

Governance of Grassroots Academic Organizations in Chinese Universities: Connotation, Logic and Paths

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Abstract: In the context of accelerating “double top-class” construction, the grassroots academic organizations in Chinese universities should uphold the concept of ecological governance. In accordance with the logic of stressing purpose, procedure and integration in the governance field, a multi-level ecological governance system needs to be constructed through various means. For instance, the stimulation of individual ecology’s endogenous dynamics, the innovation of population ecology’s competition and cooperation mechanism, as well as the reconstruction of the organization community’s ecological boundary. With all these efforts, “academic ecological force” will be motivated.

1. Introduction

According to three restrictive terms of “university grassroots”, “academic” and “organization”, the basic grassroots academic organizations in universities can be defined as below: a group unit located at the bottom of the university organization system, following the logic of discipline, and having a stable system structure. As far as grassroots academic organizations of Chinese universities are concerned, they generally refer to the lowest-level academic organizations in the university organization system which are established on the basis of secondary disciplines. They serve as the “academic community” that specifically undertake the academic functions of universities. To illustrate, they can take different forms like academic departments, research institutes, laboratories, collaborative centers, or teaching and research offices. Another significant thing to point out here is that, those colleges within the university belong to a higher-level institution above department and research institute. Their research teams and project teams do not have a stable organizational structure. The school-based enterprises which stress commercialization of scientific and research findings have no academic characteristics. In this sense, they are not considered as grassroots academic organizations.

2. Conception of Grassroots Academic Organizations in Chinese Universities

In the 1990s, with the emergence of western new public management movement and the great transformation of government functions, “governance” comes up as a new management concept and thinking mode. A well-known American scholar named James Rosenau earlier defined “governance” as a series of activities that support their common goals. In this definition, he emphasized the diversity of subjects and the interaction between these different subjects. In 1995, the UN Global Governance Committee made a new definition of “governance”. That is, a continuous process of conflict and interest reconciliation, which in fact belongs to a dynamic definition.^[1] Through this change, the dynamic debugging of relationships gradually becomes the focus of the “governance” theory. By way of contrast, ecological governance emphasizes the reference to those concepts and rules which are frequently used in the field of natural ecology. It reshapes the relationship among the interests of diverse stakeholders, so as to establish a mutually beneficial, harmonious and symbiotic ecology in university’s grass-roots academic organizations. As a both complex and giant system, grassroots academic organizations in universities are

composed of two parts. One includes the components contained within and the intricate relationships formed between these various components. The other is the continuous flow of material, energy and information together with the external environment. This provides the appropriateness of utilizing ecological governance ideas and logic for the governance of grassroots academic organizations in universities.

From the perspective of organizational ecology, the ecology of grassroots academic organizations within universities can be divided into four basic levels: individual ecology, population ecology, community ecology, and ecosystem ecology. Individual ecology aims at one single university, concentrating on its internal organization, and related influence on organizational structure, function, as well as behavior, which normally come from the elements of population ecology. In comparison, population ecology takes academic organizations established under the same first-level discipline as the target. It attaches great importance to the relationship between the populations. Different from the above, community ecology aims at multiple university-level academic organizations that are established across first-level disciplines. The research focus is the boundary issues within the population and its relationship with the corresponding environment.

During the course of “double top-class” construction, because of limitations from resource dependence and institutional convention, some Chinese universities have alienation problems and these problems occur at various levels of grassroots academic organizations. At the level of individual ecology, there are huge challenges to be addressed ahead. For instance, the elements cannot be effectively coupled; the academic force is relatively weak; and autonomy needs to be further strengthened. From the view of population ecology, some other obstacles are presented. These obstacles include alienation of competitive behaviors and difficulties with cross-discipline integration. As far as community ecology is concerned, some of their boundaries are too solidified. Moreover, the relationship with the environment is not balanced. To solve all these difficulties, the ecological governance concept should be used to adjust the ecological relationship among grassroots academic organizations in universities.

3. Logic of Governance of Grassroots Academic Organizations in Chinese Universities

Under the concept of ecological governance, the governance of grassroots academic organizations in universities should focus on purpose, process and overall performance. In order to activate “academic ecological force”, more efforts need to be done to adjust internal and external relations within grassroots academic organizations’ ecology. Only in this way can a stable and sustainable ecological governance system be achieved.

3.1 Demonstrate the Stable and Continuous Purposeful Role of Governance.

Holmes Rolston, an ecological ethicist has given the meaning of purpose to ecosystem. He believes that “the value of ecosystem is not only the sum of individual values, but actually is the mother of all values that perfect and create each individual value.”^[2] Because the overall resources is limited, we cannot deny that under the goal of survival, the competition and cooperation within university’s grassroots academic organization ecology is rational. On essence, the ultimate purpose of this type of competition and cooperation is to promote the evolution of ecology. Participating individuals, populations or communities all exhibit different purposes. Individual internal factors maintain self-survival benefits through self-organization. In addition to maintaining self-survival interests, populations also strive to guarantee the interests of the whole community. Similarly, the community cooperates with other external communities while maintaining the survival interests of the internal population. That is, in addition to safeguarding its own survival, each individual is responsible for the overall interests at a relatively more macro level. This is an obvious reflection of the unity of “internal purpose” and “external purpose” among ecological individuals, populations and communities.

3.2 Focus on Procedural Governance At Different Evolution Stages.

All ecosystems are dynamic systems that keep changing constantly. As a matter of fact, dynamic

change is the basic way in which things exist. The process philosophy represented by Whitehead holds the opinion that, our world and life is a dynamic and interrelated process. The university's grassroots academic organization ecology is also an organism formed through the interconnection and the interaction of various elements. Similar to the natural ecosystem, the evolution of grassroots academic organizations in universities is a whole process as well. It undergoes generation, growth, maturity, and even demise, which actually is a whole life-cycle change. When talking about the evolution of internal elements of these organizations and their relationship with the external environment, all these firstly derive from the internal motivation of disciplines. In the second place, they are widely influenced by changes in the external environment. Therefore, the governance of the university's grassroots academic organizations should not only stress the changes in the internal dynamic mechanism coming from knowledge differentiation and integration. More importantly, more weight should be placed on the changes of the external environment. Then on the premise of scientific planning, it is of great necessity to take proper actions in good order.

3.3 Take Organic Unified Governance as the Basis.

The function of system is realized through mutual complementation and through the relationship involving competition as well as cooperation. Integrity is one of the most crucial objective properties of ecosystem, and is also the main characteristic of ecosystem. Under the concept of holistic thinking, university's grassroots academic organization ecology is viewed as a living organization system. It becomes an organic whole with various elements related to one another. In addition to being an independent individual itself, each organization is also a "node" on the network of the whole organization's ecosystem. These multiple and heterogeneous "nodes" are connected to one another in order to form a complex ecological network. Therefore, on the basis of a common mission, the elements or components within the individual ecology can effectively stimulate vitality if they are self-opening, self-organizing, and self-generating. In a similar way, an individual's organization can establish an effective cooperative relationship among things if it is confirmed in a "relationship" together with the population, the community, and the environment. On the other way around, the interaction between grassroots academic organizations of universities directly shapes the larger external environment.

4. Paths Towards Governance of Grassroots Academic Organizations in Chinese Universities

At present, in the historical context of accelerating "double top-class" construction in China, the importance of optimizing the governance of grassroots academic organizations in universities is becoming more and more prominent. Taking the concepts and logic of ecological governance as the starting point, it should be kept in mind to implement governance at different levels. On one hand, the free flow and the effective integration of academic innovation elements will be promoted. On the other hand, the "academic ecological force" of grassroots academic organizations in universities will be further stimulated.

4.1 In the First Place, Promote the Coupling of Individual Ecology's Functions and Stimulate Endogenous Motivation with a Clear Organizational Mission.

It makes a big difference to guide university organizations to form a clear organizational mission and meanwhile imbed a high level of awareness to serve the society as well as the country in mind. Through several manners, such as discussions and symposiums, the organizational mission can be recognized by more members from the organization, making it unite a cohesive group of academics. In all, it can function as the spiritual bond for maintaining organizational operations. With all these efforts, an academic field suitable for the survival and development of academics can be shaped. Besides, academics should establish an academic community based on contract culture, allocate academic resources under the guidance of organizational mission and carry out activities related to academic heritage innovation as well as application transformation. This will produce positive effects on keeping both academic power and administrative power in their own place. At the same time, we should further strengthen the openness of the individual ecology at grassroots academic organizations. Taking full advantage of external exchanges and generating the "catfish effect" can

push forward the self-catalysis cycle of internal factors. All these measures have an implication for stimulating innovation vitality. In addition, it helps to stimulate the subjectivity, enthusiasm and initiative of grassroots academic organizations during the process of “double top-class” construction.

4.2 Secondly, Innovate the Competition Mechanism of Population Ecology, and Realize the Benign Interaction through Cross-Fusion of Knowledge.

For Chinese universities, the legitimacy basis for the establishment of grassroots academic organizations comes from the national academic directory. This artificial delimitation and setting of knowledge will inevitably lead to “bureaucracy” and “unit system”, which hinders the free flow of subject knowledge and innovative elements within the organization. Vertically, the hierarchical management model makes basic academic organizations rely too much on resource allocation made by superiors, thus the subjectivity of academic innovation becomes insufficient. Horizontally, affected by the “unit system” model, organizational boundaries are relatively solidified, leading to the fragmentation of academic identity and the fragmentation of scientific output as well. Therefore, it is necessary to further innovate the setting method and generation path of university’s basic academic organizations, reconstruct the competition and cooperation relationship among them. Furthermore, more attention should be paid to promote the cross-cutting, integration and convergence of subject knowledge. Accordingly, innovative growth points will be promoted through organizations’ cooperation as well as competition. Beyond any doubt, all these is beneficial to achieving positive interaction between organizations.

4.3 Last But Not Least, Reconstruct the Organizational Boundaries of the Community Ecosystem to Strengthen Internal and External Collaboration for Achieving Symbiosis and Prosperity.

From the perspective of producing new knowledge, in terms of the university’s grassroots academic organizations, whether it is knowledge collaboration within the organization or knowledge collaboration between the organization and the external environment, it is of great significance to reshape the boundaries of the university’s grassroots academic organization ecosystem. According to Mode 3 knowledge production view, universities are “academic enterprises” that lay stress on the maximization and the optimization of knowledge innovation, and are ideal combined with a “quadruple” mode composed of “university-industry-government-public”. This is correspondent with the interdisciplinary and cross-organizational knowledge production model.^[3] For this reason, within universities, we should break through the barriers of grassroots academic organizations, and further explore how to promote the reconstruction of these boundaries. This can be achieved in many ways, like mutual selection of courses, mutual employment of teachers, mutual evaluation of academic resources, and interoperability of resources. Outside the university, there is an urgent need to reshape the boundaries of the organization community. Special measures should be conducted to further accelerate the connection between knowledge production and the society, and build “borderless organizations”. This will enable the synergy between academic organizations and the social environment, resulting in collaborative symbiosis in the long run.

References

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