Using Neo-Institutionalism to Examine Cohort Practices in Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

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One of the major university program developments to emerge in response to societal, pedagogical, and economic pressures for change has been the cohort method of program delivery. Cohorts are touted for providing (a) clear program structure and course sequencing, (b) a supportive peer group, and (c) increased contact with instructors. Regardless of the claims, the literature reflects little research on the emergence, application, or efficacy of cohorts. We reviewed extant literature reporting the extensiveness with which cohort structures are used. We gathered data on the frequency of cohort usage as a focus of journal articles, papers, and dissertations between 1985–2000. For our analysis, we used dimensions of neo-institutional theory as a lens for exploring the processes by which cohorts have come to be scattered across the leadership preparation landscape. The neo-institutional theoretical perspective provides several approaches to exploring why and by what means a field converges upon itself to become increasingly isomorphous, or homogeneous if you will. The purpose of our paper then, was to apply the neo-institutional lens to investigate cohort program delivery as a structure for supporting the preparation of educational leaders. Below we present our findings and briefly discuss what they might mean using the neo-institutional lens.

1) Cohorts have indeed become widespread and their use has grown steadily over the past few years. Between 1991 and 2001, the frequency that cohorts were addressed in the literature had nearly tripled.
2) The data raise questions about whether differences exist among institutional types in the use of cohorts. For example, McCarthy and Kuh's 1997 study found no difference in usage between types of institutions. However, Barnett et al 2000 found that differences *do* exist, with larger, research-oriented institutions reporting use of cohorts more frequently than other types of institutions. From the information provided, we could not discern why there were conflicting results.
3) Results of existing studies show that cohorts are being used primarily for doctoral programs, and to a lesser extent, for master's and specialist programs.

In seeking an explanation of our results, we structured our analysis to address three mechanisms of isomorphic change—coercion, mimicking, and norming. Coercive processes require either explicit or implicit influence from an agent on the higher education institution to comply with its wish for some programmatic structure like a cohort. However, we suggest that only one condition of coercion appears to apply, that being the general belief among educational leadership faculty that failure to reform preparation programs may result in actions by members of the organizational and professional field to weaken higher education's role as the major provider of these programs.

Mimicking is said to occur most under two conditions – at times of uncertainty and when organizations hope to become more "legitimate" by copying the programs of another organization. We remain reluctant to draw conclusions about how much of the apparent proliferation of cohort use can be attributed to mimicking, but we believe it is indeed a factor, since we found little data that demonstrates the efficacy of cohorts in preparing education leaders except in limited cases such as in the affective domain. As a result, our field is faced with uncertainty about the technical effectiveness

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and efficiency of cohort programs. Under this condition, we expect to see organizations mimic others they perceive to be more legitimate, prestigious, or successful. Finally, leadership faculty are just as subject to normative processes as are other professions. These norms consist mostly of common expectations, values, codes, and standards about personal and professional behavior, and they are imposed and modeled by universities and other agencies such as external standards consortia, accrediting agencies, publishers, etc. The result is a pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions across academia. These individuals possess a similarity of orientation and disposition that may override otherwise legitimate variations in tradition and control. So the redundant use of cohorts by institutions may also point to the influence of these normative processes.

The purpose of our exploratory inquiry was to examine student cohort models through the lens of neo-institutional theory. We concluded that the use of student cohorts is likely the result of all three isomorphic mechanisms—coercion, mimicking, norming, although we do not know the extent of this influence or how they have interacted. Again, even though cohorts are perceived to add value, provide program coherence, and enhance the integrity of leadership programs, there is scant evidence that empirically maintains that cohort structure is any more effective in preparing leaders than other programmatic forms. But as Powell and DiMaggio (1991) pointed out, "these isomorphic processes can be expected to proceed in the absence of evidence that it increases internal organizational efficiency" (p. 73). While we maintain that neo-institutional theory offers much promise for contributing to a fuller understanding of isomorphic dynamics within the field, we find more questions than answers, for example:

1. What is the true content of cohorts as a field logic? Is their use based on the premise that they contribute to improved educational leader performance?
2. Are students who participate in student cohorts *better leaders* than students who do their graduate work in more "traditional settings?"
3. What are other plausible explanations for the increased homogenization within the profession and the increased use of cohorts in educational leadership preparation programs?

We offer these example questions in the spirit of stimulating additional research. As Achilles pointed out, calls for reform have been made for decades, yet responses to these warnings have been less than clear and unaccompanied by evidence that the field has succeeded in making a difference. Within this context, understanding what the field does—and why—becomes central to its future. Neo-institutional theory provides a valuable means to achieve this much-needed understanding.

1. See for example DiMaggio, P.J., & Powell, W.W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review, 48,* 147–160; Powell, W.W., & DiMaggio, P.J. (Eds.) (1991). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Scott, W.R. (2001). *Institutions and organizations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ■

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