

Faculty – Administrator Relationships and Responsive Decisionmaking Systems:  
New Frameworks for Study

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I believe the fundamental work of this time -- work that requires the participation of all of us -- is to discover new ways of being together.

-- Margaret Wheatley (1999) on thinking differently about organizations

## **Introduction**

There has been a dearth of empirical study in the literature on the importance of bridging the cultural divide between faculty and administrators in colleges and universities. The lack of scholarly attention to this topic may indeed stem from the seemingly irreconcilable nature of the relationship between faculty and administrators as partners in institutional leadership. Collegiality is held up as the ideal framework for institutional decisionmaking (Austin, 1990) and is reflected in collaborative activities in the interest of the institutional good. Yet, while the language of higher education and terms like “shared governance,” “collegiality,” and “academic community,” suggest to the external world that collaborative activity is routine and a unitary institutional focus underlies decisionmaking, those of us within academe see a very different picture as reflected in Dill’s (1991, p.380) idea of “the myth of consultation.” Administrators are criticized by faculty as having a penchant for unilateral decisionmaking and for failure to consult faculty on matters affecting faculty work and the learning environment. Faculty are labeled by administrators as disinterested, uninvolved, and recalcitrant when it comes to collaborative institutional activity. The reality is that structural fragmentation of

administrative and academic work results in disparate worlds with different objectives and activities.

Bridging the differences in these considerably different cultures (Austin, 1990; Birnbaum, 1988; Clark, 1987) such that increased benefits are realized from mutual association in the interest of the institution is difficult at the least. The obstacles, rooted in the disparate cultures of the two worlds, are daunting. However, increased scholarly attention to the practicality of facilitating greater cooperative association between faculty and administrators as an important component of redesigned governance systems is critical if fundamental changes in governance systems as advocated by Tierney (1998) and his associates are to be successful. Successful implementation of redesigned systems incorporating elements such as the formation of new partnerships (Braskamp & Wergin, 1998), the institution of comparative information and resource allocation systems (Benjamin & Carol, 1998), and increased focus on service outcomes (Chaffee, 1998) will demand more than reluctant cooperation between faculty and administrators. Toleration of administrative systems by faculty who perceive, or in fact have had, little or no input into the development of such systems may serve short term academic objectives. But the new governance structures being encouraged by scholars demand a commitment from both faculty and administrators to new decisionmaking paradigms calling for shifts in the cultural fabric of higher education to one which not only requires collaboration and cooperation but values its importance in the building of successful academic programs. The new culture will demand greater investment by faculty in the institutional good, and increased investment by administrators in understanding faculty and their work.

This paper explores the importance of the faculty-administrator relationship in the context of institutional governance. A conceptual framework for facilitation of empirical study is proposed. Social systems theory, described in an upcoming section, provides the fundamental basis for this examination. Conceptual approaches will be suggested to guide higher education scholars in more in-depth thinking around the components of the relationship and put words to them that will enable empirical study of the social context of higher education governance processes.

### **The Two Worlds of Academe**

Faculty and administrators in colleges and universities are two key constituents representing vastly different cultural worlds and professional orientations. Yet historically and practically speaking, these two constituents, unlike students, alumni, and donors, and most other constituents, are the primary groups who together are charged with determining institutional direction, resourcing, and making other critical decisions which impact academic programs. The role of administrators is to manage activities or groups of activities, sequence and coordinate their operations, ensure work is properly performed, correct errors, and resolve conflicts which arise in their performance. The whole process of administration is one of decisionmaking according to Westmeyer (1990). While, unlike faculty, administrators are not involved in the core teaching and learning work of the institution, they make possible the institutional autonomy, resources, and order necessary for the conduct of academic work (Downey, 2000).

Weingartner (1996) describes the work of administrators as being outside the institutional mission. Their work is the coordination and management of diverse institutional activities, specifically as they relate to eliciting decisions from others and collaborating with them in good decisionmaking. Their work engages them in the formation of broader policy whereas faculty work is performed in a much narrower context - - that of the discipline or specific academic program.

The framework for faculty work, on the other hand, that is, its standards, funding, and prestige afforded those who achieve success, emanates, with few exceptions, from outside the institution (Weingartner, 1996). While variations have been noted by type of institution, faculty allegiance is first to their discipline, and second to their institution (Austin, 1990; Clark, 1991; O'Brien, 1998). Socialization to the specific norms of the institution or department, is not automatic (Dunn, Rouse & Seff, 1994) thus faculty are often left to their own devices in initiating activities to better integrate them into the institutional community. Preoccupation with achieving success in one's discipline, as manifested in a faculty member's teaching and research, consumes the energy and attention of most, and diverts their attention from departmental and institutional concerns, particularly early in one's career and in the absence of mentorship. Where integration into the academic community does not ultimately produce such commitment, I believe involvement in institutional decisionmaking might continue to remain of secondary concern to faculty; and this would be especially true in research-oriented institutions where faculty are more "cosmopolitan" as opposed to "local" in their orientation.

The culture of the academic profession places much importance on autonomy as a core value (Austin, 1990). Faculty work is often performed in isolation from one's

colleagues. Further, faculty are not required to understand the world of administrators. They chastise institutional leadership for irresponsible proliferation of administrators (Barber, 1993; Rosenzweig, 1994), and commonly consider administrators to be their “nemesis.” Barber believes that faculty have an unrealistic attitude toward authority. while Etzioni (2000) discusses faculty unwillingness to grant authority to administrators as a dilemma of organizational structure. Another obstacle to faculty acceptance of authority is Kerr and Jermier’s (1978) notion of the existence of substitutes for leadership in organizations which neutralize leader influences. The substitutes they describe such as need for independence, professional orientation, and work that is intrinsically satisfying, are just a few examples of characteristics which can be applied to faculty, thereby reinforcing the application of Kerr and Jermier’s substitutability concept.

The negative attitudes faculty often hold toward the authority represented by many administrators would then seem to be a right, if not an obligation, of faculty. The responsibility for bridging these two worlds is primarily shouldered by administrators. It is they who are pressed by the nature of their work roles to ensure that principles of shared governance are observed, i.e. that faculty perspectives are sought as appropriate, that faculty are constructively engaged in decisionmaking processes, and that governance processes are executed in accordance with established shared governance procedures. The literature suggests an unproductive condition which is confirmed by my years of observation in practice. And that is, that faculty and administrators often tolerate each other’s “intrusion” into their work worlds for the sake of the proper conduct of shared governance with little constructive attention to development of a synergistic relationship in the interest of decisionmaking processes over the long term.

I believe that an acceptance of, and maybe even preoccupation with, distinguishing these professional cultures in higher education has unwittingly lead scholars to ignore in depth examination of the potential synergies and opportunities for improved governance systems that can result from their collaboration. Unfortunately, little attention has been devoted in the empirical literature to the connection between the work of administrators and faculty in the context of teaching and learning (Del Favero, forthcoming). This omission may contribute to the prevailing attitude of non-cooperation in many settings. Equally as unfortunate, the creation of mutually beneficial relationships is little considered in practice, although this lack of attention may stem from the insignificance afforded it by scholars. Thus a self-perpetuating cycle reinforcing inattention to the importance of this relationship is thought to exist. The gulf between administrator work and faculty needs and preferences is further reinforced in practice by organizational structures and institutional cultures which reinforce their disparate cultures, dissimilar work, and ultimately frustrate collaboration. Such conditions widen the gulf between faculty and administrators and act to undermine awareness of the inherent potential for a mutually beneficial partnership in governance at all levels of the institution.

### **Governance and Faculty-Administrator Relationships**

Shared governance as a philosophy undergirding decisionmaking in higher education establishes both faculty and administrators as essential participants in the governance process. Each acts as a check and balance mechanism (Westmeyer, 1990) by which sources of power can be counterbalanced or kept in check by the other source of

power. In this way better decisions result. The participation of different constituencies also can ensure the acceptability of decisions according to Weingartner (1996).

Tierney (2000) has urged that institutions begin to direct more attention to the internal dynamic of governance processes as opposed to focusing all our efforts on meeting external demands for change. The key to meeting the challenges of the new century are directly related to how decisionmakers coexist with one another he believes. Similarly, Weingartner (1996) calls attention to people-to-people relationships as important to the quality of decisionmaking in colleges and universities. The character of such relationships is demonstrated in social interactions. Person-to-person interactions over time can offer importance clues as to the character of the relationship, that is, whether it is collegial and productive, or destructive and works to frustrate progress toward institutional goals. These views suggests to me that more intense study of how decisionmakers interact and make meaning within the organization is not only relevant but imperative.

At the department level, much of faculty-administrator interaction is related to faculty needs to secure and deploy resources for their work, The impetus for faculty-administrator interaction at the institutional level is to engage in activities related to governance and decisionmaking. Further, ongoing interaction is required in collaborative relationships for the purpose of sharing information integral to decisionmaking (Weingartner,1996). In these ways, the faculty-administrator relationship becomes a function of shared governance (Morphew, 1999), and as such, the character of the relationship in any given institution reflects to some degree the effectiveness, if not the success, of its system of shared governance.



Much of the literature on higher education governance focuses on characteristics imputed to organizational structure and how institutions might alter structures to improve the efficiency with which decisions are made or better the inclusiveness of the process. Structures, in a Weberian sense, are evidenced by processes or patterns of activity embedded in the work of decisionmakers, such as who makes decisions, how the interests and preferences of institutional participants are considered in decisionmaking, and how the system handles conflict around divergent opinion. Benjamin and Carol's (1998) comparative information and resource allocation system is a most recent example from the literature which approaches the topic of governance from a structural point of view. They advocate the revamping what we have come to know as institutional structure, in this case the academic department, to enable higher education to be more responsive to new and increasingly pressing environmental challenges.

Weberian notions of structure then, most commonly illustrated by the concept of bureaucracy, consider it a phenomenon which is in a sense external to human action. An alternative to the Weberian approach is a conception of structure which has its basis in the actions of individuals. Emanating from studies in the sociology of action, structures stress the primacy of individuals and their agency in collective social life (Starratt, 1993) as opposed to the focus on organizational attributes or patterns of activity. Giddens' (1984) notion of the duality of structure is based on the tenet that no structure is independent of the actors who produce it, thereby blending individual and organizational components of structure to illuminate our understanding of social life. Giddens' principle of duality of structure assumes that individuals interact with their environment in a constant stream of action. Such action reproduces existing structure or patterns of

activity, which in turn shape subsequent action. An example of a department chair's interaction with the dean may be helpful. A face-to-face communication between these two individuals produces meaning around how such interactions happen. The dean may be an astute communicator but lack relevant information, and the context of the interaction may demonstrate a pattern in terms of topic, purpose, timing, or venue. These attributes of the interaction create a pattern of discourse and meaning which may be predictable and thus come to be understood by the department chair as "what to expect in interactions with the dean." This expectation becomes embedded in the social structure as a result of "reflexive monitoring" (Starratt, 1993) of action which alerts the chair to nuances of meaning being communicated in the interaction. Thus, according to the duality of structure principle, action reproduces structure and structure simultaneously acts to shape action.

Governance in higher education has been studied from a variety of other perspectives as well. Political theory as espoused by Baldrige (1971) and reflected in the works of Bolman and Deal (1984, 1997) and Birnbaum (1988), both of whom assimilated comprehensive, multi-perspective frameworks for studying organizations and their participants, assume a variety of participants with varied and diverging interests participate in most decisionmaking activity. Negotiation, bargaining, and alliances, assumed to be integral to decisionmaking, provide opportunities to persuade other actors to adopt a preferred perspective. Yet participants often bring conflicting self-interests to the table, sometimes provoking conflict and subsequent discordant relations. Unless participants engage in conscious relationship-building behaviors to reduce the potential for conflict and degradation of the relationship, then future negotiations may be more

difficult and time consuming. More importantly though, in the long term, an institutional culture marked by true collegiality becomes more difficult to achieve in the absence of trust. And trust is based on a mutual understanding derived from social exchanges and increased knowledge of others.

### **A Social Systems Theory Perspective**

Colleges and universities are social systems encompassing a variety of actors. Governance activities are conducted within the context of this social system with numerous actors including some combination of state governing boards, system boards and administrators, boards of trustees, campus administration including presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs, faculty senates, and students. Our understanding of governance in higher education has been informed through the use of cognitive frameworks such as Blau's (1973,1994) structural model, Baldrige's (1971) political perspective, various approaches applying the concept of culture (Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Tierney, 1988, 1998, 2000; Weick, 1976, 1983), and collegial models (Clark, 1991; Childers, 1981). Empirical studies of governance-related issues which apply sociological theories of action were not evidenced in the literature, despite the influence such theory has had in how we think of leadership (Bensimon, Neumann & Birnbaum, 1991).

Westmeyer 's (1990) effort to aide in our better understanding of how institutions operate put forth social systems theory as one of the many approaches to studying

colleges and universities. As described by Westmeyer, an institution is viewed as a social system with two requisite and interdependent dimensions - - the purposes and goals of the institution, and the individuals who comprise the institution e.g. faculty, administrators, students. Institutional goals and purposes are reflected in the goals and activities of its subunits. For example, a goal to put more emphasis on the research mission of a university might be reflected in the extension of increased support to faculty at the department level in their efforts to win federal grant monies. Individuals on the other hand, have expectations and preferences which can influence their actions and decisions. In other words, people do not behave systematically. And when behaviors occur which are unexpected by the system, homeostatic mechanisms kick in to bring the systems back into balance (Birnbaum, 1988; Westmeyer, 1990). In this way, colleges and universities can be seen as comprised of goal-oriented decisionmaking activity which cannot be accurately predicted insofar as it is subjected to the idiosyncrasies of human behavior. Yet from an organizational perspective, the system “works” by function of the homeostatic mechanisms.

A sociological perspective which focuses on interactions between organizational actors however, suggests another approach to explaining decisionmaking systems and related participant activity. Social systems theory offers such an approach. Thinking in terms of Westmeyer’s two dimensions of social systems, we can examine a participant’s (e.g. faculty member’s) contribution to decisionmaking by studying their relationships with other players (e.g. administrators) as they engage in activity related to institutional decisionmaking processes.

Social systems theory, according to Barber (1993, p.3), is based on the assumption that “human behavior is to be construed as action,” or “a structured interchange of many kinds of meanings (culture) between human beings.” Such action then, involves the transmission of culture, key to closing the gap which often exists between unlike groups. A companion view of social systems has been advanced by Giddens (1984) who refers to such systems in terms of the patterning of social relations across time and space. If such relations are reciprocal, that is mutual benefit is derived from the parties to the interaction, then social integration is more likely to occur according to Giddens. Moving beyond the face-to-face exchange, an important tenet of Giddens’ theory is that connections can exist with persons who are “physically absent in time and space” (p.28). This virtual connection, so to speak, brings a kind of integration to the social system that can serve as an important link between individuals. Because considerable differentiation exists between faculty and administrative worlds, and differentiation has been shown to contribute to coordination and integration problems (Barber, 1993; Blau, 1975), theories which contribute to our understanding of person-to-person connections can be helpful.

Considering the various aspects of social systems theory which allow us to examine faculty and administrator actions more closely ought to provide researchers with another way to identify and better understand actions which contribute to mutually beneficial relationships between these two critical actors in institutional governance activities. Next I will describe perspectives derived from the literature on social systems which might be useful in furthering the knowledge of researchers and practitioners on this key governance relationship.

## **A New Way to Think About Faculty-Administrator Relationships**

The foregoing sections have provided a series of theoretical concepts from the social systems literature to lay the groundwork for isolating faculty-administrator interactions as an integral, yet unexamined, component of governance systems in colleges and universities. This section describes a conceptual framework for empirical study of this component of decision-making structures. Before introducing the framework, the concepts of *social exchange* and *network forms* of organizations will be described as they provide the foundations for the proposed framework.

### *Social exchange*

Blau (1974, 1994) believes that in order for social integration to prevail in a group, its members must be concerned with attracting one another. His theory of social exchange explains how an individual's interest in maintaining association with another is established and maintained, and that is via a condition of mutual gratification as a result of the relationship. The basic assumption of the theory is that individuals establish associations with others because they expect the associations to be rewarding, and these associations are maintained through continued interactions that occur based on an anticipation that rewards will accrue as a result. Blau's work built upon that of Homans (cited in Blau, 1974) who believed that patterns of social interaction may be seen as exchange processes. For example, one who is able to offer needed services to another earns respect and status from that person, thus constituting a fair exchange - - service for status and respect. Figure 1 describes the exchange relationship in graphic form.

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Insert Figure 1

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Applying social exchange to the topic under study, consider the context of decision-making regarding the institutional budget where a provost is charged with negotiating for funds on behalf of the academic units. In this scenario the budget process provides for academic senate consultation, thus satisfying the requirements of shared governance, however, in advance of senate review many decisions are made by the provost which frame any negotiations that will ultimately occur. The provost has a choice as to whether or not to involve faculty at the early stages of the process as a strategy designed to build consensus along the way. In choosing to engage faculty leaders on the matter, the provost conveys support and a desire to address unmet faculty needs. Faculty will likely perceive a potential reward from the association, if not a favorable budget distribution, then the opportunity to make their needs known and understood. The provost on the other hand, is motivated by the potential for building trust resulting in more effective decision-making systems over the longer term, and satisfying the faculty need to be meaningfully involved in decisionmaking.

### *Network forms*

Conditions and possibilities inherent in faculty and administrator collaboration in institutional governance can be examined using Podolny and Page's (1998) insights into the nature and functionality of network forms of governance. They define the *network form* as "any collection of actors ( $N \geq 2$ ) that pursue repeated, enduring exchange

relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange” (p.59). The enduring relations component of the definition enables distinction of the network form from a *pure market form* where relations are typically episodic or formed for the purpose of a single transaction. The absence of legitimate authority to resolve disputes between organizational actors also releases the relationship in a network form from structural constraints imposed by the hierarchical form of organization.

According to Podolny and Page, many who study network forms of organization characterize the participants acting as exchange partners as sharing distinct ethic or value-orientations such as a spirit of goodwill, a willingness to invest in the relationship, and a norm of reciprocity. Each of these conditions signals a sense of obligation between the parties which overrides any desire to take advantage of the sense of trust that accrues to the relationship.

Podolny and Page (1998) describe network forms as serving several functions for organizations - - knowledge acquisition, legitimacy and status attainment, improved economic performance, enhanced ability to manage resource dependencies, and social welfare benefits. These functions are portable to the higher education context by virtue of the fact that each is served by institutional and statewide decision-making systems. served either directly or indirectly by governance activity in institutional and statewide decisionmaking systems.

Figure 2 applies the concepts of network forms of organization and social exchange theory to arrive at framework for study of the faculty-administrator relationship. The model situates the relationship in the context of a decision-making



structure as a component of the numerous social systems involved in decision-making in colleges and universities. The number of social systems is virtually infinite, so for the sake of simplicity key ones are depicted here, that is, those systems which comprise interactions of faculty, administrators, students, board members, and external constituents such as alumni, donors, and industry. Interactions between and among each of these groups constitutes a potentially quite large number of social systems, each with an infinite number of potential interactive units (read individuals). Each of these social systems is engaged in the process as it is defined for any one decision or sets of decisions. The process is depicted by the dotted-line box which suggests an openness allowing for the potential influence of information and activity from “outside the system.” The interaction of focus here, while not necessarily different in character, is potentially the most important to the building of productive relationships over time. And that is the interaction between faculty and administrators occurring outside the process.

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Insert Figure 2

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The importance of interactions in this category can be illustrated by Blau’s (1994) differentiation between social and economic exchange relations. In economic exchanges, obligations of the relating parties are specified, whereas in social exchanges obligations are unspecified. When obligations are not defined, the obligation to reciprocate can be left unsatisfied indefinitely. Absent the obligation for timely reciprocation, according to Blau, large-scale social exchange is unlikely to occur unless the two parties are bonded in a trusting relationship. The decision-making structure shown in Figure 2 suggests that

faculty and administrators interacting within an established process are engaged in an exchange under similar conditions to Blau's economic exchange. Each party carries a certain obligation by virtue of their role in the process which is to ultimately result in a decision in the interest of a specified institutional goal. On the other hand, faculty and administrators in an exchange outside the decision-making structure, accrue obligations by virtue of the exchange that are unspecified, as in a social exchange. This means then that large-scale social exchanges are not likely to occur outside the box. The model suggests that exchanges outside the box may be more difficult, if not more costly, particularly when the institutional culture is not characterized by trust and positive relationships between the faculty and administrators as collectives.

An example is in order to illustrate how the proposed model might be applied to empirical study. Focusing on the faculty-administrator social exchange, cognitive frameworks applied in the literature in the study of academic organizations described in a previous section, may be useful. Table 1 provides a limited set of examples as to how the social action depicted in these exchanges can be operationalized. Where the actions of parties to the exchange can be categorized within this cognitive framework, there is a basis for development of a rich array of behaviors for study in a well established theoretical context. This is but one example with limited illustration however it describes the relevance and use of the model within the context of literature on higher education organizations.

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Insert Table 1

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In summary, the model presented here suggests the utility of social systems theory in the study of faculty - administrator relationships. The character of these relationships offer an important indicator of decision-making cultures in colleges and universities, and as such, have implications for studies of institutional effectiveness and organizational health.

### **Conclusions**

The shared governance model which predominates in American colleges and universities today demands that faculty and administrators engage in interdependent sets of roles and responsibilities integral to institutional decisionmaking. The perspective set forth in this paper assumes that moving beyond tolerance and toward productive, cooperative, and mutually satisfying governance-related interactions between administrators and faculty, is not only necessary, but possible, and further, possibilities exist for building productive, reciprocal relationships. Bridging the gulf between the two disparate cultures of the faculty and administrative worlds is not insurmountable as our seeming reluctance to study the topic might suggest. What has been lacking in the “high rhetoric” (O’Brien, 1998) that elevates discussion of governance above decision processes, are conceptual approaches to understanding the social context of faculty - administrator collaborative activity and workable frameworks for its study.

Upending change in American higher education demands the examination of new paradigms for engaging faculty in the governance process. Old structures of domination (Starratt, 1993), tolerated in the past will no longer be effective in the

changing environment which demands accountability and greater reliance than in the past on societal acceptance and support. This paper has proposed a conceptual framework for scholarly study of the social context of governance involving faculty and administrators as critical actors in decisionmaking processes.

Faculty have an important role to play in the development and ongoing success of the new decision-making paradigms called for in the literature. While the values of the academic profession are rooted in autonomy, Braskamp and Wergin (1998) believe that faculty members can be active participants in shaping the common good. Yet Braskamp and Wergin also acknowledge a paradox in the coexistence of faculty autonomy and the press for their greater involvement in contributing to the common good of society. Faculty no longer can shut themselves off from the rest of society as the commonly accepted notion of the ivory tower once implied. On the local front, it is time faculty invested in their institutions.

The role of administrators in the new order is crucial as well. They must resist mightily the constraints imposed upon their daily work by organizational structures (Birnbaum, 1988), and progress considerably in their understanding of faculty needs and preferences. For non-academic administrators, or those unschooled in a discipline, increased understanding of faculty and their work, while also critical, is potentially more demanding a challenge. While contact with faculty now occupies a small portion of their time relative to other activities (Dill, 1991), such activity must become more integral to their decision-making activities. Administrators need to engage in what Tierney (1991, p. 127) refers to as “reasoned reflection” in understanding the organizational culture contributing to governance processes. And this means a concerted effort by

administrators to move toward greater appreciation for the values which determine faculty preferences and the disciplinary variations which distinguish them.

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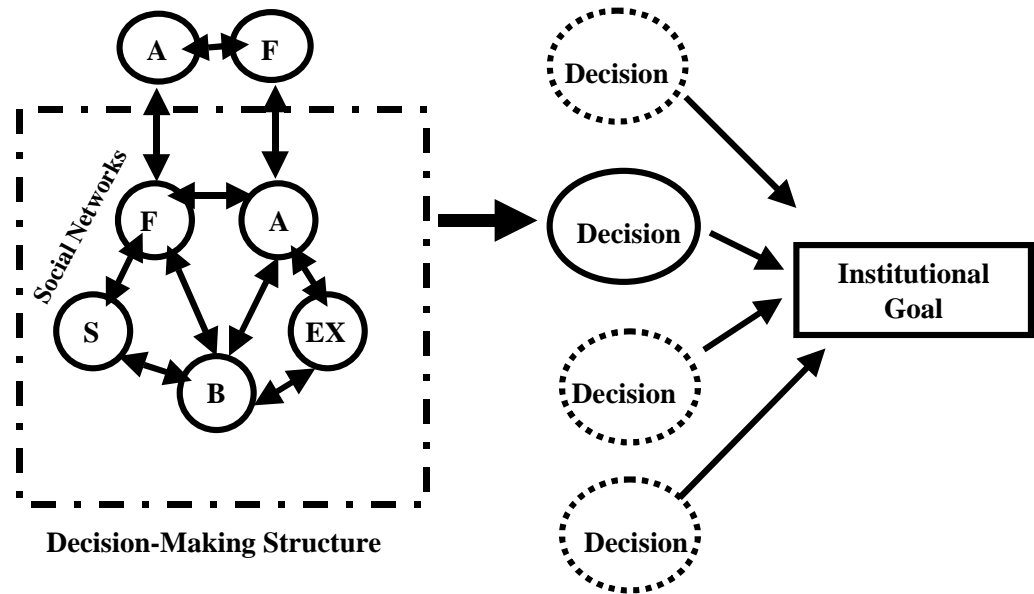
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*Figure 1. Social exchange theory*



KEY F=Faculty A=Administration S=Students B=Board EX=External constituents (alumni, industry, donors, etc)

NOTE: Illustration of relationships is simplified by showing only first-degree dyads within the decision-making structure. For example, faculty to faculty, and administrator to administrator relationships are omitted for the sake of readability.

*Figure 2: Social Networks and Decision-making in Higher Education*

Table 1. Aid to Application of the Faculty-Administrator Relationship Model

<b>Analytical Framework</b>	<b>Action-Related Questions</b>
Structural/Bureaucratic	Is authority being conveyed in the interaction? If so, how?
Collegial	Are the needs of the other party being considered by the participants? How is that consideration being conveyed?
Political	Are agendas and coalitions evidenced in the exchange? Is the exchange marked by attempts to build an alliance? Who has power? Who does not? How is conflict handled ?
Symbolic/Cultural	What meanings and values are being conveyed in the interaction?