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Strategies in Universities: Tensions Between Macro Intentions and Micro Actions

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Resumo

No contexto universitário, as estratégias assumem uma configuração distinta em razão da permanente disputa entre a alta administração e a área acadêmica. Isso desencadeia um conflito que contrapõe macro intenções da administração a micro ações das unidades acadêmicas. Neste estudo, examinamos em que extensão estratégias acadêmicas são impactadas pelas tensões desencadeadas por macro intenções da alta administração e micro ações da gestão acadêmica. A pesquisa baseia-se em estudo comparado abrangendo três universidades brasileiras. Identificamos como principais fontes de tensões entre alta administração e gestão acadêmica: a complexidade organizacional, o contexto político, a estrutura frouxamente acoplada e a autonomia profissional. Resultados revelaram um difícil alinhamento entre intenções e ações enquanto estratégias relevantes são praticadas no setor acadêmico. Concluímos que modelos gerenciais importados do mercado apresentam benefícios duvidosos e controversos na gestão de universidades. A maioria das estratégias foi representada por micro ações na área acadêmica, derivadas de iniciativas espontâneas, *insights*, intuições e ações não intencionais de gestores acadêmicos e professores, com significativo impacto tanto no desempenho acadêmico quanto no organizacional.

Palavras-chave: universidades; estratégias; macro intenções; micro ações; tensões.

Abstract

In the university setting, strategies take on a different configuration due to a permanent dispute between top administration and the academic sector. This triggers a conflict between macro intentions and micro actions at the academic level. In this study, we examined to what extent academic strategic actions are impacted by tensions triggered by the macro intentions of top management and micro actions in the academic management. This research is based on a comparative study involving three Brazilian universities. We identified key sources of tension between top managers and academic managers, such as organizational complexity, the political context, a loosely coupled structure and professional autonomy. The outcome revealed a difficult alignment between intentions and actions while relevant strategies were practiced in the academic sector. We concluded that managerial business models imported from the market led to dubious and controversial benefits in university management. Most strategies were represented by micro actions in the academic area derived from spontaneous initiatives, insights, hunches and non-intentional actions of academic managers and professors that had a considerable impact on the universities' academic performance.

Key words: universities; strategies; macro intentions; micro actions; tensions.

Introduction

The education sector has been characterized by growing competition, a search for new market niches, quality challenges and unpredictable changes from outside forces. New types of educational organizations are emerging in the national and international arena, seeking new students and attractive market opportunities, facing strong competition and cultural challenges. All these factors require new knowledge-sharing approaches, more aggressive market positioning, higher quality services, and more institutional accountability (Locke & Spender, 2011; Parker, 2002).

To respond to these challenges in both domestic and international contexts, universities now, more than ever, need strategies to achieve their goals, fulfill their missions and meet the expectations of stakeholders. In this sense, these organizations are compelled to reorganize their structures and managerial procedures while reexamining strategies to better fit into this new context.

To survive in such a complex environment, universities have increasingly incorporated new managerial procedures, and consequently developed an image of modern and efficient organizations. Most are fads. Some are old wine in new bottles, promising a better world through the application of well-known managerial approaches. Nevertheless, the results have fallen short of expectations, resulting in wasted time and resources and becoming a source of delusion and frustration among top administrators (Birnbaum, 2000; Ginsberg, 2011; Mintzberg, 1994). Traditionally, the literature in the field, based on models shaped for business firms, has stressed a rationalistic approach to the strategic process, most often represented by strategic planning and orchestrated by top management. However, strategic management assumes a different configuration in a university setting due to a permanent dispute between top management, which is responsible for running the entire organization, and the academic sector, where professional knowledge is concentrated. This clash triggers a conflict between macro intentions and micro interests and actions at the academic level.

Universities are well known for their unique characteristics that result in particularly distinctive management practices. Researchers in the field of higher education view universities as professional bureaucracies (Mintzberg, 1994), political arenas (Baldrige, 1971), organized anarchies (Cohen & March, 1974), collegiums (Millet, 1962), loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) and pluralistic systems (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006). All these special characteristics are somehow intertwined, raising the level of complexity within this kind of organization, reflecting a pluralistic context that affects organizational behavior and challenging the effectiveness of managerialist methodologies (Stacey, 2010). Organizations like universities also have short-term goals and bottom line demands, in addition to long-term plans and strategies.

In this study, we sought to answer the following research question: to what extent are academic strategic actions affected by tensions triggered by the macro intentions of top management and the micro actions of the academic management? To answer this question, we first examined the literature on tensions, stressing their relevance and the influence of tensions on managerial practices. Second, we characterized the special features of universities as complex systems and their influence on strategic management. Third, we discussed the impact of key organizational tensions on the strategic practice at three private universities.

By analyzing the tensions and their implications for strategic practices in universities, this paper makes a clear contribution to university strategic management, especially as it demonstrates the difficulty of aligning organizational goals with the specificities and interests of the academic units. Our analysis also contributes to a better understanding of an intricate process, where a less exacting rationality, such as Strategic Planning, along with politics and psychological factors like sensemaking, spontaneity, hunches and conversations, are prevalent and affect strategic results. We highlight that tensions stem mostly from the complex nature of universities, meaning that strategic management in this context is better represented by individual actions and micro strategies rather than formal practices prescribed in strategic planning. Finally, we discuss the complexity of universities (a pluralist, highly

political, loosed coupled context where ambiguity of goals prevails), stressing that the existing theories in the field still do not provide a conceptual framework.

Theoretical Foundation

In this section, we present the main theoretical foundations that support the study and particularly our analysis and discussion. Initially, we describe the identified characteristics of universities as unique, complex and pluralistic, and how these elements are a source of puzzles and conflicts that trigger tensions in university management. Finally, we explore the central topic of strategic management in organizations, with special emphasis on the academic sector of universities, stressing the significant role of micro actions in the development and performance of academic and organizational units.

Organizational tensions

The literature indicates that organizations are rife with tensions. The literature on management stresses the predominance of the rational prescriptive and instrumental approach and conformity to managerial models (Stacey, 2010). Top managers pursue an alignment between intentions represented by organization goals, policies, priorities and the actions to be taken by middle and lower level managers. However, the external pressures from a changing and competitive environment, plus the internal social and political dynamics of organizations, paint a different picture full of dilemmas, paradoxes and tensions facing the managers. It is the responsibility of organizational leaders and managers to learn how to cope with such tensions in order to respond effectively, seeking to improve organizational effectiveness, competitiveness and sustainability.

In universities, as complex systems (Birnbaum, 2000; Stacey, 2011), tensions arise in all areas and levels of the organization due to clashes between interest groups, loose structure and the autonomy of the academic agents. In such an organizational context, short-term and bottom-line demands tend to conflict with long-term goals and strategies, raising tensions and posing challenges to academic management.

Strategies in universities

Strategic management has been widely used in different organizational settings. In educational organizations, strategic management has been applied randomly. This behavior can be justified by several reasons, including the pressure generated by an increasingly competitive environment, a frenetic search for better performance, and constant concern over efficiency and quality. A drive to make the management of universities adhere to certain standards of efficiency has stimulated the use of rationalist managerial methodologies. This is known as managerialism, and it has been widely criticized by authors such as Locke and Spender (2011) and Stacey (2010) as a reductionist science of certainty. However, universities did not adapt these methodologies to the unique, complex and specific nature of universities.

The conventional rationalistic assumptions of management are not adequate for this context. Top-down organizational strategy-making, with previously stated goals, to be implemented by employees, is not suitable for professional organizations like universities and hospitals (Meyer, Pascuci, & Mamédio, 2016; Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg & Rose, 2007; Ramirez, Byrkjeflot, & Pinheiro, 2016). This is due to the complex nature of these organizations. Universities, in comparison with traditional, commercial and machine type organizations, present ambiguity of policies and goals (Baldrige, 1971) pluralism, and conflicts of interests (Jarzabkowski, 2003) between the top management team as policy makers and professionals in the academic units as agents.

Rational models for management, stressing that thinking precedes action, have been criticized by authors when examining the uniqueness of universities such as loosely coupled systems (Birnbaum,

2000; Weick, 1976, 1987). Authors, like Hardy, Langley, Mintzberg and Rose (1983), concentrated their comments on the special features of strategy formation in a university setting. Strategies in universities do exist without a particular effort from central administration, and their formulation does not necessary precede their implementation. Strategies can even be implemented without being formulated (Hardy, Langley, Mintzberg, & Rose, 1983).

Thus, some assumptions of strategic planning, such as control, efficiency, and earning higher profits are expressions of a reality more appropriate to commercial organizations, as they express mechanicity and predictability (Locke & Spender, 2011). Mintzberg (1994) also pointed out the inadequacies of strategic planning by stressing the unfortunate consequences of this approach in professional organizations like universities and hospitals.

Influenced by the predominant model in the literature, strategic planning practices in universities are concentrated in the hands of the top management, with a top down approach, in which general priorities and goals are defined for implementation at the lower academic levels. However, areas like the academic sector of universities, where the knowledge of universities is found, are less understood in the mainstream.

Elements such as professionalized academic work are both concentrated in the activities of individuals and small groups with diverse interests, knowledge and power, and are also unevenly disseminated among them. All are in some way integrated by a loosely coupled system that makes strategy and its management quite a challenge in this context. Therefore, it appears to be of vital importance to look at individual and small group activities, particularly strategic actions by managers and professors within the school setting.

Due to the complex nature of universities, strategy formation in this setting assumes different forms. It is implemented at different levels and areas in different ways due to intense interaction among the key actors. Managers in such pluralistic contexts must seek an ideal state of interdependence among individuals (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006; Meyer *et al.*, 2016).

Like middle managers, the role played by academic managers and professors as strategic agents is pivotal in strategy formation in academic units, to the extent that they are responsible for mediating between strategic macro intentions and academic interests (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2006).

In this context, it seems to be coherent to believe that strategies are not only the result of strategic planning, but mainly a practice by managers supported by creativity and spontaneity, and sensitive to a dynamic and complex environment (Stacey, 2011; Whittington & Cailluet, 2008). This aspect has proved to be particularly challenging to top administrators in charge of guiding academic managers and faculty members to commit to new strategies and promote changes based on spontaneous initiatives and sensemaking, seeking to improve teaching, learning and academic productivity.

Therefore, analyzing strategies in organizations requires an understanding of what people know and do at both macro and micro levels. Strategy as a social activity emerged by concentrating on human activity in organizations, focusing on the practical side, on routines and initiatives that make up the everyday life of organizations. In this respect, the relevance of micro perspectives on strategy is proposed, stressing informal managerial actions. Undermining this proposition is an understanding that invisible micro-activities constitute strategy and strategizing in practice (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003)

Moreover, this kind of strategic approach reinforces the critical role of department and faculty heads as relevant agents in the process and practice of strategizing. In this sense, strategy can be represented by micro actions derived from individual initiatives, plus sensemaking and sensegiving of agents in different echelons of the organization (Denis *et al.*, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2003; Mantere, 2005).

This approach counterbalances the rationalistic procedures that dominate the traditional literature on management by bringing about a more humane way of viewing managerial practices within organizations. From the perspective of strategy as social practice, strategy is perceived mostly as a

combination of intuition, feelings, hunches and judgments, requiring much more art than technique in practice. In this sense, strategic practices play different roles, such as communication, integration and symbolism (Whittington, Molloy, Mayer, & Smith, 2006), reflecting different cultures, process and practices in different organizations. Therefore, strategic initiatives in the university setting are represented by a blend of rational analysis, feelings, creativity, politics and hunches, requiring considerable tolerance of controversy (Keller, 1983).

Methodology

We adopted a comparative, qualitative case study design based on three Brazilian universities, referred to here as Alpha, Beta and Gamma. The universities are located in the eastern and southern parts of the country. Two are religious-oriented institutions and the other a private institution. At the time of the study all of the organizations had accumulated significant experience in strategic planning and management over a considerable period of time. All three follow similar approaches, in quite distinct but equally competitive environments, using their own strategies and achieving different results.

We collected data from four main sources: interviews, questionnaires, documents and non-participant observation (Jaccoud & Meyer, 2008) to avoid possible bias resulting from a single data source. The sampling criterion that we adopted for the interviews and the questionnaires was intentional, focusing on managers directly involved in the strategic management of the universities. Initially we applied the questionnaires to 81 university administrators in the top management and academic management, with 33 from Alpha, 26 from Beta and 22 from Gamma. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify their perceptions of the strategic intentions and actions within the universities.

The purpose of the second phase of data collection was to conduct a closer investigation of how strategy initiatives occur. We adopted a guided interview to identify how the strategies were developed and particularly the influence of sensemaking, spontaneity and creativity of the agents in the decisions related to this process. In this phase, we interviewed 40 university managers (17 from Alpha, 12 from Beta and 11 from Gamma) at different organizational levels: top management (presidents, vice-presidents), academic management (deans and department heads) and professors. Top and academic managers who were interviewed had a large experience in management mostly in academic institutions. The main information on the interviewees profiles is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Profile of Interviewees

Elements	Alpha	Beta	Gamma
Type	President, Deans and department chairmen, and professors	President, Vice-Presidents and department heads	President, Vice-President, Deans, and department heads
Managerial experience	Large experience of top and academic managers	Large experience of top and academic managers	Large experience of top managers and medium experience of academic managers
Selection process	Top and academic managers chosen based on prior academic experience	Top and academic managers chosen based on prior academic experience	President was elected by the academic community, which chooses academic managers based on prior academic experience

Note. Source: Prepared by the authors.

The data collection instruments were tested and validated with similar academic managers of another university that did not participate in the study. The sample of respondents and interviewees was not intended to be identical. We also took notes as non-participant observers and kept field diaries to aid analysis. Overall, the material transcribed for analysis (interviews and field diaries) amounted to over 490 pages. Archival materials were also used. These included the strategic plans of the universities, reports on activities, and information available on the universities' websites.

The primary data were analyzed using Narrative Analysis (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001), with meaning as the analysis technique. We analyzed the questionnaire data using descriptive statistics, with the support of Sphinx software. The secondary data were analyzed using document analysis. The variety of methods adopted for gathering data allowed the Triangulation Approach to be used.

Profile of the universities

Alpha University. It is a medium-size private university and religious-oriented institution with 30,000 students. At Alpha, a formal plan was set for the entire organization, including its four campuses. We identified three main strategies. The first strategy concentrated on the expansion of the university's educational services to other cities in the state and setting up new campuses. Being a religious-oriented institution, this overall strategy represented a new, more business-like style of management, with emphasis on goals and performance evaluation seeking the measurability and improvement of the academic work. The second strategy dealt with increasing enrollments, which was considered vital to strengthen the institution's finances, as 90% of the total revenues are tuition driven. A third organizational strategy focused on improving the academic quality of teaching and research. Participation in the strategic decisions was restricted to the top administrators.

Beta University. It is a small religious and private university with 5,000 students. At Beta the top management was concerned with strengthening the formal strategic management process. To integrate strategic efforts, the top management sought to align the overall goals, priorities, main objectives and key strategic actions carried out within the academic units, using conversations and resource allocation as tools to support new initiatives. Intense informal interactions and negotiations took place between top managers and academic managers seeking to address strategic issues. Regarding strategic actions, there was concern and some difficulty among academic managers over how to meet the goals and expectations of the top management stated in the formal plan, with some strategic actions.

Gamma University. It is a private regional university with 30,000 students. Based on strong leadership by the President, who ran the institution for ten years, Gamma introduced a new culture of managerialism (Locke & Spender, 2011). Managerial procedures were applied to the top management involving the Vice-Presidents as well as academic managers such as deans and department heads. Consultants from the business sector were brought to the campus to introduce and disseminate new managerial tools such strategic planning aligned with performance indicators in the academic sector. The strategies targeted institutional expansion in geographical and academic terms by offering new programs in different parts of the state and outside the state via distance learning. Strategic change was one of the priorities most responsible for strategic actions resting on the shoulders of academic managers.

Analysis

Initially we analyzed the characteristics of strategic actions in the universities. Then we focused our analysis on the sources of tensions and their implications for strategic actions carried out in the academic units.

Strategic actions

When we examined the main features of strategic management, we observed that the universities follow the general pattern by implementing a formal Strategic Planning process. However, some tensions that arose in this process hampered the achievement of more effective results. The approach used by the universities bears some resemblance to umbrella strategies (Mintzberg, 1994). The strategic decision-making processes at the three universities are similar in some aspects. A point in question is the concentration of strategic decisions at the top of the hierarchy. In the case of the three universities, the strategic goals were set and decisions made by the top managers. The formal plan was developed with the assistance of external consultants. This was the case of universities Alpha and Gamma.

Sometimes, depending on the nature of the issues and interests involved, leaders of interest groups were called on to participate in the discussion as a form of legitimizing their decisions and forming a **dominant coalition** (Cyert & March, 1992). As highlighted by a department head, “the strategic directives are decided on by the top management. The department heads were involved because it falls to us to ‘sell’ it idea to the professors. This means that we acted as ‘filters’ between the management and the professors” (Interview, Gamma). Consequently, the transformation of strategic intentions into actions has a strong political bias by involving individual micro actions such negotiations, exchanges and incentives.

At all the universities under study there appears to be a dissemination of some form of grassroots model of strategy. Thus, some strategies initially grow like weeds while others are cultivated and proliferate as patterns disseminated within the organization (Mintzberg & Rose, 2007). In parallel with the formal planning approach, as an initiative coming from the top, we found that a significant amount of strategic actions occur in the academic departments, conducted individually or in small groups by professors (Denis *et al.*, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2003; Mantere, 2005; Rouleau, 2005). According to an academic manager, “the generic directives come from the top down to us, but in daily life, most of the ideas that make the difference are those of the professors. We formed an incredible partnership in the region to offer courses. That was our idea”. (Interview, Alpha). Therefore, this highlights the heavy dependence on the knowledge, skills and network of professionals who enjoy autonomy to perform their duties, based much more on individual than collective minds. This also reinforces the spontaneity based on which ideas and initiatives were derived informally through interactions and conversations to bring about creativity and innovation in the academic units (Bilton & Cummings, 2014).

In universities, as professional organizations, specialist knowledge is located at the bottom of the pyramid, implying that subordinates (faculty) are usually equally or even more knowledgeable than their superiors when it comes to pursuing and achieving their goals. All these elements may account for why there are so many strategists spread over the different areas and levels of the institutions. We observed this in the strategic actions of the universities and mostly in the large or medium-size ones such as University Alpha and Gamma, respectively, and less intensely in University Beta, where informal relations and strategic conversations maintained the culture of following guidelines from the top, a disseminated behavior among academic managers.

In academic units, the plurality of interests plus the ambiguity of the organizational goals and professional autonomy (Baldrige, 1971; Birnbaum, 2000; Cohen & March, 1974), always leave room for different interpretations and actions with regard to a particular reality, or sensemaking and enactment (Weick, 1995) by academic managers and faculty. The outcome is a lack of alignment between top-level goals and the micro actions practiced in the academic area. In this respect, a professor stated that, “some strategies are a mystery. If their meaning is different among its own formulators, who can tell how its executors will view it?” (Interview, Gamma). The predominance of emergent strategies and the presence of subjective aspects that we identified in the day-to-day activities of academic life, such as feelings, spontaneity, trial and error, and reactions, corroborate this statement.

Another common element that we identified in the three universities was the emphasis placed on a formal Strategic Plan, not only as a symbol but also as the main channel of communication with the academic area in terms of goals and strategies (macro intentions). In this respect, one academic manager

was adamant in saying that, “in our courses, we preach planning so much and yet in practice it is not effective” (Interview, Alpha).

However, we found that the vast majority of strategic actions that are effectively executed are less the result of the Strategic Plan and much more the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy, strategic conversations (Weick, 1995) and spontaneous initiatives of academic managers and professors. The most important aspects regarding how strategies occur in the universities in question are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Strategies in the Universities: Characteristics, Intentions and Actions

Elements	ALPHA	BETA	GAMMA
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Formal SP · Top down · Predominance of deliberate strategies · Lack of alignment between SP and budget · Political decisions and conflict · No incentives · Formal/informal interactions · Introduction of managerial practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Formal SP · Top down · Predominance of emergent strategies · Lack of alignment between SP and budget · Political decisions and conflict · No incentives · Informal interactions · Conflicts · Bureaucratic management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Formal SP · Top down · Predominance of deliberate strategies · Lack of alignment between SP and budget · Political decisions and conflict · Negotiations and incentives · Formal/informal interactions · Managerialism
Macro Intentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Academic expansion · Enrollment growth · New campuses · Professionalization of management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Academic expansion · Educational quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Academic expansion · Enrollment growth · Physical expansion · Professionalization of management
Micro actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Strategic conversations · Academic quality · Responses to market demand · Program changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Strategic conversations · Academic quality · Community interactions · Program changes · Self-fulfilling prophecy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Strategic conversations · Academic quality · Responses to market demand · Program changes

Note. Source: Prepared by the authors.

In the cases under study, we noted a significant gap between strategic intentions and strategic actions. Asked about what is mainly responsible for directing their actions, 76% of the interviewees said that it was feeling and “reactions to each problem as they arise” (Interview, Beta). This result shows the importance of subjectivity in this process, factors such as sensemaking and the emergent character of many of the strategies (Weick, 1979).

Once again, we stress the symbolic and somewhat inspiring role of the Strategic Plan in the universities in terms of strategic actions based on the perception of the academic managers and professors. In this regard, one academic manager stated that, “here strategies are like compasses, although many top managers still understand them as something deterministic that functions like a clock” (Interview, Alpha). Thus, at University Alpha, we found that the Strategic Plan appeared to function more as a map for action (Weick, 1987) – or compass, in the words of the interviewee – rather

than a program of activities that that prescribes the organization's goals, priorities and strategic actions to be developed at the lower levels of the organization.

Source of tensions between decisions and actions

We identified the existence of different sources of tension among top and academic managers, causing different impacts on the strategic management of the universities. We verified some main sources of tension (see Table 3) that helped to widen the gap between the strategic intentions of top managers and actions carried out by the academic managers such as organizational complexity, the political context, a loosely coupled structure and professional autonomy.

Table 3

Sources of Tensions

Source of tensions	Examples
Organizational complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Ambiguity of goals · Anarchy · Professional autonomy · Loosely coupled system
Internal politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Plurality of interests · Decision making · Organizing anarchy · Conflicts · Coalition · Priority setting
Strategic practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Rational models (Managerialism) · Participation · Performance indicators · Bureaucratic control · Self-fulfilling prophecy
Resource allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of alignment between SP and budget

Note. Source: Prepared by the authors.

We also found that organizational complexity (Baldrige, 1971; Cohen & March, 1974; March & Olsen, 1976; Stacey, 2011; Weick, 1976) makes decisions considered simple in other organizational contexts become sources of ongoing tensions in academic management, with very negative impacts on strategic process. This is the case of decision related to centralization and decentralization, individual versus collective, exploration versus exploitation and even the adoption of mechanistic managerial models versus organic models. In pluralist contexts like universities, these choices are always a challenge to the university managers who should seek to strike a balance that considers the nature of the tensions and specificities of the issue.

Universities with a loosely coupled structure as a source of tension reveal that academic strategies are mostly developed in quasi-autonomous units, with only weak links to the central administration, and loosely coupled among themselves (Weick, 1976). As knowledge-based and specialized units, they enjoy freedom to conduct their activities with little or no interaction or dependency among themselves. The absence of real control over activities in the university context (Cohen & March, 1974) provides room for creativity and opens a potential a gap between macro intentions and the strategic activities of academic managers and professors.

Another factor of academic tension was professional autonomy. Specialized knowledge and professionalism allow professors and academic managers to promote changes and new initiatives, at the individual and group levels, based on their individual interests and those of their academic micro cells. Consequently, intentions from diverse groups trigger countless interpretations and reactions (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Pfeffer, 1994). In this context, strategic actions are a result of negotiations and interpersonal informal relations rather than guidance from established systematic objectives.

Of the cases in question, University Gamma, as a non-religious and sectarian institution, provided a good example of the political arena. In this case, in particular, the pure transfer of managerial business models to academic organizations ended up being one of the main sources of tension among the top managers, academic managers and professors. In the experience of universities Alpha and Gamma, it could be seen how heavy this market rationale can be in an academic system. The stronger pressure from the top managers at University Gamma resulted in a more market oriented Strategic Plan and, consequently, resistance, discontent and the loss of good professors and academic managers. Meanwhile, at University Alpha, the conflicts between the top management and academic management resulted in a symbolic Strategic Plan. On the other hand, the smaller structure of University Alpha enabled greater integration between top management and academic units.

In the case of University Beta, formal and informal conversations were a way of understanding intentions and actions, as well as a way of including participants in and excluding them from the strategic effort, and making sense of the experienced reality. This also highlights the presence and influence of sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995) in the strategic process of academic organizations.

Discussion

Two main aspects are explored in this section. Initially we discussed the fact that the strategies developed in the universities are better represented by micro actions rather than formal and rationalist practices derived from strategic planning. Later we stressed that there is no theory of university management to guide university managers with implications for the way management is practiced within universities today.

The clash between short-term and bottom-line demands and the long-term goals, plans and strategies vis-à-vis external pressures, financial resources and political interest creates puzzlement, tensions and barriers to academic strategists. The pure transfer of managerial business models to the management of academic organizations is one of the most common practices. On the other hand, it is one of the most serious errors committed by their top managers. The unique characteristics of this kind of organization act as barriers when rationalistic approaches are brought to Campus. The cases in question also reinforce this understanding that strategies originate from other sources, rather than being centralized Strategic Planning processes within universities.

The experiences of Universities Alpha and Gamma show how inefficient and harmful the strategic process was, with the outcomes triggering a managerial clash between market-oriented logic and the academic logic when imposed on the academic departments. The top management views the university as a corporation oriented to market competition and performance, based on a hierarchy and centralized power and authority in the hands of the top management. However, the academic managers consider a university a **community of scholars** devoted to the mission of producing scholarly knowledge and maintaining its academic reputation (Canhilal, Lepori, & Seeber, 2016).

Nowadays, most Brazilian universities are engaged in some sort of Strategic Planning experience. Their outcomes are remain somewhat blurred. Experiences abroad revealed that strategic plans in American universities are neither a strategy nor a plan, but a waste of time (Ginsberg, 2011).

In the university context, more than Strategic Planning and plans, as guidance for action, appears reasonable to reinforce the understanding that strategies emerge as a result of micro actions and are reified by their important contribution to teaching, learning and research. In this setting, we observed that academic strategies materialize as micro scale initiatives representing small but important gains (Weick, 1987).

The tensions resulting from the clash between macro intentions and micro actions stress the inexistence of a theoretical framework to integrate the numerous variables that form such a complex system. The unique characteristics of universities that make them such a complex system include goals ambiguity, plurality of interests, loose structure, undefined technology, organized anarchy, decision-making, professional work and autonomy of agents, along with limited measurability of the educational outcomes.

The theory of university management is still in its infancy. It has been incrementally created by new generations of academic managers and by research conducted by scholars in fields like management, economics, sociology, political sciences and psychology in different universities and countries around the world. The management of colleges and universities is too important to be left in the hands of businesslike or amateur managers with the wrong ideas about how to run higher education organizations and help them fulfill their mission for society.

Concluding Remarks

In complex and loosely coupled systems such as universities, we found that the role played on a small scale, by academic managers individually or in small groups, in the form of micro actions, has a considerable impact on academic strategies and performance of the academic units.

Top managers at the universities materialized their goals and priorities in the form of strategic plans, all of which were set a priori for the entire organization. However, multiple tensions due to the complex nature of these organizations and the plurality of interest groups led to contradictory demands creating puzzlement and insurmountable barriers for top and academic managers. The outcome revealed a difficult alignment between intentions and actions within the university setting, while some unconnected but relevant strategies were practiced in the academic sector. Most were represented by micro actions that stemmed from spontaneous initiatives, insights, hunches and non-intentional actions of academic managers and professors that had a visible and considerable impact on the quality of the academic work.

We found that central strategic plans do not reach the academic micro cells of universities. Importing business models to manage universities led to dubious and controversial benefits to the performance of the institutions.

We also found that the impact of tensions led to confrontations, political negotiations and maneuvers in order to find ways to respond to the adjustment of combined intentions and priorities from the top management and the initiatives, motivations and micro actions at the academic units. It is at this level that meaningful micro strategies are created, and they improve the academic work, aid the fulfillment of the institutional mission and meet the expectations of key stakeholders.

As Weick (1987, p. 221) has already pointed out “A little strategy goes a long way. Too much can paralyze or splinter an organization”. This seems to be case of the strategies in universities, where strategy-like outcomes come from sources other than formal strategic plans.

Tensions are always present and disseminated within social organizations. Therefore, they are not exclusive of complex organizations such as universities. On the contrary, tensions arise in any organization as a result of a diversity of goals, interests and interpretations and misinterpretations of particular aspects of organizational reality. Tensions are also derived from decisions that generate

frictions among interest groups. This includes disputes for power and influence among organizational members at top, middle and operational levels. We recognize the need for future research to more thoroughly analyze critical factors that trigger organizational tensions, and the way they impact managerial practices within academic organizations.

Key areas that deserve further investigation in future research include the exploration of actual strategic management processes and practices within academic organizations. It is important to more closely examine loosely coupled structures, micro actions, sensemaking and enactment, which are all strong influential factors in managing strategies in academic organizations. Two relevant research areas are politics/power and environmental relations. Each of these are mechanisms which help to cope with conflicts and tensions in organizations, particularly negotiations among managers involving critical issues such as decisions on resource allocations among academic units to support strategic actions.

Tensions also arise from the way the environment is perceived by two distinct groups: top administrators and academic managers. It is important to improve comprehension on how these groups perceive and interpret the environment and the resulting impact on strategic decisions, actions and outcomes in academic organizations. Academic managers as leaders who are interested in improving strategies and their practices should be aware not only of the complex nature of academic organizations but also the multiple elements impacting any relevant managerial endeavor.

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