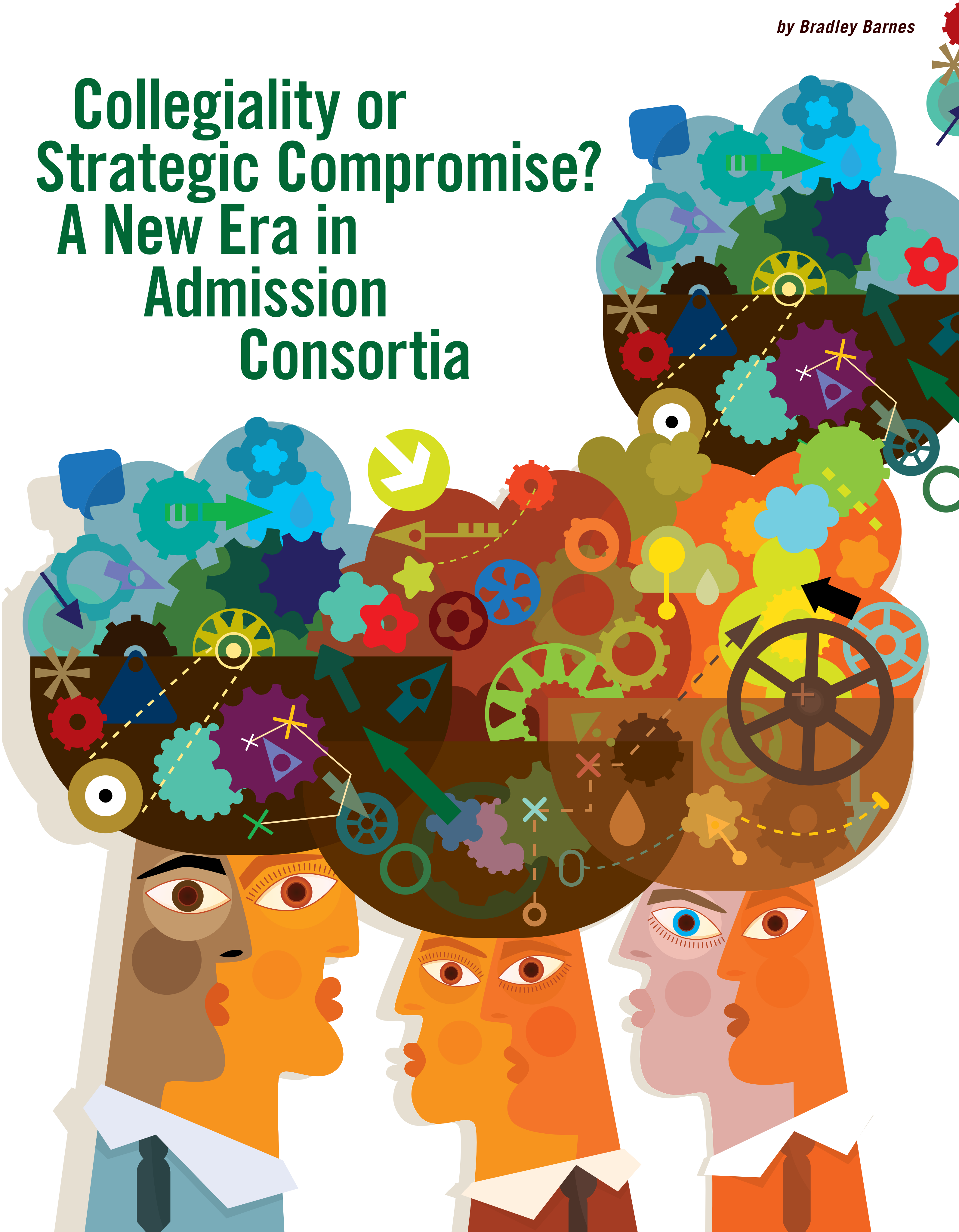
by Bradley Barnes

Collegiality or Strategic Compromise? A New Era in Admission Consortia



Abstract

This case study examines the collegial behavior of enrollment professionals within an admission consortium. Resource Dependency Theory provides a guiding framework for the analysis and discussion of the findings. Data collection for this case study was derived from interviews with enrollment deans and directors who represent public universities competing within the same student enrollment market. The findings show that the collegial behavior of enrollment professionals has diminished in conjunction with public funding and increased competition for student tuition revenue. Implications of this study provide that resource dependence is capable of changing the collegial behavior of enrollment professionals and the perception of our field.

Traditionally, academic consortia were established as associations that promoted the sharing of ideas and resources between universities in a manner that warranted collegiality. While most of academic consortia fostered teaching and research, few concentrated specifically on recruitment and enrollment strategies. Recently, the utility of consortia has evolved to serve a broader range of university interests. Culminated by funding deficits and increased competition for student tuition revenue, admission consortium networks are germinating from the traditional academic consortium design. Set forth by university presidents and provosts from various athletic conferences, admission consortia are led by enrollment experts who center focus on strategic enrollment planning. Intercollegiate collaboration is expected from all members despite external pressures in the form of market forces that have the potential to complicate collegial intentions. Admission consortium members in this study find themselves disjointed between a collegial higher education culture and protecting key elements of their recruitment, enrollment and retention operations.

Related Literature

The decision for public universities to "move to the market" and safeguard against inevitable state funding cuts has been tempered by recent higher education literature (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Priest, St. John and Boon 2006; Breneman and Yakoboski 2011). State governments, intentionally or not, have driven public institutions to realign their revenue mixes placing greater dependence on more predictable sources of revenue such as tuition (Geiger 2004; Heller 2006). In response, enrollment management units have become tools for public universities to increase and perhaps more importantly control, to a degree, tuition revenues (Hossler 2006). Employing strategic partnerships and collaborative working relationships with peer institutions present enrollment managers with an alternative means by which to maximize tuition revenues (Walsh and Kahn 2010). An example of partnerships that foster the sharing of best practices and resource leveraging are admission consortia, which former Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities (GCCCU) Executive Director Barbara Stonewater describes as, "interinstitutional collaboration" (1999 p.45). Another and perhaps more familiar concept of collaboration with institutional counterparts is collegiality (Bess 1988; Birnbaum 1988). Like other impressionable behaviors, collegiality has the potential to yield to market forces in the form of competition for scarce resources (Hardy 1996).

Conceptual Framework

Recent economic downturns have compelled public universities to pool human and financial resources into admission consortia to cooperatively recruit students and collaborate on enrollment issues. Consequently, such collaboration requires operational disclosure with institutional counterparts placing enrollment professionals in a position of compromise to either confide with consortium group members or protect key elements of their recruitment strategies. Examining how the collegial behavior of enrollment professionals responds to market competition will equip admission professionals with a deeper understanding of the political and social challenges that encompass consortia environments. To best describe behavioral dynamics in a consortium environment operating within the confine of intense market competition, exploration of supporting frameworks were considered across multiple bodies of literature including sociology, higher education and business.

Sociological literature identifies dynamic systems theory (DST) or systems theory, as the means by which human behavior is best understood through interactions between individuals and their environment (Robbins, ChatterJee and Canda 1998). For decades, system theory's application in the higher education literature has been used to understand organizational behavior on college campuses (Birnbaum 1988, 1992, 2000). According to O'Meara (2011), systems theory "has been used to consider change in higher education and overall organizational behavior and has the potential to help us understand the influence of environmental characteristics on elements and outcomes" (p.192).

> Resource Dependency Theory suggests that universities will search for alternative revenue streams… first, when universities become too dependent on a single resource; second, universities will search for alternative revenue when dependent resources become scarce.

The interconnectedness between behavior and environment serves as a basis for this study; however, systems theory alone does not completely contextualize the consortium's tenuous nature. To more accurately frame behavioral patterns, the concept of resource dependence was selected as the guiding framework to more aptly contextualize the group's tendencies. Characterizing systems theory in this study, Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) places emphasis on human behavior in an environment of intense market competition for limited resources.

Originally emerging from the business literature, RDT helped to explain relationships between organizations and their environments. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) used the concept to describe a type of organizational management of dependent resources that acquires alternative resources in order to maintain operational autonomy. Since its origination from the business literature, RDT's application has gradually expanded into the social sciences finding a second home in higher education literature. RDT's relevancy in a higher education context explains why alternative revenue sources such as tuition have become increasingly important to the survival of public universities (Callan 2001, Duderstadt and Womack 2003, Slaughter and Leslie 1997). One of higher education's most recognized applications of RDT can be found in Slaughter and Leslie's *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (1997). In this book, the authors advance the position that the revenue mix of public universities is changing along with the economic uncertainty of government funding emphasizing abandonment of state funding for higher education and the need to move to the marketplace for alternative revenue, (Priest and St. John 2006) offer a more recent application of RDT in their aptly edited book, *Privatization and Public Universities*.

Business and sociological literature collectively present a basis for this study by which to view collegiality in a market-driven environment. Together, the bodies of literature should contribute to higher education as a competitive marketplace while explaining how admission professionals behaviorally respond to market forces in a group setting. Resource Dependency Theory suggests that universities will search for alternative revenue streams when one of two situations arises: first, when universities become too dependent on a single resource; second, when dependent resources become scarce. For purposes of this work, state funding represents the scarce resource and student tuition represents the alternative resource. This case study should provide enrollment professionals with perspective on behavioral dynamics in admission consortia relative to the recruitment markets in which they compete.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was utilized to focus on the collegial behavior of enrollment professionals within a specific admission consortium. Yin suggests that this research method is preferable when "investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (2003 p.13). The following research question guided this study of collegiality amid market forces:

> How has collegiality among enrollment professionals endured state funding deficits and increased competition for student tuition revenue within the context of an admission consortium?

Purposeful sampling served as the unit of analysis by which participants were selected (Merriam 1998). Three criteria guided the selection process. First, participants were required to have actively served for a minimum of three consecutive years within the admission consortium including attendance to annual planning meetings, recruitment events and on-site conferences. Second, study participants were required to have actively served their three consecutive years in the consortium, representing the same university. Finally, all participants interviewed were required to hold senior staff positions at their respective university. It was important for the sample to have met these criteria to fully understand the culture of the admission consortium so to provide meaningful perspective (Creswell 2007).

Data were analyzed during the collection process to organize and concentrate the study's focus (Bogdan and Biklen 1992). A small number of general codes was used to represent large portions of information and then the number of codes was increased throughout analysis to segment the data into definitive groupings. Placing data into categories produced key concepts that demonstrated thematic relevancy to the case and provided for a structured interpretation of the findings (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The utility of qualitative case study is that, if thoroughly contextualized, its findings can be applied to other situations according to Merriam's concept of "external validity" (1998 p.207).

Findings

The findings suggest that collegiality is transcended by competition for student tuition revenue. Tuition-base realignment consistently emerged from the data indicating that public universities, while obligated to their states, are committing substantial resources outside their home states to capture higher paying students. Driving competition for student tuition across state lines has changed who competitors are and has complicated traditional sharing behavior between enrollment professionals. Analyzing group dynamics within the context of an admission consortium tests the boundaries of collegiality in a complex market-oriented environment. The data provided by participants were analyzed to answer the study's research question that focuses on collegiality between enrollment professionals who serve in admission consortia.

Tuition-Base Realignment

Symbolizing more than a new funding concept for public higher education, tuition-base realignment is changing the collegial nature of our field. As Resource Dependency Theory plays out in public universities, those most dependent on state support are forced to seek alternative resources in the form of tuition revenue to supplement state funding cuts. Cumulative state funding cuts to public universities have consequentially changed the competitive landscape between schools and according to this official, have necessitated realignment in tuition base to balance revenue mixes:

> As money resources change, you lose certain resources and you put more pressure on other forms of revenue, so it changes the balance between what is coming in externally from either the federal or state government and what you have to generate through tuition and student fees. So, as one goes down, your cost of doing business does not really decrease, so this requires you to put more demand on the other. As your demand on tuition goes up, usually that means you are looking for more students or students who pay a different amount.

Out-of-state tuition revenue is most prized and as suggested by (Hearn 2006), is changing the revenue mix of public universities in a way that more closely resembles operating budgets of private colleges.

Tuition-base realignment is not only changing the revenue mix of public universities but it is also changing the behavior and perception of enrollment professionals. In a description of the paradigm shift, one informant recalls:

> There was a great article, in *The Chronicle* a couple days ago about the changing nature of the dean of admissions. Now we have become these, instead of pipe-smoking, tweed-wearing sages who sit there and figure out who is going to be a student, etc. We are now marketers and we are now driven by return on investment and the numbers. I think there is a lot of truth to that.

Attune to the value of out-of-state students, public universities are quickly expanding their geographic reach to maximize this portion of their tuition base. However, establishing presence in new recruitment markets has the potential for significant competitive consequences of fueling existing rivalries and igniting new ones.

Competition for Revenue

Market forces in the form of competition for tuition revenue have spurred joint ventures between universities for collaborative enrollment planning. The premise is that an admission consortium comprised of universities affiliated with a specific athletic conference, will collaborate on best practices and recruit with counterparts outside of their conference territory for nonresident students. However, the crux of this consortium arrangement is that competitors are expected to share key elements of their enrollment strategies potentially marginalizing their competitive advantage. Members of the admission consortium suggest that the market for out-of-state students is so competitive that it has changed their willingness to share information.

I think competition is complicating things in our group to the point where some people have seen their ideas and strategies used against them and they simply don't want to go down that road again.

One example is evidenced by this informant's list of discretions:

> I do not tell you how much money I am spending on my scholarship program. I do not tell you what my scholarship thresholds are or how I prospect for my scholarship pool. I do not tell you about all my different market stratifications, my communication plans for people at different levels, what kind of market analysis I have done behind the scenes. I mean I have a lot more information about my applicant pool, just like you do but I won't talk about it.

Competition between admission consortia members is restricting the sharing of recruitment and merit aid strategies, as well as other enrollment practices that is challenging the group's collegial intentions. One senior official offers an explanation as to why competition is complicating collegiality:

> For people who view this as a zero-sum game where in order for me to win or meet my enrollment goals, you have to lose, then I think it can affect their collegiality and how much they are willing to perhaps share or be open, and I think sometimes they feel they will lose their competitive advantage.

Another consortia member comments on the same question and expresses concern for others:

> You can tell which ones want to be there and which ones are politically committed to representing their university from a public relations standpoint. I think competition is complicating things in our group to the point where some people have seen their ideas and strategies used against them and they simply don't want to go down that road again.

This statement suggests disparity between enrollment professionals who benefit from sharing and those who do not. While it is unlikely that schools will openly argue strategy exploitation, the consortium member's comments give perspective to the sometimes guarded posture of enrollment professionals.

Collegiality

Bourgeoning competition in new recruitment markets is complicating the sharing behavior between the enrollment professionals in this study. Describing how sharing behavior has changed along with tuition realignment, this university official draws the connection to declining resources and increased competition:

> Before resources became so scarce, sharing with folks from other states just was not an issue because our overlap was small enough on marginal numbers of students that we would share best practices. Whereas I think as resources have changed and the demographics have changed, it has changed the definition of who is competition; and if it changes who is competition, it will also change our willingness to share information.

Another informant provides an account of how the change in competition for tuition revenue is complicating her decision to share enrollment data and best practices with institutional counterparts at annual meetings:

> My colleague and I, every year before we go to the annual summer meeting and even before I go to our annual meeting in January, we sit down and have a conversation about all right, we know he's not going to tell us or they're not going to tell us. And we have made some decisions about the way we present data knowing that we're not going to get theirs. And I hate to say it that way.

Despite communication impediments, data sharing to some degree is expected from each consortium member. However, not all consortium members buy into sharing key elements of their enrollment strategy with their competitors. One administrator describes why some consortia members struggle to confide with institutional counterparts:

> Knowing what your competitors are doing is an intrinsic part of how we set our own strategies. It's not entirely about what somebody else is doing I mean, it's not exactly the same as it is on the athletic fields and courts but at the same time, it's not dissimilar.

Reluctance to share enrollment data with consortia members resides within each study participant. This informant explains why:

> Being collegial doesn't come without risks. It's my responsibility to know how sharing this data with this school benefits us and how sharing this other data with this other school could hurt us.

Conclusion

This study explains how resource dependence affects collegial behavior within admission consortia during times of economic uncertainty and is supported by Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978, 2003) Resource Dependency Theory. Competition for nonresident students is transcending higher education's traditionally collegial culture adding to the complexity of consortium relationships. Increased efforts to realign university revenue mixes by leveraging nonresident tuition rates, has broadened the competitive horizon and disguised the identity of once apparent friends and foe. Fearing that their competitive advantage may be lost through collaborative sharing of best practices, some enrollment professionals in this group struggled with emotions of skepticism and distrust.

Competitiveness between the enrollment professionals in this study stems simply from competition for scarce resources. The interconnectedness between competition for scarce resources and collegial behavior directly impacts data sharing and ultimately, consortium effectiveness. Despite a structured consortium environment fostering the sharing of best practices with institutional counterparts, discourse on substantive enrollment issues lie quashed by the idea of strategic compromise. Future academic consortia considering admission networks will likely benefit from understanding the origin of the collegial challenges explained in this study. The test for enrollment professionals will be reexamining public higher education's traditionally collegial culture and expectations of it to coexist in a market-driven era.

This case provides an impressive example of universities with established enrollment operations that are experiencing adaptation challenges to admission consortia relations. Clearly, the pressures exerted by market forces on collegiality demonstrate a degree of vulnerability to the market's influence. External pressures that complicate the ability of colleges and universities to resolve collegial conflicts are precarious and come at the expense of consortia performance. With no economic indicator in sight to suggest the return of sustainable state funding for public higher education the burden to address consortia dynamics is ours. However, before effectively addressing admission consortia relations that are so closely tied to market demands, enrollment professionals must first decide if collegiality is worth saving or if this is indeed a new era in admission consortia.

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