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ABSTRACT

A study of the college curriculum decision-making process examined the generation of options or alternatives considered as part of a general education curriculum revision in the late 1980s at a major church-affiliated university. This process was examined in the framework of the rational-choice model of human behavior. Data were gathered from a detailed documentary record and retrospective interviews with key individuals. Archival and ethnographic data were then synthesized to produce a picture of the workings of the decision-making group. The study found that the 2-year curriculum revision resulted in a program not very different from its predecessor, and that none of the curricular alternatives considered was dramatically different from the original program. Factors examined closely included the role of departments and existing school structure in curriculum design, the approach taken to cultural diversity, and creation of a new general education governance committee. The study concluded that in all of these cases, the alternatives considered and the net result supported maintenance of the status quo. In addition, the rational-choice model of decision-making was seen as inadequate for analyzing the complexity of the organizational reform process. (Contains 27 references.) (MSE)

Institutional Constraints on the Development of Curricular Policy Alternatives

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Institutional Constraints on the Development of Curricular Policy Alternatives

ABSTRACT

This study considers the generation of options (alternative sets) as part of a university decision-making process. Specifically, it examines the creation of various proposals that were advanced to address issues in a general education revision effort at a major religiously-affiliated university. After considering some limitations of the rational choice model of decision-making, an analysis is proposed that considers institutional constraints on the generation of curricular alternatives. It is suggested that the institutionalization of academic departments, of the structure of the university's existing general education program, and of organizational field within which the university is embedded are possible explanations for particular characteristics of the alternative set that was developed by the decision committee.

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULAR POLICY ALTERNATIVES

Introduction

The past decade has seen much attention devoted to undergraduate general education in the United States. Although attention is often focused on decision outcomes in such discussions, much less attention has generally been paid to the part of the process devoted to the generation of alternatives in organizational decision making. (Burstein, 1991) However, this is a nontrivial issue since to be chosen, an alternative must actually appear on the menu of possible alternatives, and since deficiencies in the alternatives may thus have a consequence in the quality of the final decision.

This problematic area in the understanding of decision making is relevant to general education reform, which has been a recurrent and problematic issue throughout this century. (Carnochan, 1993; Rudolph, 1977; Veysey, 1973) Consequently, this study considers the generation of options, or alternatives, as part of a university decision-making process. Specifically, it examines the creation of various proposals that were advanced in a general education revision effort at a major religiously-affiliated university, here called National Sectarian University [NSU].

Recently, a great number of American colleges and universities have undertaken to revisit or reform their general education curricula. (American Council on Education, 1988) When confronted with a major issue such as general education curriculum reform, universities often employ the use of a "big-decision" committee. Whether a standing body, or a freshly-

created task force, or a blue ribbon commission, these decision groups are entrusted to investigate whatever issue is at hand, to formulate possible courses of action, and to choose from among the possible alternatives that which it deems the best solution to the problem.

We know that there are disagreements and ambiguity about what, exactly, we expect students to learn in a general education program. (Bok, 1986: 39-72) Yet it is nonetheless expected that general education decision-makers will more or less proceed along the lines sketched above. We expect that the decision-makers will gather information and search for alternatives, and that they then will select that alternative which, in their judgment, is the best one. In other words, there is a normative expectation that major university decisions will be rational. (Birnbaum, 1988: 72-80) In fact, it has been argued that this symbolic communication of this rationality is itself an important function of a social decision-making process. (Edelman, 1967)

Theoretical Framework

In general, the preceding description is thus far consistent with the overall outline of the rational choice model of human behavior. (Allison, 1971; Becker, 1986; Elster, 1986) Rational choice advocates argue that this approach is such a powerful framework of analysis that it is "comprehensive . . . [and] applicable to all human behavior." (Becker, 1986: 112) Indeed, its use is normative within the field of economics, and it has increasingly been adapted to other social science fields, such as political science and sociology. While the complete rational choice theory is quite elaborate, the central features of it are nonetheless relatively striaghtforward. Basically, this conception of decision-making has the following essential elements:

(1) known preferences, which can be rank-ordered;

(2) a search for alternatives; and

(3) selection of the alternative that maximizes the known preferences.

(Allison, 1971)

Intuitively, this picture of decision making has much to recommend it. Of particular relevance to the present study is the step concerned with the search, in which actors develop a set of alternatives (termed "feasible sets" in the langauge of rational choice), from which they subsequently select that option which best maximizes the actor's preferences. (Allison 1971; Elster, 1986; Simon 1976)

However, some scholars suggest that such steps in decision-making processes may not be quite so simple as it would appear in traditional rational choice theory, especially where there is ambiguity or uncertainty. For example, James March and various associates have described a far less tidy picture in their conception of "organized anarchies" that have "garbage can" decision-making processes. (Cohen and March, 1986; March and Olsen, 1976) In that view, some decision-making events--although not all such events, an aspect of their paradigm which is often misunderstood--are characterized as a mixture of three "streams": (1) problems; (2) solutions, which, in their conception may actually pre-exist the problems to which they become attached in a decision-making process; and (3) participants, who may themselves float in and out of the process. (March and Olsen, 1989: 12-14) If we compare this view to that of traditional rational choice theory, we see that the orderliness that rational choice envisions in the search for information and the development of alternatives is far less apparent.

In practice, such a search is often incomplete, apparently due to the constraining factors of the time and resources. Where the search is abbreviated, actors nonetheless develop options until one is found that will "satisfice," that is, one that will at least meet a minimal level of satisfaction when compared to the preferences. (Simon, 1976) Of course, there are also cases where cognitive dysfunction or deficiency may lead actors to fail to consider certain alternatives. (Elster, 1983; Janis and Mann, 1977; Tversky and Kahneman, 1981) Surely these are important aspects of the problem, but is there another way to think about the constraining factors in the development of the set of alternatives?

Borrowing from a more sociological perspective, attention can be focused on norms and institutions, which can be seen as contributing to a milieu in which organizational decision making takes place. Norms and institutions are important factors for understanding the way in which an organization and the actors in it carry out a decision-making activity because they prescribe what is viewed as legitimate. (Parsons, 1961: 43) Moreover, those norms that have become institutionalized--that is to say, internalized--have the further effect of channeling human behavior because they come to define the perceived limits of action and the meaning attached to it. (Douglas, 1986; Zucker, 1991)

In this vein, the so-called "new institutional" perspective suggests the utility of viewing organizational activities with an eye towards the importance of these patterned, replicated social behaviors. (March and Olsen, 1989) Institutionalized facets of organizations, as in the greater society, are seen to have a "taken-for-granted" characteristic that itself constrains social behavior. (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) Because norms and institutions influence what is seen as legitimate and delimit what is thought to be possible, it is therefore obvious that they have potentially significant implications for a study of decision making. Moreover, institutionalized organizational decision-making forms, through symbol and ritual, provide legitimacy that channels behavior into the boundaries established by that institution.

In a group decision-making process, then, it appears reasonable to ask whether the development of a set of alternatives is, in addition to the factors noted previously, additionally shaped by these institutional constraints. Consequently, this study investigates whether certain institutionalized characteristics relevant to a university (e.g. departmental organization or structural characteristics of general education) impinged upon the search process at National Sectarian University, limiting the alternatives that decision-makers developed in the case of general education curriculum reform.

Methodology

The search for alternatives is a process embedded within the history of particular organizations. Since this study is largely concerned with establishing the reasonableness of incorporating aspects of the new institutionalism within a rational choice theoretical framework for the analysis of curriculum change, it is therefore appropriate to focus on one organization at present. This implies a qualitative design, which the study adopts. The study used historical and ethnographic methods for the collection of relevant data at one such organization, National Sectarian University [NSU], during decision making in a recent general education revision effort, circa 1989 to 1991.

First, a detailed documentary record was examined. Although these investigations began in NSU's archives, I subsequently gained extensive access to a retrospective collection of related documents that were in the possession of a key senior administrator. These records were loaned to me *in toto* in what appeared to have been an unedited and uncensored state. Overall, several thousand pages of documentary material were reviewed, including meeting minutes, internal memoranda and correspondence, personal notes, university reports and publications, and student publications.

Second, retrospective interviews were conducted with key informants, selected based upon information in the documentary record. Persons were invited to participate who appeared particularly well-suited to provide additional information, and whose collective perspectives would reflect a variety of viewpoints. About a dozen persons were interviewed for this study, usually in a format between one and two hours in duration, from late 1992 and early 1993. Before and after these interviews, I spoke about the curriculum reform process more informally with several faculty, students and administrators over a period of some months.

After collecting this information, the archival and documentary records were synthesized with the ethnographic data of the interviews to develop a picture of the workings of the decision-making group. The forthcoming larger study from which this paper is drawn contains a detailed

narrative of the whole of the NSU curricular reform decision-making process. For the present purposes, those parts of that narrative which have relevance to or illuminate aspects of alternative generation are here summarized.

A final word is necessary concerning the question of coding. Obviously, if the menu of curricular alternatives is to be examined, then it follows that a clear idea is needed about the identification of such alternatives in the overall story. As will be illustrated below, decision making in this particular case was a social, rather than a personal, event since the unit specifically delegated the authority to carry out the decision making was a collectivity, not an individual. As such, the unit of analysis is most appropriately set at the level of this collectivity. (Stinchcombe, 1990: Ch. 10) Thus, for the present purposes, an alternative is defined as a specific proposal taken up by the decision-making body in the course of curricular reform decision making, and a distinction therefore has been made between an individual's idea--which is not here defined as an alternative--and an idea which was accepted (i.e., seen as feasible and hence added to the menu of possible choices) by the collectivity--which is here coded as an alternative. The point here is that an idea that is not accepted by the collectivity as feasible cannot reasonably be classified as a legitimate alternative. In group decision making, then, alternative sets as socially constructed.

The Setting

National Sectarian University [NSU] was founded in the nineteenth century by members of a religious order. Its original purpose was to provide an opportunity for local young men to receive a higher education consistent with the sect's religious doctrine. By contrast, today it has grown to be a large, fully co-educational university that is increasingly well-known nationally. Unlike some similar organizations, it has fared well over the past decade, maintaining sound financial health and avoiding the enrollment woes seen at so many other institutions.

The undergraduate student population currently numbers about 10,000. These students are distributed among four undergraduate schools, the oldest and largest of which remains the College

of Arts and Sciences with about 5500 students, followed by the College of Management with about 2000 students, the College of Education with about 700 students, and the College of Nursing, with about 350 students. While the balance between males and females is about even, the student population is overwhelmingly white and of traditional age.

The faculty at NSU totals nearly 600, of which nearly 70 percent were ranked at the Associate Professor level or higher. Following the student distribution, Arts and Sciences similarly accounts for the bulk of the faculty at about 350 faculty members. In addition, there are about 75 faculty members in the College of Management and about 50 each in the Colleges of Education and Nursing. (The remainder are affiliated with graduate schools having no undergraduate degree offerings.) Most faculty members were white males, although there has been a slight trend toward more women and minorities.

While the administrative leadership of NSU remains squarely in the hands of persons holding office with the founding religious sect, over recent decades there has been a noticeable decline in the number of faculty so formally affiliated with the sect. With the influx of faculty less strongly attached to the founding sect and a resulting loss of homogeneity, a related development has been that the newer faculty increasingly have a professional orientation consonant with a research university. This orientation has recently been adopted by the administration, and in fact, the university's president has publicly stated that a greater research reputation is a desirable goal for NSU. However, as became apparent during their efforts to reform their general education program, the ethos of the research university, which emphasizes specialization (and thereby creating the unintentional and unwanted by-product of fragmentation) leads to expectations in curricular matters that differ from the that which would result from the more unitary world view of the founding religious order.

In any case, there is a stark contrast between the tightly organized central leadership of NSU and the fragmented situation of the university's faculty. Perhaps the most interesting and telling example of the faculty's condition is seen in the fact that there is currently no regular

university-wide forum for faculty discussion of policy matters. Instead, faculty participation in governance is more or less focused around committee structures contained in the university's various schools. These groups seldom, if ever, interact formally with each other.

Alternatives In Curricular Reform At NSU

In the late 1980s, the leadership of NSU initiated a general education reform effort, stating that it had sensed a feeling among many members of the university community (including the faculty) that the time had come to revisit the twenty-year old general education program that was then on the books. That plan was essentially a set of distributional requirements. The requirements could be fulfilled by taking courses from a rather large menu of approved courses for meet various category requirements.

To address the question of reforming general education at NSU, a General Education Task Force [Task Force] was promulgated by NSU leadership and charged to thoroughly review general education at NSU, with a view toward possibly making sweeping reform.

In the end, the new general education program that the Task Force recommended two years later was hardly sweeping. (See Table A) In fact, the changes were rather limited and, while including some new developments (perhaps most notably a one-course requirement in the area of cultural diversity), for the most part the curriculum was quite similar to what had gone before. From the point of view of this study, it is perhaps more interesting that not only did the final decision in the general education matter strongly resemble its immediate predecessor; a closer examination of the decision-making process reveals that the set of possible alternatives that were advanced for the impending reform were similarly not dramatically different from what was already in place.

As noted above, in undertaking core curriculum decision making, the Task Force clearly was influenced by normative pressure to proceed in a rational, hence legitimate, manner. Indeed, a violation of this institutionalized norm in the designing of a general education program would

seriously undermine the internal logic required to rationalize any non-arbitrary general education curriculum. (Even the free election system implemented at Harvard by Charles Eliot was rationalized for its possibilities in allowing for specialization, not as an arbitrary program.) This norm of rationality in decision making implies a concern for what is seen as an appropriate measure of order, method, and thoroughness in reaching a decision. Thus, the norm of rationality required that the Task Force gather information in an orderly way and that it develop reasonable options for the core revision based on that information.

Institutionalization of Department and School Structure

As the Task Force gathered information, it became apparent that departmental participation in the general education sequence was of great concern to the faculty. In part, it appears that the enrollment windfalls that result from required study in a department were a factor in this, but overall it would be difficult to persuasively argue that this was the sole explanation. The Task Force went to great lengths to develop full-blown rationales for the precise formula of course requirements, but regardless of this apparently exhaustive task, the final formula maintained roughly the same balance of departmental offerings as before, raising the total requirements for general education to 45 of 120 credits from 42 of 120 credits. Indeed, one source candidly described the outcome as "rearranging the deck chairs."

In the course of reaching a decision, the Task Force went through an elaborate series of exchanges between the Task Force and representatives of various interests, most typically organized along the lines of either disciplinary departments (especially true in the case of Arts and Sciences) or the individual professions represented by the NSU professional schools (i.e., nursing, management and education). The Task Force interpreted the information that was gathered from these various interests through its own lens, a lens that was colored by certain institutionalized facets of university life such as the near sanctity with which the unit of the academic department was regarded at NSU, especially in the College of Arts and Sciences. Only slightly less apparent

was the entrenchment of the division of the university according to individual school. Although at least one member of the Task Force suggested that the time had come for a reassessment of the departmental/school structure, particularly as these related to the general education curriculum, such action was explicitly avoided; the Task Force did not meddle with this established order. (This may not seem so remarkable, but that fact may itself result from our own tendencies to take for granted the primacy of departmental organization within a university.) In fact, the Task Force went to considerable lengths to reassure the Arts and Sciences departments, in particular, that the departmental rights in matters of general education under their purview would not be challenged although the Task Force did issue a plea for more coordination among them.

Does this imply that the Task Force took no action on the role of departments (and to some extent, schools) in the matter of general education? Not at all. By retaining the established order by department and by school in this way, the Task Force was, in fact, taking an action; that action was a reaffirmation of the moral order, which is reflected in the university's normative-institutional matrix and hence embedded deeply within the university's structure. Importantly, this reaffirmation--which might be seen almost as a by-product of the process--was inescapably communicated in a symbolic fashion by the very fact that the existing order was left unaltered. This would be true whether or not this was the explicit intention of the actors involved in the decision making. (Edelman, 1964; Elster, 1983)

The point here is that other proposals--some fairly obvious ones--were not added to the menu of alternatives. For example, there was little thought given to reorganizing the structural basis for general education at NSU through the creation of a new organizational unit (department, program, etc.) that would have primary authority for it. By no means would have been unprecedented for the Task Force to have suggested the creation of such a new university entity specifically entrusted with ownership of general education. Critics of general education have long noted the contradictions and problems resulting from basing general education courses in specialization-oriented disciplinary departments. The documentary evidence in this case indicates

that the Task Force was aware of the general tenor of the national curricular debate in the 1980s and that it had examined the curricula of about ten other organizations with general education programs of various types. The reinforcement of the departmental apparatus for implementing general education is not typically found in such material. Moreover, the evidence strongly suggests that some members of the university community (including some of the Task Force membership) believed the perceived power of the departments, especially in Arts and Sciences, contributed to the kind of fragmentation against which NSU's general education plan was supposedly fighting. Although in the end a new oversight committee was established to coordinate and give approval to core courses, from the outset the primacy of the departments was acknowledged by the Task Force. No proposals that would have infringed on this were accepted on the menu of alternatives.

Thus, the unstated prestige hierarchy among the various department and professional school interests was not violated in the decision-making process. Quite the reverse, the Task Force's interactions with the departments were colored by this relative "ranking" of the departments. For example, the departments of philosophy and theology--cornerstones in the founding sect's educational philosophy--were treated gingerly by the Task Force with the result that no discernible thought was given to reducing their combined share of the general education pie. The Task Force had attempted to persuade one of these departments that less emphasis should be placed on the use of graduate students to teach general education courses, and the Task Force suggested to the other department that perhaps the number of different courses it offered to fulfill its distributional area was excessive. In both cases, however, the Task Force was more or less rebuffed, if politely. By contrast, in interactions between the Task Force and certain of the social science departments (which were perceived as weaker and assumedly lower on the prestige ladder at NSU) it was apparent that here it was the sometimes the departments, not the Task Force, that proceeded gingerly. Again, however, the specific curricular alternatives that were

developed by the Task Force did not noticeably depart from the previous plan in these disciplinary areas.

Cultural Diversity Alternatives

In contemporary American higher education there is obviously an emerging normative tendency to include some "cultural diversity" component in an undergraduate curriculum. On this point, some NSU Task Force members explicitly stated that they saw no way of avoiding the inclusion of such a requirement due to such external pressures, and, in fact, the reformed general education plan did include a one-course cultural diversity requirement. However, a focus on this end result obscures a more complicated story.

Indeed, in generating various alternatives and hammering together various working models for a revised general education program, the Task Force was the object of fairly obvious lobbying efforts by interests which may be categorized under the general rubric of cultural diversity. The most comprehensive and best-organized of these efforts was surely made by proponents of a new general education requirement specifically in the area of African and African-American Studies. However, at NSU there was also increasing pressure to include more material relevant to women's studies and non-Western cultures, in general, into the undergraduate course of study, and in fact any or all of these perspectives could have made a similarly credible case for specific inclusion in the reformed general education plan.

But it was persons associated with the African and African-American Studies program at NSU who engaged in the most comprehensive lobbying in an effort to secure a specific general education requirement in that area. However, despite this strong effort, such an alternative was not advanced by the Task Force. On this point, it is profitable to note that at NSU, African and African-American Studies is a classified as a *program*, not a department, as has been the case since its inception two decades ago. In fact, there is no full-time faculty member who is solely affiliated with that program. (Even its new director holds a joint appointment in another, more

traditional Arts and Sciences department) In the present analysis, the point is that the African and African-American Studies program at NSU has become institutionalized in a less-than-a-department form, with the lesser prestige consequences associated with that status.

Given that situation, it was perhaps not surprising that the Task Force alternatives around the cultural diversity component for a new general education program did not include a specific course in African and African-American Studies. Instead, the alternatives proposed specified a cultural diversity requirement which could be satisfied with courses taken in various departments in addition to those in African and African-American Studies. (Indeed, in the alternative finally selected, courses from traditional Arts and Sciences departments comprise the bulk of the options, with African and African-American Studies relegated to but a few of the possible options for fulfilling the requirement.)

From an institutional point of view, this corresponds not only to the institutionalization of African and African-American Studies area at a lower prestige level within the university, but also to a somewhat less obvious pressure not to significantly increase the overall size of the general education program in relation to the entirety of the baccalaureate course of study at NSU. This latter pressure again has an institutional source. The logic of this runs as follows: Members of the Task Force collectively assumed in advance that cultural diversity would be included in the final general education reform proposal. It would be difficult to argue that African and African-American Studies, and *only* African and African-American Studies could rightfully fulfill such a necessity since, as indicated above, any number of other perspectives appear to have an equally strong argument. Consequently, if African and African-American Studies was proposed as a unique general education course requirement, there would be little argument against also establishing specific requirements in such other areas as were reasonably suggested.

Perhaps a case for such inflation of specific general education course requirements could have been soundly presented. However, such an argument would then run counter to another strongly institutionalized form at NSU and American universities, in general, namely, the

disciplinary major. To put it simply, the institutionalized major comes with significant discipline-based requirements, and a significant addition to the total number of credits required in general education studies thus would have infringed on those left for specialization in the major. This point was explicitly made to the Task Force by a faculty member concerned with the competitiveness of NSU students with those at nationally-ranked universities and colleges in such areas as graduate study, national scholarships and fellowships, awards, and so forth. This situation dictated against more than a modest increase in the size of the general education. Considering the degree to which the other elements (in Arts and Sciences) were institutionalized within the general education program, then, there would not be room to add more than one additional course for cultural diversity.

Thus, whatever other considerations that individual members of the Task Force may have taken under advisement in reaching a collective decision about cultural diversity in the new general education plan, it appears that there were at least two clearly discernible institutionally-based constraints on the alternatives that they actually developed: the academic departments and the major.

Creation of a New General Education Governance Committee

While it is not part of the curricular structure, per se, the governing body at NSU charged with oversight of that program obviously has a direct influence on the program that is actually implemented. Consequently, a brief look at that area is also instructive.

Although there was an existing oversight committee for the general education program at NSU, by 1989 it was almost universally seen as ineffective. In fact, internal planning reports that had suggested the need for general education reform at NSU in the first place had asserted that the existing oversight committee may have been a contributor to what problems existed with the program. The main complaint seemed to be that although the committee had dealt adequately with individual courses and the minutiae of general education, the overall picture had become

blurry and coherence had been lost, a familiar criticism offered by those advocating curriculum reform.

Accordingly, the Task Force was charged to make a decision about what sort of governance structure should be used to coordinate the new general education plan that it devised. It was quickly assumed that a new faculty governance structure was needed. Again, alternatives proposed for the specification of such a committee can be seen as corresponding to the institutionalized characteristics of NSU faculty structure. Basically, the Task Force only considered alternatives which (1) reflected the institutionalized belief that such a committee should be representative of the faculty, and (2) that such representation should mirror the departmental/school organization of the university.

On the first point, the faculty collectively had expressed some apprehension about the non-representativeness of the Task Force itself, and this had raised somewhat dormant issues about the lack of faculty participation in the overall governance of the university. Still, once the issue was raised the normative interpretation that control over the curriculum is most legitimately under the auspices of the faculty was asserted by faculty at NSU. (This view is obviously pervasive in most strata of American colleges and universities.) Proposals to delegate that authority elsewhere were not seriously entertained by the Task Force.

On the second point, the alternatives for a new general education governance committee of faculty representatives varied only by degree of representation among the various schools and departments. There was no talk of representation other than along these structural lines. Consequently, no alternative was advanced that included at-large representatives, or that assured representation of women or of other minorities within the NSU community, and so on. I am not arguing here whether or not such alternatives should have been advanced; rather, I am pointing out that the alternatives that were advanced closely followed the institutionalized disciplinary department/professional school structure. If the institutionalist point of view is correct here, then the implication is that this structure, which is largely reflected throughout American higher

education and which is surely a fundamental part of the socialization process occurring in graduate training (Becher, 1987), may either be compelling in its own right or else so taken-for-granted that it is not seen at all.

Discussion

Although the findings presented above capture only major parts of the overall story of general education reform at NSU, these aspects are sufficient for the present purpose. It is not the aim of this paper to provide an exhautive analysis of the infleunces on alternative general in curriculum reform at NSU. Rather, the point is to make a case for including specific consideration of instituionalized elements when conducting such an analysis. In the preceding section, other interpretations could be applied to the same events. However, the fact remains that we would still have a situation where the specification of alternatives in the instances cited above appears to have mirrored institutional parameters. Indeed, taken together, the episodes mentioned above suggest the inclusion of constraining institutional variables in the analysis of this decision-making event as a supplement to the usual elements of a rational choice perspective.

In this case, it seems fairly apparent that the general drift of events paralleled the normative and institutional parameters relevant to NSU, especially those involving organizational structure and the prestige hierarchy arising from utilization of disciplinary departments and professional schools as the building blocks of the university. In addition, the importance of the academic major and the legitimacy of faculty sovereignty over curricular matters--which are similarly deeply ingrained in American college and university life--were de facto boundaries beyond which curricular policy alternatives were not advanced. In short, the general education program that was advanced was ultimately one selected from a short list of alternatives which, in the aggregate, were reflective of the whole of the university's institutional-normative order.

The basic question that this study raises is: Given the universe of all possibly feasible alternatives to a problem (here, curricular reform), what factors serve to limit the development of

these alternatives at any number below that which is theoretically feasible. This has been a troubling question in decision making analysis, as mentioned above. In theory, certainly constraints of available time and other resources would form part of the answer, and there would also be potential limitations caused by cognitive deficiencies, including perhaps something as simple as forgetfulness. Still, these do not seem to capture all of the answer.

However, the institutional perspective suggests a modification to the rational choice framework to include institutional constraints in that description of the decision-making process. These institutional constraints could be considered as a variables between the preferences of decision group members and the creation of alternatives. Implicit in this suggestion is an understanding of institutions which emphasizes their taken-for-granted nature. Thus, these variables may be a way that the organization imposes limits on the individuals making decisions in it. Moreover, this may account for inclusions and omissions in preference sets that do not seem to arise from solely the desires and beliefs of the actors involved (at least not without rather contorting efforts of explanation[1]) either because the underlying preferences are either unknown , indeterminate or ambiguous, or because the actor cannot rank-order the preferences that are known.

Conclusion

The rational choice model seems to have something to recommend it on both intuitive and common sense levels. Certainly, it appears to be a model of the way that we wish decisions would be made, especially decisions that are of concern to us on a personal level. However, the rational choice model does not appear to capture the full complexity of decision making in all cases. Using that perspective alone, it remains difficult to satisfactorily explain why organizational reform efforts so often fall short of the mark, or why it seems so very difficult to successfully complete a comprehensive reform. (March and Olsen, 1983)

This study suggests that by considering the institutional elements relevant to an organization, a clearer picture may emerge. For example, in this case a decision-making group

was empowered to make, if it chose to do so, sweeping recommendations for a reformed general education curriculum, but yet the alternatives considered were not sweeping. Impinging institutions may be part of the reason for this. In this view, characteristics of the alternative set will be constrained by the particular set of institutions (endogenous or exogenous to the organization) that are applicable to the decision-makers. This implies that we should seek to discover what institutions are present and relevant in organizational decision-making events. Moreover, following Zucker (1991), it also seems reasonable to consider these institutions themselves as variable. The same institutions may be present on two campuses, for instance, but in decidedly different degrees. In addition, several, perhaps many, institutions may be identified at a given college or university, but similarly in degrees that differ.

Thus, future studies, in addition to considering institutions as constraining factors in the generation of alternatives, might investigate the role of institutional variability (strong versus weak institutionalization) in the creation of alternative sets. Critics of the rational choice approach to understanding organizational choice have noted limitations such as those mentioned here. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that any single theoretical perspective is inadequate to capture the complexity of human social decision-making behavior. As a response, some have argued for the adoption of multiple viewpoints for the interpretation of organizational activities. (Allison, 1971; Martin, 1992) While there is something to recommend some of these arguments, that is not to say that where possible, work should cease on integrating and refining elements of existing perspectives. This study has aimed to make a small contribution in that direction.

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[1]As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, in a rule-based analysis of behavior "every course of action can be made out to accord with the [given] rule," if necessary by invoking a new, perhaps novel, interpretation of the rule. (Wittgenstein, 1963: 81e)

TABLE A.--General Education Curricula at National Sectarian University, Before and After General Education Reform

General Education requirements, est. ca. 1971		New General Education requirements, 1991	
Theology	2 courses	Theology	2 courses
Philosophy	2 courses	Philosophy	2 courses
European History	2 courses	History	2 courses
English	2 courses	Writing	1 course
		Literature	1 course
Natural Science	2 courses	Natural Science	2 courses
Social Science	2 courses	Social Science	2 courses
		Mathematics	1 course
		Arts	1 course
		Cultural Diversity	1 course
Cluster Requirement*			
EITHER:			
Mathematics	2 courses		
OR BOTH:			
Fine Arts	1 course		
Speech/Communications	1 course		
TOTAL	12 courses + 2 cluster	TOTAL	15 courses

*Added in early 1980s:

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