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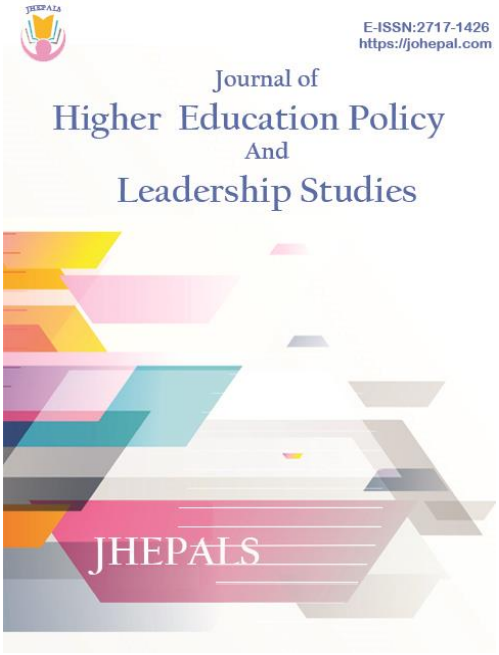

Who's Got the Power: Systems, Culture, and Influence in Higher Education Change Leadership

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Abstract

American higher education has managed to maneuver monumental periods of seismic change throughout the country's history. Recent demographic, political, and ideological shifts within the internal and external environments of higher education indicate that the field is approaching yet another significant period of change; one that could require institutions to undergo significant structural and cultural redesign. The literature on change leadership and organizational theory suggests that those in senior-level leadership roles at institutions are often best positioned to encourage, implement, and lead change initiatives. But what are the actual lived experiences of senior administrators during change processes at the individual, institutional, and spherical level in higher education? This qualitative study examines the experiences of six senior-level administrators at American higher education institutions during periods of internal and external change. The participants described how internal and external factors impacted their perceived influence in implementing, and leading structural and cultural change at various levels within the field. Future studies might consider an examination of the practical influence and/or preparedness of higher education leaders to guide forecasted change initiatives within the field.

Keywords: Higher Education; Administration; Change Leadership; Systems Theory; Organizational Culture

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) serve a wide range of external stakeholders such as parents of students, employers of graduates, post-secondary education government-run organizations and agencies, and legislators (Bess & Dee, 2012a; Sauphayana, 2021; Sharma & Jain, 2022). Similarly, the internal institutional environment consists of a constantly expanding variety of populations and interest groups such as undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff, social scientists, scientist, and those pursuing professional degrees (Hendrickson et al., 2013). To further complicate the world of higher education, internal and external stakeholders alike represent a growing variety of singular and overlapping demographic categories including, but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and sexual orientation. These internal and external environments, which consist of multiple social identities, unsurprisingly hosts various political and ideological views and perspectives. For many years, leaders of HEIs have managed to operate within the context of these complex internal and external relationships. Successfully doing so, however, has required careful navigation through the structural and cultural conditions within, between, and beyond the internal and external boundaries of higher education (Bess & Dee, 2012a; Bolman & Deal, 2017; Sharma & Jain, 2022). Structurally, higher education leaders work to navigate internal and external power and reporting structures, processes, policies, and protocol in order to ensure consistent institutional progress and sustainability. In a much similar way culturally, higher education leaders work to navigate the internal and external social climates, traditions, and formal and informal norms that influence and impact the operational fluidity of higher education at all levels.

Recent demographic, political, and ideological shifts within the internal and external environments might indicate that American higher education is reaching a tipping point and will soon need significant structural and cultural redesign to appropriately response to these changes (Flores et al., 2021; Grawe, 2018). Grawe (2018) explained that the national population is changing demographically, shifting at a rapid rate "away from traditionally strong markets" for higher education and more toward "those with lower rates of educational acquisition," i.e. socially and culturally underrepresented groups (p. 6). This change raises concerns for higher education leaders who already face the cyclical pressures to enroll larger, more competitive, more diverse, and more sufficiently prepared classes of first-year students. Political dynamics are shifting as well toward greater accountability and less state funding for higher education institutions (Kelchen, 2018; Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021). Costs of attendance continue to rise as state allocations for higher education shrink, all the while federal and state legislators echo public cries for higher accountability placed on institutions to produce more workforce-ready graduates (Mintz, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2017; Umbricht et al., 2017). Possibly as a side effect of astronomical costs of attendance and a collectively perceived underwhelming return on investment, public ideological perception of the value of higher education has taken a hit (Bowen, 1996; Mintz, 2021). Many external stakeholders have begun questioning whether the costs of attending traditional four-year colleges and universities is even worth it. Considering these inevitable demographic, political, and ideological shifts, the sphere of higher education might be in

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need of serious structural and cultural change in the very near future in order to remain relevant and sustainable.

If there were to be an impending period of significant reform in higher education, who would be responsible for initiating and leading it? Some scholars have supported theories that organizational change begins at the ground level or is laterally and collectively guided (Bess & Dee, 2012a, 2012b; Bours et al., 2021; Imperial, 2021). Another, not quite alternative perspective that aligns more with traditional Western organizational structure of higher education suggests that redesign within an organization or industry begins with those in formal leadership roles (Bess & Dee, 2012a, 2012b; Gittell, 2017; Imperial, 2021). This leader-dependent, hierarchical perspective of change processes stems from the assumption that those in senior-level leadership roles possess the most organizational power and knowledge to ensure that change initiatives are successful. In the context of traditionally structured American higher education, such formal leadership roles would likely refer to senior-level administrators of colleges and universities who oversee academic affairs (i.e. provost, associate provost, college deans), student affairs (i.e. student life vice presidents and deans of students) and financial affairs (i.e. chief financial officers, vice presidents for finance, directors of financial aid). Individuals in such roles are typically heavily involved in major decision-making processes that largely impact the growth, advancement, and sustainability of an institution. Though positioning within an organizational structure may indicate theoretical or implied influence and authority during change processes, in practice those leadership roles might have minimal influence in encouraging, implementing or leading change within their organization or the broader industry. As mentioned previously, there are numerous internal and external stakeholders in higher education who might impact the actual or perceived influence of structural authority or – in the case of policy makers and legislators – share in that authority.

Based on Gittell's (2017) recommendation, significant change within an organization or industry is difficult to come by if it is not encouraged, implemented, or led by organizational and industry leaders who are perceived to be influential. This is an increasingly important notion when the impending need for potentially sizeable reform is closing in on higher education with each calendar flip to a new academic cycle. Additionally, the external environment of higher education is highly dynamic, forcing constant internal structural and cultural changes for institutions to simply survive or remain relevant. Following Gittell's assertion that effective change leadership hinges upon leaders' perceived influence in change processes, this qualitative study examined how senior-level leaders in higher education – on the legislative and institutional levels – perceive their influence on encouraging, implementing, and leading change processes in the sphere of higher education. By conducting semi-structured interviews with higher education leaders, the researcher sought to answer the following questions: (a) how do higher education leaders view their administrative roles in initiating and leading processes of structural and cultural change in higher education; and (b) do higher education leaders believe that they, in their organizational roles, can influence comprehensive reform in higher education?

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Compounded Conceptual Frameworks

Change processes throughout the sphere of higher education require that leaders operate "as" and "within" institutional systems. Additionally, leaders must navigate "between" and "across" formal and informal structural and cultural boundaries during change processes (Bess & Dee, 2012a; Sharma & Jain, 2022). To help conceptualize this phenomenon in the context of this study, the researcher applied two frameworks: general systems theory and cultural determinism. General systems theory, though very broad, provides a flexible framework that can help conceptualize how organizations interface internally and externally (Bess & Dee, 2012a). At its most basic understanding, general systems theory explains the transformative process of exchanges (or inputs and outputs) between systems (organizations) and their internal and external environments. Boundaries of systems help to group together or separate systems from other systems and environments, acting as a point of exchange of inputs and outputs. When inputs enter into a system, they can be stored or transformed from raw material into finished products (Bess & Dee, 2012a). Often, HEIs function as systems comprised of smaller systems which make up institutions' physical and theoretical internal environment (colleges, divisions, departments, committees, etc.). As systems, HEIs often engage in input/output exchanges across boundaries both internally and externally (students, resources, practices and policies, etc.). General systems theory also explains the process by which inputs from the external environment are either stored (unprocessed due to lack of system capacity) or transformed. Thus, general systems theory is an appropriate framework for this study because it provides a foundational backdrop for how institutions as systems are impacted by their exchanging of inputs and outputs within and across internal and external boundaries.

The scope of this study describes changes in the internal and external environments as inputs into the university system; changes that require institutional leaders to either store the information – remain unresponsive to change simply because the system does not have the capacity to processes it – or transform it into a new output. The transformational process in systems theories, in the context of this study, introduces another important factor in change processes: leadership. Leaders in higher education are positioned to scan the internal and external environments and encourage, implement, and lead change as they deem necessary (Bess & Dee, 2012a, 2012b; Gittell, 2017). It's important to note here that the changes leaders might want to enact are not only sparked by shifts in the internal and external environments but can also be substantially guided or restricted by the internal and external environments (Bess & Dee, 2012b). This effectual phenomenon between higher education leaders and environments of their institutions is best explained by the second conceptual framework applied for this study, cultural determinism. Cultural determinism is the belief that the decisions made by leaders in any given situation are more so determined by the general cultural context of the situation rather than the skill or values of the leader (Bess & Dee, 2012b). Plainly, leaders are often enable or constrained in their decision-making capacities by the operating environmental structures, cultures, and systems.

Applying both frameworks – general systems theory and cultural determinism – allows for a two-leveled analysis of the literature and findings for this study. The first level describes how HEIs operate as systems engaged in exchanges of inputs across internal and external boundaries, and the transformation process of those inputs into outputs. The second level

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describes how higher education leaders must navigate change processes as individuals and institutions that either influence or are influenced by the internal and external environments of higher education. The authors have designed Figure 1 to help provide a visual representation of how both frameworks work together to conceptualize change processes in higher education. The next section will review the literature on organizational culture in change process, matching strategic leadership models with organizational culture typologies. Such pairings offer a deeper context for the experiences of change leadership in dynamic internal and external environments.

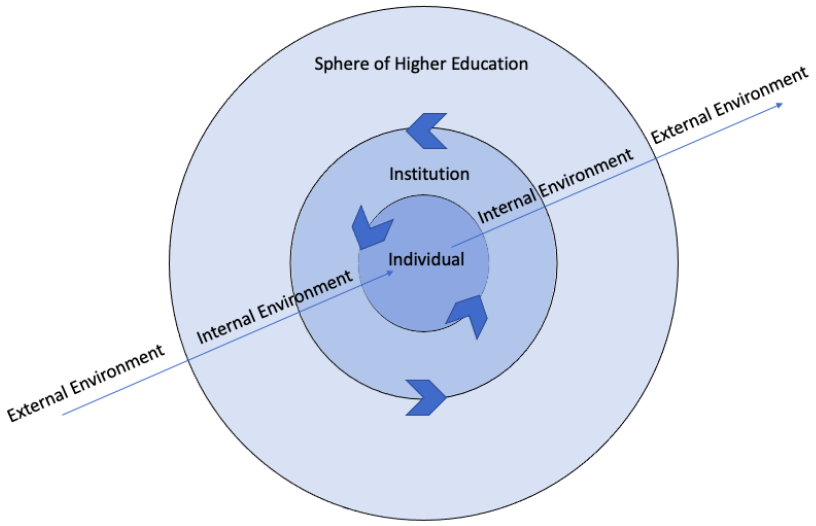

Figure 1. Compounded Framework: Systems Theory & Cultural Determinism

Literature Review

Bess & Dee (2012b) explain that change in higher education can be either incremental – happening on a smaller scale, over a prolonged period of time, still potentially resulting in greater institutional change – or transformational – a more immediate "overhaul" of institutional structure or culture. Whatever the pace or magnitude of change in higher education, it is often initiated by formal leaders responding to internal or external environmental conditions (Bess & Dee, 2012a, 2012b; Gittell, 2017). Gittell (2017) wrote that change in higher education is often "…necessary to address changing student needs and populations, financial contingencies, shifts in priorities…" and other internal and external factors (pg. 57). Leaders in higher education must maintain a high level of sensitivity and awareness to the conditions of the external environment and the stakeholders thereof (Bess & Dee, 2012a). Such an awareness to the condition of the external environment is necessary because it essentially guides the ways that higher education leaders choose to operationalize the mission of their institutions in a broader context of societal needs and expectations. Keeping a pulse on the external environment, institutional leaders often contextualize the decisions that they make according to the anticipated external response and outcomes. Therefore, significant changes in the external environment would likely signal

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to institutional leaders a need for responsive structural and/or cultural adaptations within the organization.

Similarly, a higher education leader seeking to encourage, implement, or lead structural or cultural change of any form or caliber must be aware of the internal environment of their institution. It is difficult to develop a definition of the internal environment of an HEI that encompasses the full complexity of institutional elements. Duncan (1972) defined the internal environment of an organization as "the relevant physical and social factors" within an organization that are directly considered in decision making, acknowledging that there are multiple internal influencers in decision making for organizational leaders (p. 314). Halmaghi et al. (2012) described these "physical and social factors" in more detail as an organization's "owners, managers and leaderships, employees, materials resources, and organizational culture" (p. 378). Hendrickson et al. (2013) illustrated the relationship between and internal influences by describing the inner workings of an academic organization as being a combination of formal and informal operating and social structures directed by strategies, goals, material and human resources, and culture. Each of the above descriptions of an organization's internal environment carry a consistent theme: that the internal environment of an institution relies heavily on the institution's organizational structure and culture and how the two impact internal constituents as well as institutional resources. Familiarity with and awareness of an institution's internal structure and culture, and how the two interface, would benefit a leader during change processes by allowing them to better anticipate how any change will impact or be impacted by internal constituents and institutional resources. Unlike institutional culture, the structural landscape of an institution is easily recognized by simply understanding how an institution "divides its labor and integrates…efforts" (Joseph & Gaba, 2020). Conducting a quick scan of an organizational chart, institutional and/or departmental policies, and standardized processes and procedures would likely reveal the structural landscape of an institution. Identifying an institution's culture is a bit more complex and begins first with recognizing its observable artifacts, values, and assumed behaviors (Bess & Dee, 2012a; Schein 1990). With that information, a leader can then determine institution's cultural type (Bess & Dee, 2012a).

According to Schein (1990), at the first level of organizational culture are the organization's *observable artifacts* or the visible and tangible, physical social psychological characteristics that represent the organization's mission, philosophy, and production or outcomes. Some common observable artifacts of HEIs are mission statements, campus architecture, structural practices directly tied to student and campus outcomes. Artifacts are also an adopted mission-driven, ideological behavior and language that campus constituents aim to embody as a representation of consensual membership within the community. At the second level of cultural manifestation are *values*, which are the core beliefs that are articulated in the missions and philosophies of institutions. The final level of cultural manifestation are *institutional assumptions* or the unconscious behavior of campus constituents that are driven by both values and artifacts. Using Schein's (1990) three levels of organizational culture manifestation, institutional leaders can more easily observe and identify the current culture of their institution and thus decide whether structural or cultural change is necessary or if it is even possible given the structural parameters that exists and cultural typology that might be revealed in their observations.

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Cultural Typologies and Structural Implications

While organizational culture typologies vary, the literature will focus on Smart & Hamm's (1993) typologies because of their appropriate alignment with the theoretical frameworks of this study as well as their emphases on people and resources within an institution (Bess & Dee, 2012a). Smart & Hamm outlined four organizational culture types: collegial, adhocratic, hierarchical, and market. Collegial and hierarchical cultures focus more to the internal environments of institutions while adhocratic and market cultures focus more on the external environments of institutions (Bess & Dee, 2012a). Collegial cultures tend to be more flexible, collaborative, and tradition-and-values-driven. Collegial cultures also call for high participation in decision-making and change processes and are more reactive than proactive to changes in the external environment. It has been found that collegial cultures often result in low-conflict, low-stress, friendlier working environments for faculty and staff (Hatfield, 2006). Although a student perspective on collegial cultures at colleges and universities are absent from the literature, studies have found that student success can be traced to a campus-wide culture of community, comradery, and collaboration (Commodore et al., 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2020).

Conversely, a hierarchical culture is more stable, bureaucratic, and driven by set rules, processes, and procedures. Hierarchical cultures approach decision-making and change processes from the top down, with leaders organizing and facilitating reactive responses to any changes in the external environment (Bess & Dee, 2012a). Hierarchical culture though often efficient, sometimes can create restrained working conditions where employees feel less engaged (Lee et al., 2017). This is simply due to the fact that most if not all decisions in a hierarchical culture come only from top leadership, allowing for minimal collaboration and participation. Additionally, in less stable environments such as the current (Grawe, 2018; Xing & Marwala, 2017), mechanistic organizations tend to be characteristically inflexible to a fault, and unable to maneuver situations that necessitate immediate operational changes. In the context of higher education and change management, while change process might move swiftly and efficiently in the beginning – only requiring input and approval from the top – implementation, sustainability, and practicality might suffer as changes begin to impact the day-to-day operations of other institutional constituencies (faculty, middle-management and entry staff, and students). A higher education leader seeking to encourage, implement, or lead change in a hierarchical culture would be the one of the – if not the sole – primary decision-maker. It would be wise for a leader in a hierarchical culture to scan both the internal and external environment continuously throughout the change process.

Similar to collegial cultures, adhocratic cultures are also very flexible cultures. In fact, flexibility is the primary characteristic of an adhocracy (Bess & Dee, 2012a). These institutional leaders are viewed as entrepreneurial, often scanning the external environment and making innovative – sometimes risky – adjustments in response to changes in the external environment. Studies have shown that adhocratic cultures are highly effective in promoting innovative employee behavior and work very well with a transformative leadership style (Golden & Shriner, 2019; Setiawan, 2020).

Leaders in market cultures, though also very attune to changes in the external environment, make institutional changes to remain competitive in the and seek optimal productivity (Bess & Dee, 2012a). Although entrepreneurship is highly valued in a market

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culture, the level of risk, innovation, and creativity seen in an adhocratic culture is are not reflected in a market culture (Golden & Shriner, 2019). Market cultures are very goal-oriented and value winning, beating out competitors. Organizational change can impact institutional image and reputation, prestige, and attractiveness; often traced in national rankings, enrollment numbers, student outcomes and job placement, endowment and restricted and unrestricted monetary gifts and donations.

Though an amalgamation of organization cultural theories might be helpful to leaders seeking to contextualize change processes embedded in the internal and external environments of higher education, bringing theory to practice has historically been difficult for professionals in the field (Mader et al., 2013; Astin, 1985). Absent from the literature are descriptions of how leaders actually experience change processes within internal and external cultural and structural systems. Although power and influence are implied based on title or organizational positioning, does that power actually translate in practice? The researcher hopes to address this gap in the literature by adding the voices of senior-level higher education leaders who, in the role at the time of the study, had attempted or were attempting to navigate change processes as or within their institution of employment and between and across boundaries.

Research Methodology

Recruitment

Participants for this study, which is IRB approved, were recruited via email. The selection criterion for those added to the recruitment mailing list included: (a) anyone employed in a senior leadership role at a four-year, non-profit (private or public) HEI of 2,000< students in the state of Indiana (n=20) OR an employee or representative of a government agency, organization or entity with vested interest in the condition of higher education in the state of Indiana; (b) employed in a role that oversees or directly impacts the academic affairs, student affairs, or financial affairs/resources of a HEI. The names, job titles, emails, and institution/place of employment of potential participants were collected from the official websites of higher education institutions and post-secondary educational government organizations in the state of Indiana. Job titles that classified as “senior leadership” roles were deans, associate/vice presidents, provosts, and presidents. The researcher chose to recruit participants from Indiana for ease in recruitment and interview planning and scheduling. Additionally, the researcher believed it would be beneficial to compare the different perspectives of participants within a common geographic and legislative context. A total of 72 recruitment emails were sent to senior-level administrators (n=63) at HEIs and employees or representative of a government agencies, organizations or entities with vested interest in the condition of higher education (n=9). The researchers set a goal to have at least one representative either from a HEI or government organization in each of the following categories: Academic Affairs (1 university representative/1 government representative), Student Affairs (1 university representative/1 government representative), and Financial Affairs (1 university representative/1 government representative), reaching a total of 6 participants. A total of 6 individuals agreed to participate in the study. The categorical representation is as follows: Academic Affairs (1 university representative), Student Affairs (3 university representatives), and Financial Affairs (1 university

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representative/1 government representative). To protect the identity of the participants and ensure confidentiality, each of the 6 participants were assigned the following pseudonyms based on their institutional/organizational roles: Academic Affairs 1, Student Affairs 1-3, Financial Affairs 1, Legislative Affairs 1 for the representative of the government organization.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant completed a 30-45-minute semi-structured, recorded interview with a member of the researcher team. During the interview, participants were asked questions regarding their experiences in encouraging, implementing, and leading structural and cultural change both at their institution of employment and in the overall general field of higher education. Based off their experiences, participants were asked to describe their personally perceived impact in encouraging, implementing, and leading change at various levels in higher education, as well as some challenges they've faced as leaders of change initiatives. At the completion of each interview, the produced recordings were then transcribed by a member of the research team. The data collected was triangulated through a process which involved two members of the research team and each participant reviewing and confirming the content of the interview transcripts. Participants' responses were collected and coded thematically according to the general and contextual content of their responses, as it related to their role, positioning, institutional type, and overall experiences throughout change processes.

Findings

Participants' responses to the seven interview questions were divided into two primary thematic sections that emerged: a) their perceived influence in encouraging and implementing change; and b) a power dynamic between structural and cultural change. In the first section, participants' responses highlighted the ways that leaders perceived their influence in encouraging and implementing structural and cultural change at the institutional level as well as within the broader sphere of higher education. In the second section, the researcher categorized participants' responses using Table 1 to help explain what participants described as a power dynamic that exists between structural and cultural change initiatives they've encouraged or implemented. Within this power dynamic theme, sub-themes helped to categorize participants' experiences and challenges in encouraging and implementing change in the internal and external environments. Each sub-theme is included in Table 1, as well as participants' corresponding responses.

Perceived Influence: Institution v. Higher Education Sphere

Generally, participants perceived their roles to be moderately-to-highly influential in encouraging and implementing either structural or cultural change at the institutional and/or organizational level. Within the broader sphere of higher education, however, participants viewed their roles to be relatively more limited and moderately influential in encouraging and implementing change listing professional organizations, networking opportunities, and membership of professional groups, committees, and athletic conferences as opportunities to engage in change processes.

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Change Leadership in Higher Education

At the institutional/organizational level, three participants described their roles as being highly influential in encouraging and implementing either structural or cultural change while two others described their roles as being moderately influential, and one other described their role as being "middle-to-highly" influential. Five participants attributed their high-ranking influence mostly to the structural positioning of their role within the institution/organization. One participant who answered that they perceived their impact to be high, shared that they believed being highly situated within the organizational structure *and* someone in the gender minority added to the strength of their influence in decision-making. Academic Affairs 1 pointed out that their oversight of campus policy, operations, and campus climate positioned their role to be highly influential:

> "There's a lot of policy, formal things that happen here and there's a number of informal things that rest here…[and]…originates in this office. I wouldn't want to overstate the role, but ultimately, we're responsible and accountable for a lot of the things that happen on the campus…To say that it's not…highly engaged and highly responsible at a high level would be maybe underselling the importance of what the office broadly is responsible for." – Academic Affairs 1

Two participants added that their structural positioning is further empowered by the elite status and reputation of their institution, thus making their role that much more influential. Institutional status and type (private versus public) were also described as factors in whether a participant perceived their influence within the sphere of higher education to be highly or moderately influential.

Four participants also explained that their high level of knowledge and expertise related to their area, department, or division of oversight (e.g. Chief Financial Officer overseeing the Office of Financial Aid) was valued by the institution and caused them to be included in important conversations, and thus highly influential. Along the theme of value to the institution/organization, one respondent mentioned that their influence is usually either limited or expanded based on the revenue their office generates noting that the roles related to enrollment and academic affairs are more influential that others because of their impact on revenue.

Change Experiences and Challenges

When describing experiences and challenges with encouraging and implementing structural and cultural change, the participants' consistently described a power dynamic that they believed existed between structural change and cultural change (i.e. structural change drives cultural change, but institutional/organizational culture can sometimes limit or extinguish structural change initiatives). Participants' experiences and challenges included examples either within the internal environment or external environments of higher education. Additional sub-themes emerged from participants' internal and external examples. Internal environment sub-themes that emerged were: (a) the impact of internal culture on change; (b) the impact of internal structure on change; (c) structural or cultural conflict between change actors; and (d) structural or cultural financial barriers to change. External environment sub-themes that emerged were: (a) social and political climate driving internal change; and (b) a dynamic external environment driving internal change and decision-making.

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Tables 1 and 2 offer visual representations of how participants' responses were thematically categorized. Along the left side, y-axes of each table are pseudonyms assigned to each participant based on their area of oversight within an institution or organization (Academic Affairs 1, Student Affairs 1-3, Financial Affairs 1, Legislative Affairs 1). Along the right side, y-axes of the table is the vertical heading "Power Dynamic Between Structural and Cultural Change" representing how each experience described by participants reflected the overarching theme of a power dynamic between structural and cultural change processes.

Table 1
Internal Environment Responses and Themes

Themes	Internal Environment				Power Dynamic Between Structural and Cultural Change
	Impact of internal culture on change	**Impact of internal structure on change**	**Structural/cultural conflict between change actors**	**Structural/culture financial barriers**	
Academic Affairs 1	"…with higher ed there's…always barriers to change…it's just a reality. We are steeped in traditions [and] very committed to the way we do things. So, I think any change initiative you've got to anticipate that people…have firmly seated views about how things should be done and…that some new approach is not the best way."	"We worked...to...reposition of our libraries as a library and school of information studies to better reflect [their] role…Most people had a very traditional view of what [librarians] did in their role and so they were pretty marginalized in terms of their contribution to the broader campus. So, now we got that done..."	"I mean, even with the teaching evaluation change…it took a couple of years…There's a lot of different literature out there on bias in teaching evaluations. There's different perspectives on even the value of students evaluating instructors. And so, it took a while to bring a lot of voices together…"		
Student Affairs 1	"…we were leaders out the gate talking about generational change…I started seeing how students were approaching things…Students didn't want to work our jobs on campus anymore, they wanted to get grounded in things that were career specific...Other spaces were mental health changes...We realized that generations are shifting and we did a lot of outreach in that space a kind [and] got it on the table here on campus that things are changing and we need to be rethinking how we do things if we're going to relate to this population."	"…The auxiliaries had operated with a philosophy of being very financially driven, and I brought the lens of…how are we leveraging these institutional assets to support student education…My focus on learning and the impact of learning in the residence...helped set the stage for [combining] auxiliary set of functions with traditional student affairs functions."		We weren't necessarily sure we would be able to raise mode for the whole [new band] building. So, I thought why don't we try to build a residence hall that has a band component, and that way money coming from the residence hall will help subsidize the cost...I got very expensive and...ultimately that's what tanked the idea. It got too expensive.	
Student Affairs 2		"Well at our institution...policy change will go through shared governance. So, faculty senate, staff council, and student government. They provide input. Sometimes that can take a long time by getting their input….This can take months."	We have a student organization that is scheduled to return [that has] some historically ties to Robert E. Lee…and we had some [opposition to] them returning. Well, it became a discussion of free speech. Those students have the freedom of speech and freedom of association...and they haven't violated any policies."		
Student Affairs 3	"The other thing that creates challenges for us is…and I think that at private institutions with liberal arts backgrounds its more the case…we have a very entrenched ideology around some of our academic programs…That history runs deep and it runs deep within academic circles."	"We have an interesting reporting structure in which our multicultural and international programs report away from student life to that actual chief diversity officer. So, that presents some challenges for the university in terms of impacting campus culture."		"…the most significant barrier for change that student life would seek out would be financial barriers, but I think it can be very situational. I mean some institutions have done a good job at creating the kind of background funding necessary for student life change and some just haven't done as well at that."	

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Financial Affairs 1	"When I became executive director, I was merging three offices…We get along as people but we have very different interoffice cultures and traditions…The financial aid office would spend Monday morning doing devotional, like a faith-based talk [and] reading. The student accounts office did not do that because [they wanted] to have the cashier's office open, [they felt like] they couldn't close the office. And so, although we get along each unit [wants] to do their own thing."	"I've wanted my own data person. I had the money for my own data person and just structurally that's not how it's set up…part of that is the financial aid director in the other office doesn't have the same needs, so they don't want to hire their own. Sometimes our structure gets in the way of progress."	"…oftentimes, I've hit a roadblock with financial aid [policy changes] where…my interpretation of a federal regulation is different that financial aid central (campus system central financial administrative office)"		
Legislative Affairs 1	"Many students, especially our low-income students, our Black and Hispanic students were being basically advised to take lesser credits that what they were actually capable of taking. So…people who look like me were advising people who don't look like me to do less and so...these students were in the 5th year of college...running out of state aid. So, we put in a credit completion requirement."		"We wanted to launch a program [to encourage students that dropped out to return and complete a degree]. Now for this to be effective…we needed to be able to market what [institution] was in [their] area. Institutions were very protective of that data. They did not want it to be shared out to the point where they banded together and killed the bill."		

Note: The cells aligned with participants' pseudonyms contain excerpts from each participant's response based on thematic content. If the cell is blank, the participant did not share any experiences or challenges that coincided with the emergent themes.

Internal Environment

Five participants provided examples of the internal culture of their institution, division, department, or office impacting structural change by either driving, limiting, or stalling structural change initiatives. In their response, Academic Affairs 1 shared an overarching belief that all change in higher education will encounter some resistance simply due to an inherent cultural commitment to traditional methods. Student Affairs 3 shared a similar view and spoke extensively to the point that the existent culture of an institution might cause structural change initiatives to stall of even fail completely. This participant noted how institution type (private versus public) as well as entrenched institutional traditions ideologies and values that make up an institutional culture can be limiting in structural change processes. Student Affairs 1 described ways that their offices led campus conversations around policy development that addressed cultural shifts in generational preferences related to campus jobs, internships, and mental wellness. Financial Affairs 1 explained how cultural differences between three merging offices which were brought beneath their structural oversight led to or in some ways maintained structural divide between members and personal preferences for how certain operational process ought to be carried out. Legislative Affairs 1 described how a possible cultural misconception among college academic advisors related to the course load that students of color are capable of completing materialized into a culture of recommending that students take fewer credit hours rather than the amount necessary to consistently progress toward degree completion. To correct this cultural misconception, Legislative Affairs 1's team developed a statewide

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credit completion policy, ensuring that students remained on track to earn their degree within the six-year timeframe during which students were eligible to receive financial aid.

The second sub-theme that emerged was concerning structural factors within the internal environment that impacted cultural change initiatives within the institution/organization. Five participants' responses were related to this sub-theme. Student Affairs 2 explained that a shared governance model at their institution oftentimes led to slow decision-making processes, preventing quick large-scale changes at the institution and impacting the general consensus and understanding of change processes across the institution. In their example, Student Affairs 2 described how a proposed cultural change initiative related to the creation of a culturally inclusive space on campus was slowed and drawn out due to the structural design of the institution's shared governance model. The initiative was proposed to address recent social unrest in the country by fostering a safe environment for campus community members. The change was originally expected to take a couple of weeks to be approved and implemented, however, due to the shared responsibility in decision-making and a lack of consensus among change actors, the change took a far longer to approve and implement. Student Affairs 3 shared a similar experience, explaining how the reporting design at their institution pulls offices like multicultural and international programs away from student life, making it difficult for them to engage in change cultural change initiatives related to students' racial/ethnic identities. Also, speaking to the limitations caused by structural standardization, Financial Affairs 1 explained that they were denied a request to expand their department personnel to assist with fostering a culture of data collection and assessment simply because others in similar roles within the campus system did not require similar personnel needs. Conversely, Student Affairs 1 described an experience where structural changes that they were able to make to the funding model within their division successfully led to a cultural change at their institution in how Residence Life operates and promotes student learning outcomes.

The third sub-theme that emerged was concerning internal structural or cultural conflict between change actors (internal stakeholder who are involved in carrying out change initiative). Four participants' responses were related to this sub-theme. Academic Affairs 1 described how faculty resistance to proposed policy changes in the student-instructor evaluation process slowed the progression of eventual changes to the policy. Academic Affairs 1 went on to explain that sometimes strong, traditionally held opinions and views cause a firm resistance to change aimed at undoing traditional, long-lasting policies and processes. Financial Affairs 1, also described internal conflict related to policy change, referencing disagreements amongst internal change actors in how new federal policy might be interpreted and implemented. Unlike the example given by Academic Affairs 1, their issue was not an argument of whether the new policy was sound but an argument over what the policy actually meant in application. Legislative Affairs 1 described an experience in which new statewide policy was proposed but failed due to internal change actors (institutions) unwilling to comply with the procedural process for implementation. In essence, in order for the policy change to be effective, institutions would need to provide former students' information to the government agency. However, institutions were unwilling to do so. The final example of internal conflict was shared by Student Affairs 2 and dealt with free speech. In their example, faculty and staff expressed opposition to the return of a student organization with historical ties to Confederate Army General Robert E. Lee. The opposition

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resembled recent gestures by HEIs to remove ties to historical figures that represented racist or culturally insensitive ideology or imagery. However, because the student organization had not violated any behavioral policies, the institution had to allow them to operate as a chapter on campus to avoid any violation of the students' First Amendment rights.

The fourth theme that emerged was related to financial barriers to change initiatives. Two participants described in their examples ways that limited financial resources caused internal structural and cultural change initiatives to stall. Social Affairs 3 explained that because of the underwhelming amount of revenue that their division produces – compared to Academic Affairs and Enrollment – they are limited by the institution financially. Social Affairs 3 attributed their lacking financial support for structural changes to the fact that their changes often cost money, but don't directly produce revenue, which complicate the return-on-investment optics to senior administration. Student Affairs 1 described a similar experience of a structural change proposal failing due to lacking finances and underwhelming prospect for a return-on-investment.

External Environment

Five participants gave examples of the external environment of higher education either driving, limiting, or stalling structural and/or cultural change initiatives at their institutions. Participants' responses were thematically categorized into two categories: examples of the (a) external social and political climate driving internal change; and examples of when (b) a dynamic external environment drove internal change. In their response, Academic Affairs 1 explained how recent national attention given to racial injustice caused institutional leaders to direct their attention to supporting campus community members who belong to racial minority groups, specifically Black faculty, staff, and students. As a result, they added a commitment to increasing numerical/proportional representation of Black faculty, students, and staff as well as fostering a supportive environment for members of the Black community to their strategic plan. Similarly, Student Affairs 2 described an experience where they worked within their institutional shared governance model to establish an inclusive space in the student union where students would be allowed to display flags that represent their social identities – although it was noted that the process was slowed by the shared governance model. This initiative emerged directly from campus discussions among students and staff about how might the institution address the divisive social climate in the country. Student Affairs 1 explained that the divisive social and political climate of the external environment made it more difficult to encourage or implement cultural change initiatives because of the over-politicization of many controversial topics and a widespread unwillingness to communicate through differences in perspective. Student Affairs 1 described an internal urge to avoid addressing some topics in fear of being "cancelled" for misspeaking and disagreeing with others. Student Affairs 3 described an administrative push to change the institution's mascot because of its ties to the Christian crusades. This change resembled recent similar gestures made by many colleges and professional athletic organizations in the United States to move away from offensive and culturally insensitive mascots and mascot imagery.

Three participants made comments that highlighted ways that a dynamic external environment influenced internal change initiatives. Academic Affairs 1 explained how unprecedented internal adjustments in response to the Covid-19 pandemic sparked an

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institution-wide reimagining of how certain aspects of the campus might operate (in-person instruction, the need for physical office space, etc.) post-pandemic in order to optimize efficiency. Student Affairs 3 spoke more generally, explaining that fast-paced decision-making in higher education is necessary for institutions – particularly private institutions – to survive in a dynamic external environment. Legislative Affairs 1 explained simply that their ability to make decisions and encourage and implement change initiatives is "predominantly guided" by what the state legislature allows.

Table 2
External Environment Responses and Themes

Themes	External Environment		Power Dynamic Between Structural and Cultural Change
	Social and political climate driving internal change	Dynamic external environment driving change/decision-making	
Academic Affairs 1	"…More recently, you know we're in situations we're trying to think about the climate of the university more broadly. How do we be more inclusive? Most recently the board of trustees taskforce has put a particular focus on Black students. They'll be announcing initiatives...to increase the number of Black students, faculty, and staff that week see on our campus.	"We're working on the idea of a change of calendar…reducing the [spring] semester length by a couple weeks…and that's a pretty big lift for the campus right now. That really came from a group of deans we charged last summer in looking post-Covid[a] on things that we should be taking a very hard look at...to really come out of Covid with some new ideas and things that make us better as a university."	
Student Affairs 1	"You know, I think we're at an interesting, difficult time right now in higher ed with figuring out how to have hard conversations about race, about gender…and I think trying to navigate in this space at this particular moment in time is exceptionally difficult...It's canceling rather than dialoging ...it's so hard to figure out how to have these conversations without stepping in it."		
Student Affairs 2	"…because of the social injustice attention that we've received in the last 11 months in our country, we wanted to put a BLM flag up in our student union…And so, members of the present's cabinet agreed [to] do a display of inclusiveness in our student union [displaying] flags of inclusivity.		
Student Affairs 3	"Our interim president made the decision to put a small committee together and eliminate the current mascot at our institution which was religiously based imagery of a crusader. Feeling the crusader was not appropriate anymore in modern culture - obviously the crusades killed thousands of Muslim people..."	"Things are fast and furious right now in higher education. Particularly in private higher education. This is an urgency to decision-making. Change is fast and furious right now and…as somebody once said…there's the quick and the dead."	
Financial Affairs 1			
Legislative Affairs 1	"The biggest barrier [to broad structural change] that we face here…is the state opinion on higher education. The questioning the value of it. The thought about the cost of it. The view [that] we didn't need it in the past, we don't need it in the future. The increased polarization politically around higher education."	"The work that I do is predominantly guided by what we can and can't get through the state legislature.	

Note: The cells aligned with participants' pseudonyms contain excerpts from each participant's response based on thematic content. If the cell is blank, the participant did not share any experiences or challenges that coincided with the emergent themes.

[a]Corona Virus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that sparked a deadly global pandemic, causing numerous public spaces and business, including higher education institutions, to limit and/or halt in-person activities and gatherings.

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Discussion

Organizational positioning implies structural rank in managerial power and decision-making processes (McPhee, 1985; Secundo et al., 2022). Formal structures in organizations, especially in the traditionally Western context, have long formally and informally communicated to members of an organization who carries power within an organization, and how the power is assumed to be exercised. This organizational tenet certainly materialized in the responses of participants as they described their perceived influence in change initiatives. High institutional positioning gave the majority of the higher education leaders a sense of significance in encouraging, implementing, and leading change at the institutional level. Participants that expressed a high sense of influence in change processes simply because of their organizational positioning projected core elements of Smart & Ham's (1993) hierarchical cultural typology, in which decisions are made and delivered from top administrative levels down to the rest of the organization (Bess & Dee, 2012a). As institutional leaders operating in a highly dynamic external environment, being able to make swift decisions – a characteristic of a hierarchical culture – without having to clear numerous thresholds of approval can be highly beneficial. However, as reflected in participants experiences as constituents in the broader field of higher education, the further down a position structurally falls within a hierarchical culture the further removed the individual feels from the decision-making process, thus negatively impacting their perceived influence. Participants' confidence waned when asked about their perceived influence within the greater sphere of higher education. By expanding the context of influence from the individual and institutional levels, more change actors and stakeholders were added and in turn added more levels to the formal and informal "reportioning structure" of higher education, compounding the bureaucracy of decision-making processes. So, though participants viewed an internal hierarchical culture to be the most efficient for internal decision-making processes, that same cultural typology when applied to the sphere of higher education was believed to be limiting their capacity to influence change beyond their institutions. This comparison of the two perspectives – hierarchical cultures within the institution versus the same beyond the institution – is not highlighted by the authors to suggest that one cultural typology is more appropriate than any other at the institutional level. Further, the authors do not intend to suggest that the same cultural typology operating at the institutional level is appropriate at operational levels in the broader sphere of higher education. This comparison is made simply to provide an additional understanding of how complex the boundaries between systems in higher education are; boundaries that delineate yet, bind together the individual, institutional, and spherical system that higher education leaders must navigate daily.

Though in theory, traditional structural power perceptions seemed to remain intact, the leaders described challenges from personal experiences during change processes that in ways minimalized their practical influence. Beyond organizational positioning, there seemed to emerge an inferiority complex among the leaders that resulted from the increasingly complex structural and cultural spaces they must navigate to successfully enact change at the institutional and spherical levels of higher education. Further, difficulty in encouraging, implementing, and leading change initiatives elevated as more internal and external structural and cultural factors were considered. Internally, leaders made it very

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clear that a power dynamic between structure and culture for all intents and purposes determines the success of change initiatives, and that striking a balance between the two is difficult. According to Schein (1990), an institution's culture is reflected in its visible and tangible, physical social psychological characteristics that represent the organization's mission, philosophy, and production or outcomes. These characteristics of culture often include and, in many ways, inform structural practices. To offer an example of mental visualization, if institutional structure acts as the bones of an institution, then the culture becomes the tissue and flesh of the institution. One does not and cannot function alone, each giving meaning and purpose to the other. Bones provide no structure to that which in non-existent, and flesh cannot stand without bones. Structure reinforces culture, and culture mobilizes structure. As described by the leaders, this power dynamic between structural and cultural change initiatives is more so the operationalization of systematic reliance on one another. What is most challenging is when there is an imbalance between the two; an imbalance consistently described by the participating leaders. Such an imbalance makes it difficult for leaders to navigate around barriers and reconcile issues that arise from internal conflicts, funding imbalances, cultural misalignment across boundaries, informal structural bureaucracy. In such instances, there was a noticeable decrease in perceived influence among the participating leaders.

Externally, the overall message from participating leaders was that the social, political, and ideological climate in the external environment is change, and changing fast. Institutional leaders who can't keep up and respond efficiently and appropriately without significantly damaging the institution's reputation and wellbeing are likely find their names readily removed from institutional directories. External stakeholders the likes of legislators, employers, and parents of current and prospective students are demanding more accountability from HEIs (Kelchen, 2018). The cost of higher education has shifted away from the federal and state government toward the pockets of students and their guardians (Mitchell et al., 2019; The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019). The little funding provided to HEIs by state legislators could not prevent HEIs ramping up tuition and campus housing costs, leaving many families wanting more "bang for their buck," usually in the form of more financially competitive job placement for students following graduation (graduates (Mitchell et al., 2019). This has left higher education leaders scrambling to respond by offering more competitive student learning and co-curricular experiences with limited funds. All the while, social phenomena like the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, social justice movements like *Black Lives Matter* in response to the killing of unarmed Black men by law enforcement, and the novel Covid-19 pandemic have sent higher education leaders into a whirlwind of responses in the form public statements, campus initiatives, and operational adjustments that could make or break an institution.

In revisiting the conceptual framework for this study, responses from the participating higher education leaders heavily reflect the compounded process of interfaces across, between, and within structural and cultural boundaries at the individual, institutional, and spherical level of higher education. Further, the described power dynamic – or what is possibly better described as a codependence – emphasizes the monstrous effect of cultural determinism in change leadership. In other words, it is highly likely that the implied theoretical influence of institutional leaders from title or organizational positioning alone cannot determine their actual influence in encouraging, implementing, or leading change

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initiatives. Structural and cultural change are so closely interconnected that one cannot proceed without the other. Finally, as reaffirmed by the participants, the boundaries that exists between the internal and external environments of higher education are increasingly permeable. The fluid interface between the two environments – whether inputs and output be good or bad – determines the actual influence that a leader in higher education might have in change processes moment to moment.

Conclusion

Change is difficult, but inevitable. This is even more true in the world of higher education. Leaders of HEIs work to navigate challenging structural and cultural change processes within, between, and across internal and external environments all the while maintaining strong relationships with internal and external stakeholders. Though theoretical influence in change processes might be implied based off of job title or organizational positioning, the overall influence of higher education leaders is much more complicated in practice. The internal and external environments of higher education are changing demographically, politically, and ideologically and institutions need to respond quickly and soon. This study highlighted how higher education leaders experienced encouraging, implementing, and leading change processes at various levels in the field of higher education, bringing to surface the impact of internal and external factors on leaders' perceived influence throughout change processes. A question that remains unanswered and is an opportunity for future research is whether or not current higher education leaders are prepared or possess the necessary level of influence to guide the change that will be needed in the near future.

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Human Participants

All persons who participated in the study did so voluntarily and were aware of minimal risks and without having received any form of compensation. The identity of participants are and will remain confidential.

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