different populations of employees are affected by changing resource inputs into the university and the interdependency inherent in institutional decision-making (Bidwell & Kasarda, 1985). Resource dependence theory emphasizes how universities limit organizational uncertainty by acquiring and maintaining multiple revenue sources to limit its dependency on any one revenue stream (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Lastly, the sociological concept of microfoundations highlights, “how the local affairs of existing members of a field can both sustain and prompt shifts in practices and conventions” (Powell & Colyvas, 2008, p. 277). The inclusion of this theoretical component in this framework emphasized the role of individuals in decision-making and how the university’s identity is created and sustained through the collective actions and decisions of those who work within it.

Combined, these theories guide studying the changing academic profession and the implications of resource constraints on those responsible for instruction. This framework can help us better understand the changing types and growing number of academic workers as well as the ramifications of that growth for how institutions function. Evaluating how compounded contexts influence changes in the academic labor system and its consequences for both universities and the professoriate is a difficult task given its intangibility; however, it is essential that we study this process and its short- and long-term effects for faculty members, administrative employees, undergraduate education, and

institutional outcomes to improve overall organizational effectiveness and educational quality.

If nothing else, this conceptual framework demonstrates how complicated and messy academic hiring decisions can be. This complexity may be lost in the local nature of some of these decisions in academic departments. Therefore, it is important for academic administrators and other leaders of faculty affairs to take a broad, overarching approach to evaluating faculty hiring decisions within their respective institutions. This may facilitate comprehensive professional development or training to establish a more uniform process across colleges, schools, and departments or a more deliberate strategy around the appointment types that would best fill labor shortages while still supporting student success and the work of the institution.

Using this conceptual framework as a lens for future research, there are three distinct areas where this framework may be most beneficial. First, future research could focus on separate parts of the framework. For example, future work could examine the individual-level of faculty hiring and interview faculty members, department heads, and deans – the people directly involved in academic hiring decisions to see what factors influence the decision-making at the individual-level of the framework. Likewise, the environmental and institutional level could be the focus of their own respective studies to obtain a more refined notion of what each level of the framework contributes to hiring decisions. Second, this framework would be a helpful lens to explore how provosts and leaders of academic affairs forecast hiring needs and make decisions about which hiring requests to approve. Third, this conceptual framework provides a foundation for research on changes among not only faculty members but also other categories of university workers beyond the professoriate. Administrative and staff positions also have a layered nature within and among their respective institutions and the larger environment, so this conceptual framework could be extended to address the contexts of other workers within higher education institutions.

The utility of this conceptual framework lies in its ability to contextualize changes in how institutions carry out their missions, evolve over time, and compete for finite resources (i.e. time, money, prestige). By taking into the account how individual, organizational, and environmental changes influence the people carrying out the missions of

universities, we gain a more nuanced understanding of faculty hiring and, more broadly, how institutions function.

Conclusion

This conceptual framework and its emphasis on the external environment, the university, and the individuals that work within the institution refines and highlights the multi-faceted factors involved in academic hiring decisions. The substantial changes within and across the academic labor system are not a foregone conclusion and the increased reliance on non-tenure track faculty is not solely a byproduct of larger budgetary decisions. Rather, the decisions surrounding academic hiring and the changing profession are results from interdependent external, institutional, and individual factors.

The significance of academic hiring decisions cannot be underscored for higher education institutions since those decisions are the mechanism by which the academic workforce is sustained, so it is essential that research continues to address the ways that the professoriate is evolving. Because as the professoriate changes, so do the ways that higher education institutions carry out their work fulfill their missions.

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