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Robert Birnbaum

The Life Cycle of Academic Management Fads

Institutions of higher education are always under pressure to become more efficient and effective. In response, many have attempted (either voluntarily or under mandate) to adopt new management systems and processes that were originally designed to meet the needs of (presumably) more efficient business or governmental organizations. One contemporary observer, referring to "the hum of corporate buzzwords" in the academy, has commented that "a person would be hard pressed these days to find a college that doesn't claim to be evaluating or reshaping itself through one of these approaches" (Nicklin, 1995, p. A33). This "hum" is not new; it has been a feature of the higher education landscape for at least the past forty years.

Among the first of these processes was the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS), initially developed by Rand for use by the Defense Department and adopted by many higher education institutions in the early 1960s. Among the most recent are Business Process Reengineering (BPR), and Benchmarking. In between, business management scholars have documented over two dozen management innovations that were proposed between 1950 and 1990 (Pascale, 1990), some of which were adopted by institutions of higher education. The development and advocacy of new management approaches in both nonacademic and academic management continues, and at an increasing pace.

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In the business sector these new ideas are often "presented as universally applicable quick-fix solutions—along with the obligatory and explicit caution that their recommendations are *not* quick fixes and will require substantial management understanding and commitment. As many managers will attest, the result has been a dazzling array of what are often perceived as management fads—fads that frequently become discredited soon after they have been widely propagated" (Eccles & Nohria, 1992, p. 7).

Many of these management innovations, when adopted by higher education, also exhibit the characteristics that led Allen and Chaffee (1981) to define them as fads; they are usually borrowed from other settings, applied without full consideration of their limitations, presented either as complex or deceptively simple, rely on jargon, and emphasize rational decision making. Following Allen and Chaffee, I use the term "fads" to refer collectively and non-pejoratively to certain higher education management innovations enjoying brief popularity, a use consistent with the definition in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (p. 444) of a fad as "a practice or interest followed for a time with exaggerated zeal." Not all management innovations are fads. Some (for example, fund accounting) may diffuse and be adopted rapidly through institutional networks to become an accepted part of the system. On the other hand, fads, by definition, are ultimately not widely adopted throughout an organizational system.

This study is grounded in two basic propositions: first, that it is possible to use the literature to trace the evolution of a management fad from the time of its creation to its eventual abandonment and second, that management fads may diffuse between nonacademic and academic systems. These are not novel notions. Informal observations of one or both of them have been noted previously by higher education scholars. For example, commenting on the movement of management innovations between the nonacademic and academic sectors, Baldridge and Okimi (1982) said "Every six months, it seems, a new fad sweeps through management circles. First it strikes the business community, then government, and finally education. Think back a few years and the mind stumbles on the carcasses of fads once touted as the newest 'scientific' way to manage an organization." These fads may "arrive at higher education's doorstep five years after their trial in business, often just as corporations are discarding them" (Marchese, 1991, p. 7). Once the fad has been introduced into higher education, a standard sequence is suggested: "First, the system will be widely acclaimed in the higher education literature; institutions will eagerly ask how best to implement it. Next, the publication of a number of case studies will appear, coupled with testimonials

to the system's effectiveness. Finally, both the term and the system will gradually disappear from view" (Chaffee, 1985, p. 133). Management fads in higher education thus appear to follow the cycle of educational innovations in general: "Early enthusiasm, widespread dissemination, subsequent disappointment, and eventual decline" (Slavin, 1989, p. 752). The movement of fads has been noted not only between different sectors in the same country, but also between the same sectors in different countries, and America may be the world leader in such management exports. Neave (1997, p. 278) has commented, "Never in the recent history of higher education in Europe have we seen such a frenzy of model exportation, from North America to Western Europe and from thence eastwards. We have a dangerous faith in management models, often developed in organisational settings other than the university, and no less in their capacity to act as a 'quick fix'."

The comments of these previous observers have for the most part been anecdotal and casual. In contrast, this study takes a more systematic approach to understanding the management fad phenomenon. It analyzes the literature of academic management fads to seek patterns permitting the construction of a Weberian ideal type, a conceptualization "based on observations of reality that are designed to make comparisons possible" (Rogers, 1995, p. 263). This ideal type allows us retrospectively to consider the "life cycle" of academic management fads from the time of their diffusion into higher education until the time of their eventual abandonment, re-invention, or partial incorporation. Analysis of this life cycle may improve our understanding of the effects of management innovations of the past and give both institutional and political policymakers a context in which to understand the possible trajectories of academic management techniques that may be introduced in the future.

The life cycle developed here is based on data from seven case studies in which the cases were not institutions but the natural histories of specific management techniques. Each case study[1] was based on an analysis of a selected sample of periodical, monograph, and technical literature for the period 1960 to the present, describing and analyzing seven widely discussed management techniques which were advocated for use in higher education. The management innovations considered were Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS), Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB), Management by Objectives (MBO), Strategic Planning, Total Quality Management/Continuous Quality Improvement (TQM/CQI), Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and Benchmarking. The literature sampled was selected to include foundational works for each technique both in and outside higher education, repeatedly cited journal articles, conference presentations and fugitive materials identified

through the ERIC data base (*ERIC on CD-ROM, 1966–1979, 1980–September 1996*, 1995), and a snowball sample of other references cited in these materials. Each case interrogated the literature database to ask the following questions:

- What were the essential characteristics of the management innovation?
- When, in what setting, and under what circumstances did the innovation originally appear?
- How did the innovation diffuse into higher education?
- What were the outcomes of the innovation in its original and higher education settings?
- When, and for what reasons, was the management technique abandoned?

The cases were then reviewed iteratively using a process of explanation building (Yin, 1984) to develop the cross case analysis presented in this article. The analysis proposes the stages in the life cycle of management fads within organizational sectors, suggests the lagged phases through which fads are diffused between the nonacademic and the academic sectors, and discusses some similarities and differences in the fad adoption process in both academic and nonacademic systems.

The Life Cycle Stages of the Fads Process

The cross-case analysis found a consistent and predictable five-stage cycle which describes the trajectory of management fads: creation, narrative evolution, time lag, narrative devolution, and dissonance resolution. The stage process is depicted in Figure 1. This section describes the fad trajectory as it appears *within* either the non-academic or academic organizational sectors. The following section considers how the innovation moves *between* organizational sectors

Stage 1:Creation

A crisis is claimed to exist in an organizational sector, usually related to an enacted environment (Weick, 1979) of the larger social system (for example, the Cold War, recession) or an organizational subsystem within it (for example, lack of international competitiveness in business, or lack of attention to customer needs in higher education). Present modes of operation are alleged to be inadequate to address the crisis, and the adoption of a new management technique is proposed to solve the problem. The new technique is supported by advocates (often, paid con-

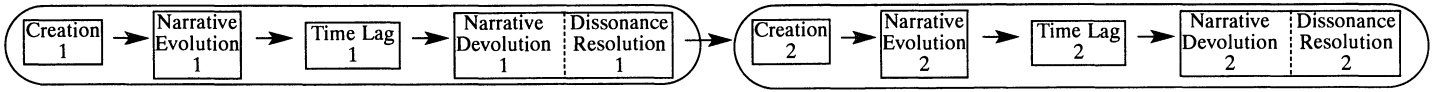


FIG. 1. The Life Cycle Stages of the Fads Process

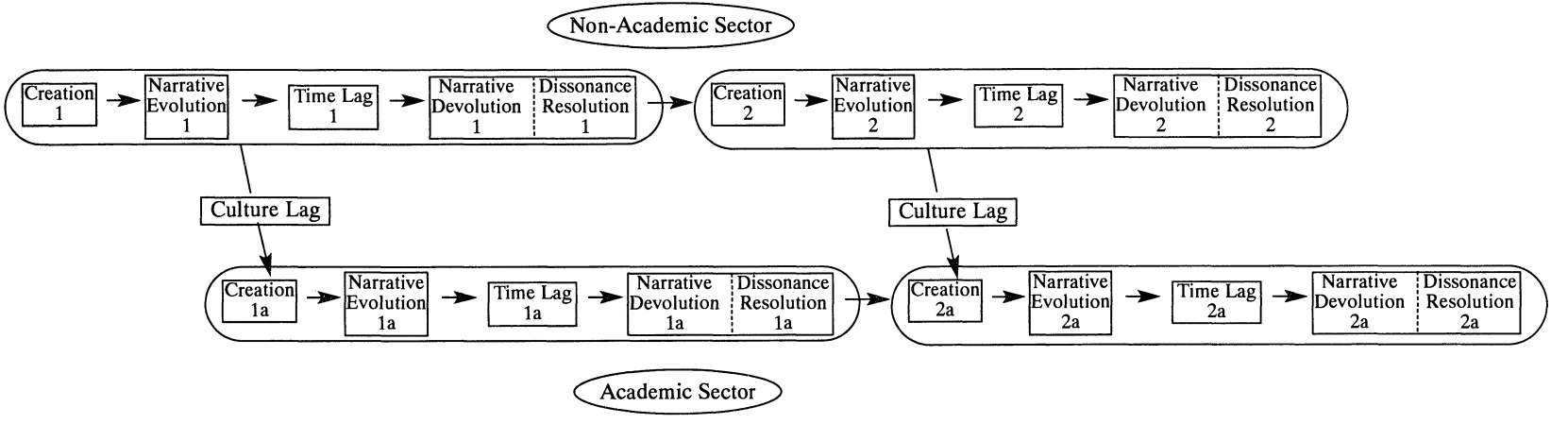


FIG. 2. The Movement of Fads Between Sectors

sultants whose livelihood depends on creating and disseminating this new management technique), by dramatic but unverified narratives by external champions, and by enthusiastic statements of early institutional adopters. The stories, or narratives (Roe, 1994) developed in this creation stage include claims of unusual success.

As a consequence of these claims, additional institutions participating in common interorganizational networks (Rogers, 1995) and accepting the claims of crisis, are encouraged to adopt the new technique. The technique is initially presented in simplified terms, which appear to be so consistent with common sense and with rationalized organizational myths related to efficiency and effectiveness (Meyer & Rowan, 1992) as to make counterarguments difficult. Advocates state that, unlike previous techniques (which may be explicitly denigrated as fads), the technique now being promoted will significantly improve core organizational processes and functions. Promises of extraordinary outcomes are made, and resistors are painted as traditionalists unwilling or unable to respond to change. The technique is often presented as both necessary and sufficient to transform the organizational sector; true believers may present their views with messianic zeal and suggest that the success, perhaps even the survival, of the sector depends on adopting this innovation. Adoption of the technique may be supported, or in some cases driven, by the availability of a new technology that appears to make its implementation feasible. In retrospect, the new technology being promoted may be seen by some as an example of a solution seeking out a problem to which it might be the answer (Cohen & March, 1974).

Stage 2: The Narrative Evolution

Narratives begun in the Creation Stage become elaborated and more widely disseminated. Stories of successful implementation are increasingly distributed and the innovation hailed. The narrative focuses on claimed benefits; little attention is given to potential costs. There are few counternarratives, and those who attempt to relate traditional counternarratives are labeled as apologists out of touch with contemporary needs. It is asserted that the new technique has been widely adopted, if not throughout the system then at least by the higher status members of the system. The allegations of widespread adoption persuade even more institutions to adopt through imitation or to maintain legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1992). Consultants, champions, purveyors of the technology, and adopters increasingly circulate within the organizational system, making presentations at professional meetings and writing articles for professional journals that contribute to the diffusion of the innovation. These presentations serve to certify and reinforce the status of the per-

son making them, as well as that of the institutions to which they refer. Some of the stories of success prove to be attractive to newspapers, newsmagazines, and other agents of mass media eager to spot new trends, so that the name and/or acronym of the innovation, and simplistic statements of its foundational ideas, become popularly diffused. Organizations adopting the innovation are applauded for acknowledging the existence of serious problems, engaging in efforts to improve and reform, and recognizing that system and social benefits should outweigh selfish interests of organizational participants. Organizations not adopting the innovation may be criticized for being resistant to change, conservative, wasteful, and self-interested.

Stage 3. The Time Lag

There is a lag between the time the new technique is created and disseminated and the time at which user reactions and independent analyses become publicly available. Stories of successful adoption continue to be disseminated during this period. These stories are usually written by, or about, organizational members who have vested interests in being seen as being associated with a successful program and whose leadership is thereby given visibility. At the same time, revisionist and cautionary stories begin to surface, some reminding organizations of the unfulfilled promises of previous innovations and others suggesting that not all those adopting the innovation have been successful with it. Scholars and others (who may have vested interests different from the promoters of the innovation) begin to disseminate analyses of data not previously available. During this time lag period, the acceptance of the innovation peaks, and the pace of new adopters slows as those most likely to adopt have already done so.

Stage 4. The Narrative Devolution

As the more recent revisionist analyses are disseminated, the power of the original narrative of creation is challenged by a new narrative of skepticism. Enthusiasm for the new technique based on initial reports of success becomes tempered by countervailing reports of failure as outcomes fall short of unrealistic expectations. Data collected by scholars and other observers studying the new technique suggest that the original claims of success were either overstated or were not sustained, organizational performance was not improved in the predicted manner, and claims of the extent of adoption had been exaggerated. Surveys of users reflect increased dissatisfaction. Acceptance of the new technique diminishes, and journal and newspaper commentaries report on the reversal of fortune and declare the new technique to be "dead as a pet rock" (Byrne, 1997, p. 47).

Stage 5. The Resolution of Dissonance

There is significant temporal overlap between Stages 4 and 5, but they are separated here for purposes of analyses because they appear to have different dynamic properties. As champions and adopters see the demise of the innovation which only recently they had vigorously advocated, there is a need to account for its failure in ways that protect both their status and their ideological views. "A man with conviction is a hard man to change" (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956), so that it should not be unexpected that those who support the premises of a fad are not dissuaded from their views merely because it has not been successful. Analyses of these seven fads reveal many of the rationalizations used, the most frequent of which are lack of leadership, intransigence of followers, improper implementation, and lack of resources. In addition, the innovation, which was described during its narrative evolution stage as a defined set of specific ideas and practices, had developed by the narrative devolution stage into many programs that, although sharing the same name, were quite different. It is thus possible to maintain faith in the "true" innovation by ascribing failures to the flaws of its mutations. The least frequent response to failure is to consider the possibility that the new technique itself may have been based on invalid premises, so that successful implementation was either highly improbable or, in some cases, impossible. Identifying failure as due to the weaknesses of specific individuals, unforeseeable external forces, or correctable flaws in implementation sets the stage for either reinventing the innovation and recycling it with minor modifications and a major change of name (Rogers, 1995) or for proposing a better innovation (clearly labeled as "not a fad") which is claimed as both necessary and sufficient for organizational improvement and in which the unfortunate problems leading to the abandonment of the earlier innovation have been corrected. The Creation Stage begins anew, and the stages of the cycle are repeated.

The Movement of Fads Between Sectors

Each of the management fads considered in this study was initially implemented in either business or governmental organizations before being diffused into higher education. There is relatively little overlap between the interorganizational networks of the innovation source groups and the higher education systems in which they were later applied. Members of both academic and nonacademic organizations have more association and communication with those inside their own sector than with those outside. Most people in different sectors read different journals, attend different meetings, share different values and perspectives,

and live in different organizational cultures. This discontinuity leads to a culture lag so that events that are disseminated and generally known in one sector may not be immediately available to another.

As the apparently successful implementation of a management innovation in the original sector becomes conventional wisdom as part of its Narrative Evolution Stage, groups or individuals concerned with issues of organizational efficiency and effectiveness suggest the innovation may be suitable for adoption in new settings, such as higher education. Exactly how the transition between sectors is accomplished is unclear. It may be related to the increasing availability of stories in the popular press, but research on the adoption of innovation (Rogers, 1995) suggests that interpersonal communications are more effective than mass communications in disseminating innovations. Moreover, interpersonal communications about innovations are more effective when they occur between individuals who are similar or, as Rogers (p. 286) calls them, homophilous, than between members of different sectors, who are more likely to be dissimilar (or heterophilous). This suggests that a major vector of management innovation in higher education may be boundary spanning individuals with homophilous identities in both the nonacademic and academic sectors. These might include business leaders or legislators serving on higher education boards of trustees, college presidents and other academics appointed to business boards of directors, members of professional associations formed at least in part to maintain linkages between higher education and external groups, academics who read journals in multidisciplinary areas, such as business or human resource management, and consultants who solicit clients in both the education and noneducation sectors.

As a consequence of the culture lag, champions in academic institutions become familiar with innovations in the nonacademic sector at about that time in the nonacademic sector's Narrative Evolution Stage in which expectations are high and increased levels of adoption are claimed. Unaware of the revisionist analyses taking place during the latter part of the Time Lag and early part of the Narrative Devolution Stages in the nonacademic sector, but persuaded by the enthusiastic reports developed during the earlier Narrative Evolution Stage, champions in higher education begin the Creation Stage in their sector. The higher education sector then recapitulates the cycle of the nonacademic sector, but in Academic Procession-like fashion, always one to two stages behind. This relationship is depicted in Figure 2.

Similarities and Differences Between Sectors

Innovations are ideas or practices perceived as new by the adopting organization (Rogers, 1995), regardless of whether they are objectively

new, so it is not surprising that the process of fad adoption seen in academic settings is similar to that followed by the same innovation in nonacademic settings. In both sectors, initial decisions to adopt management innovations appear to be based on subjective judgments disseminated by homophilous peers, rather than analyses of empirical data, and in both sectors the momentum of innovators and early adopters is accelerated during the Narrative Evolution Stage. When 10–20% of a population has adopted an innovation, it has reached the "take- off" point (Rogers, 1995, p. 259). At this time the fate of an innovation is in the hands of a group that Rogers refers to as the "Early Majority." Compared with innovators and early adopters, the Early Majority is more deliberative and has a longer decision time. Acceptance by the Early Majority sets the stage for further acceleration and possible adoption of the innovation by all members of the social system, thus embracing it as part of standard practice. Rejection by the Early Majority leads to a drop in adoption rates and eventual discontinuance within the system, thus identifying the innovation as a fad.

It is during the Time Lag of Stage 3 that a major difference between fads in the academic and nonacademic sectors appears as they move toward Narrative Devolution. In the nonacademic sector, it is a period during which data of various kinds are collected, analyzed, and distributed within the sector. These data may come from surveys of the extent of adoption within the sector, scholarly comparisons of differences in outcomes between adopters and non-adopters, or surveys of users that assess their satisfaction with the new procedures. Results are likely to be presented quantitatively. In contrast, in the academic sector, information collected during the Time Lag of Stage 3, with infrequent exceptions, is limited to nonquantitative claims of the extent of adoption. These are usually presented as generalizations with no supporting documentation and commonly based on subjective judgments of outcomes by champions or adopters. There are few published examples in the academic sector of attempts to assess the institutional consequences of a management fad through data that provide evidence either of organizational outcomes or of the satisfaction of users. I can suggest two possibilities to account for the differences how fads are assessed in the two sectors.

The first, and most obvious, is that the two sectors respond to different kinds of data and in different ways. An innovation's meaning in either sector is not self-evident, but instead is "gradually worked out through a process of social construction" (Rogers, 1995, p. xvii). It is stereotypical, but perhaps not without some justification, to think of business as being data-driven and bottom-line oriented; quantitative data are sought after and considered of great consequence when produced.

Results can be measured in profit and loss statements, numbers are important, and decisions to retain or abandon an innovation can be made rapidly. In the more loosely coupled academic sector, quantitative measures are suspect. Interpretations develop slowly, and it takes longer for the meaning of an innovation to be shared by organizational participants. The data to which the business sector responds may move quickly up the system, whereas in the academic sector it may move more slowly, as counternarratives of shared authority and other myths begin to respond to the original narrative of efficiency. The Narrative Devolution Stage may be initiated by quantitative data in the nonacademic sector and by interpretive data in the academic sector.

The second,and less obvious possibility, is that the meaning of "adoption" may differ between the sectors. In both the academic and nonacademic sectors, organizations may claim to have adopted an innovation without truly having done so. However, the hierarchical structures and legal authority systems of the nonacademic sector make it more likely that senior management can impose management innovations on the institution's technical core. In contrast, the unique dual governance structure and loosely coupled processes of academic institutions buffer educational from administrative procedures and permit subgroups to operate with significant autonomy. This makes it easier in higher education for an innovation to be publicly "adopted," but not actually implemented in a way that affects core institutional processes. In this way, academic institutions may have greater opportunities than others to engage in what I call the "virtual adoption" of fads. For example, TQM/CQI, which entered higher education through the business sector, was said by senior academic administrators to be used by 70% of all colleges and universities by 1994 (El-Khawas, 1994). But by 1997 even TQM/CQI's strongest advocates acknowledged that only several hundred institutions had actually experimented with it in any meaningful way, and no more than a dozen had implemented it as a central component of their program (Marchese, 1997). Similar discrepancies between early claims of adoption and later analyses of actual use exist for each of the fads in this study. Academic institutions may have the ability to respond to fads as they respond to educational reforms—they may adopt them as policy, but never implement them (Cuban, 1990). Because business and government can impose fad processes that influence what people actually do, they may be more sensitive to data that may confirm or deny the validity of the fad practice. In contrast, because the "adoption" of fads at academic institutions may be primarily symbolic and have little effect on what most people do, there may be less emphasis on collecting and analyzing quantitative data to validate or invalidate the inno-

vation and more emphasis on collecting impressionistic data that can justify the original adoption decision. Virtual adoption of fads allows an institution to have its cake and eat it too. Public claims of adopting an externally hailed innovation certify an institution's progressive attitude and concern for efficiency and improved management; private isolation of the fad protects the institution from the disruptive effects it would have if it were really implemented.

Virtual adoption is essentially superficial, although at some institutions where adoption initiatives of senior administrators have been particularly intense it may lead to some localized and undue disruption and discomfort. However, for the most part it is unlikely to have significant impact on the institutional core. Virtual adoption means that academic institutions may find it easier than other organizations both to "adopt" management fads and to abandon them. Because the fad has been embraced only by the senior administration, and not the technical core, neither adoption or abandonment requires significant attention or effort from most of the organization's members or has a major impact on their daily lives. In this way, the adoption of academic management fads is similar to the academic propensity regularly to form societies for the purpose of making silk purses out of sows' ears. As Cornford put it ninety years ago, "This tendency is not as dangerous as it may seem; for it may be observed that the sows, after taking their washing with a grunt or two, trundle back to the wallow; and the purse-market is quoted as firm" (1964/1908, p. 13).

Discussion

Suggestions by previous analysts of the existence of regularities in the management fad adoption process in higher education are confirmed by patterns in this cross-case analysis of data describing the life cycle of seven management innovations. On a small number of campuses, a fad may take hold and be maintained over an extended period, long after most institutions have rejected it. Occasionally, the fad may be integrated into an institution's culture and become a means by which the institution differentiates itself from others. These exceptional successes provide the evidence true believers may use to argue that the innovation is sound and that its generalized failure is due to faulty implementation rather than an inadequate conceptual base. But perhaps a more realistic lesson to be learned is that in the context of the great diversity of colleges and universities in the United States, an idea may find fertile soil in some microclimates, even as it proves to be sterile in most others. If the success of management fads over the past 40 years is measured by the extent

to which they have been adopted and maintained in recognizable form in a reasonable number of institutions of higher education, it can it be said with confidence that these innovations have uniformly failed.

Still, management fads in the academic sector continue to be created or reinvented despite the absence of data suggesting that they have been successful and in the face of the failure of most of them to be widely adopted by the sector. Why does this happen? Those who develop the fads, as well as those who support them, appear to view academic organizations through the lens of an organizational paradigm that emphasizes the importance of goals, rationality, and causality. The acceptance of this paradigm leads those who believe it to choose problems "that while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solutions" Kuhn (1970, p. 37). Fads therefore are proposed solutions to puzzles seen as problems because of the paradigm being used. Management fads, even though they may sometimes be explicitly claimed by their creators to reflect a new paradigm, in reality reflect the old paradigms expected as part of "ordinary science."

Although fads fail, the paradigm supporting them remains. As Kuhn pointed out, failure of a paradigm to solve problems does not by itself negate the paradigm; it merely suggests to its adherents that the puzzle has not yet been solved and that further work is necessary. For example, after acknowledging that TQM/CQI has been ignored or rejected by most potential users, advocates still point to a small number of limited but presumably successful programs to claim that the system does work; it just isn't being implemented properly (Marchese, 1997). It is typical to deny the failure of fads by arguing that others have used it successfully, that it takes time to overcome past practices, and that results will be achieved in the future (Nohria & Berkley, 1994). Because of these arguments, there are no data that can convince a true believer that a fad is not effective, and claims that a fad "works" therefore cannot be disproved. Just as failure cannot negate a paradigm, the failure of a narrative to assist in solving policy dilemmas does not necessarily negate the narrative. Narratives cannot be overturned by countervailing evidence, but only by a different paradigm or "an equally straightforward narrative that tells a better story" (Roe, 1994, p. 40). Unless and until higher education is able to tell its story with a narrative more compelling than market-oriented economic utility, it is safe to assume that another fad, similar in many ways to those we have seen over the past 40 years is around the corner, and it will go through the stages within sectors and the phases between sectors described here.

Fads develop outside higher education and then are imported. I can think of no example in which a management innovation developed in

higher education has been explicitly exported to business. Why is business in the lead? Some may say it's because business is more concerned with management than is education. A more cynical suggestion is that business has more consultants who make money by proposing and marketing fads than does higher education. Why do consultants give priority to marketing fads to business over education? As Willie Sutton said about why he robbed banks, "because that's where the money is."

Although management fads in higher education have not had the positive outcomes promised by their proponents, it is also true that the loose coupling of academic organizations has prevented the dire consequences predicted by some fad opponents. However, it would be a mistake to believe that fads have no consequences at all for the organizations or systems that adopt them. Some of these consequences may be negative, as people become cynical and resistant to new ideas, the judgment of leaders is questioned, and funds and energy are seen as being diverted from important institutional activities. But there may be positive consequences as well if fads "are kept in the proper perspective and incorporated into the collective wisdom of a company" (Rifkin, 1994, p. 11). Fads contain a "kernel of truth" that can help institutions reconsider familiar processes. Fads may have important latent functions in cuing attention, promoting action, and increasing the variety necessary for organizational evolution (Birnbaum, 2000). Fads may improve some nonacademic support activities at some institutions. And even after the fad itself has faded from view, its residual legacy, like the smile of the Cheshire Cat, may remain and indirectly influence institutional structure and values (Bohl & Luthans, 1996). Even when fads fail, they are important; the more we understand them, the greater the opportunity to increase their potential for institutional improvement and decrease their potential for institutional disruption.

Notes

[1]These case studies, and the citations to the literature on which each is based, are presented in chapters two through four of R. Birnbaum, *Management Fads in Higher Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

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