Politics in governance of higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines peculiarities of applying the political model of organizational analysis to the governance of higher education institutions. The political lens is a powerful analytical tool, and its characteristics have long been the focal point of higher education research. The findings of the previous research on the topic are summarized. Three key political areas of HEIs governance—power distribution, decision making, and conflict resolution through negotiations—are identified and analyzed. Implications for the HEIs governance (taking a public university as an example) are proposed in each area. Tools of a political situation analysis are offered.

I. Introduction

The organizational theory provides several approaches to analyzing organizations in general and higher education institutions in particular. The most common frames include the following: the structural (rational-bureaucratic), human resource (collegial), political, symbolic (cultural), and cybernetic models, as well as the notions of "organized anarchies" and "loosely coupled systems" (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Balderston, 1995; Cohen & March, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988; Pfeffer, 1997; Simsek, 2000; Weick, 2000). These frames offer unique perspectives of particular aspects and processes of HEIs: "Each image is valid in some sense; each image helps complete the picture" (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.142).

This paper considers applicability of the political frame to the governance of higher education institutions (HEIs). Following Hardy (1990), we will define governance as "the process of making academic decisions. It describes the reality of decision-making, rather than simply the official distribution of policy-making authority" (p.393). This task will require identifying key areas of the political analysis of the HEIs and analyzing unique characteristics of the political model in each area. Since the notion of higher education is too broad, the paper focuses on, and uses examples of, one type of HEIs—one-campus four-year public university. The identified key areas of the political model include distribution and exercise of power, decision-making process, and conflict resolution through negotiations.

First, we summarize the findings of the research on the political model of organizational analysis and its application to HEIs. Second, we analyze the internal and external distribution of power in public universities. Third, we look at the process of decision making through the political lens. Finally, we consider the process of negotiations with internal and external publics of HEIs.

II. Political model of organizations

A. Research on the political nature of organizations

The political model offers a unique theoretical approach, which is based on the following assumptions: "[P]ower, politics, and influence are crucially important and permanent facts of organizational life" (Shafritz & Ott, 2001, p.298); organizations are "alive and screaming political arenas that host a complex web of individual and group interests" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p.163); "given the opportunity, an organization will tend to seek and maintain a political character" (Pfeffer, 1981, p.32); "interdependence, difference, scarcity, and power relations will inevitably produce political activity, regardless of the players" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p.165); "the political model encapsulates self-interest" (Hardy, 1990, p.402).

Different researchers emphasize similar characteristics of the political organizations in almost the same terms. For example, Shafritz & Ott (2001) write, "Organizations are viewed as complex systems of individuals and coalitions, each having its own interests, beliefs, values, preferences, perspectives, and perceptions. The coalitions continuously compete with each other for scarce organizational resources. Conflict is inevitable. Influence … is the primary 'weapon' for use in competition and conflicts" (p.298). Within the political framework, organizations are seen as "both arenas for internal politics and political agents with their own agendas, resources, and strategies. As arenas, they house contests and provide a setting for the ongoing interplay of interests and agendas among different individuals and groups. … As agents, organizations are

tools, often very powerful tools, for achieving the purposes of whoever controls them" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, pp. 210-211).

Bolman and Deal (1997) summarize five propositions of the political frame that define sources of political dynamics in organizations (p.163): 1) Organizations are coalitions of individuals and interest groups. Coalitions form due to interdependence among their members. "Coalitions tend to be transitory: they shift with issues and often cross vertical and horizontal organizational boundaries" (Shafritz & Ott, 2001, p.298); 2) There are enduring differences among coalitions. "Political activity will be more visible and dominant under conditions of diversity than under conditions of homogeneity" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p.164); 3) The most important decisions involve the allocation of scarce resources: "[P]olitics will be more salient and intense in difficult times" (*Ibid*., p.164); 4) As a result, conflict plays a central role in organizational dynamics. However, conflict and politics are not necessarily dysfunctional; they may be beneficial. Power—its distribution and exercise—becomes the most important resource; 5) Goals and decisions emerge from ongoing process of bargaining and negotiations, as well as jockeying for position among the principal players. "Goals result from ongoing maneuvering and bargaining among individuals and coalitions" (Shafritz & Ott, 2001, p.298).

The ultimate goal of political activity is obtaining greater influence, which is aimed at steering an organization in the desired direction. Mintzberg (2001) claims, "organizational behavior is a power game in which various players, called *influencers*, seek to control the organization's decisions and actions" (p.353—emphasis in the original). Baldridge et al. (2000) contend that the key issue of the political process is policy formation: "The political model focuses on policy-forming processes, because major policies commit an organization to definite goals and set the strategies for reaching those goals. Policy decisions … bind an organization to important

courses of action" (p.135). Because of that, the process of policy making is the activity field of interest groups within the organization.

To summarize, the previous research outlines three key areas in the study of politics in organizations: (a) power and influence distribution among individuals, and coalitions and interest groups; (b) decision-making process that transforms power into policy; (c) conflict of interests and conflict resolution through negotiations and bargaining.

B. Research on power

Political activity is the means of achieving power and influence within organizations. Power distribution in organization is complex and does not necessarily coincide with the formal hierarchy of positions. As Bolman and Deal (1997) state, "Authorities have position power, but they must vie with many other contenders for other forms of organizational clout. Contenders bring different beliefs, values, and interests. They seek access to various forms of power and compete for their share of scarce resources in a limited organizational pie" (p.175). The bigger the organization, the more complicated is the interplay of more and less powerful groups.

1. Definitions of power

The most common definitions of power include almost the same key elements: Power is defined as (1) "the potential ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do" (Pfeffer, 1992, p.30); (2) "*the capacity to achieve specified ends* … a matter of social interdependence, and it is achieved through the social coordination of actions around specified definitions" (Gergen, 2000, p.532—emphasis in the original); (3) "the ability to mobilize resources (human and material) to get things done" (Kanter, 2001, p.343); (4) "the ability to get things done the way one wants them done; it is the latent ability to influence people" (Shafritz & Ott, 2001, p.299); (5) the ability "to make one's will prevail and to attain one's goals" (Russ as cited in Bolman and Deal, 1997,

p.165); (6) "potential capacity to influence outcomes, for either the common good or self-interest" (Hardy, 1990, p.415).

However, some authors claim that power defies definitions in unambiguous terms. As Cohen and March (2000) put it, power "tends to be misleadingly simple and prone to tautology. A person has power if he gets things done, if he has power, he gets things done" (p.17). This simplistic and useless view leads to "fruitless search for the person who has 'the real power' … [and] organizational locale 'where the decision is really made'" (*Ibid*., p.17).

2. Traditional views on bases of power

Identifying the bases or sources of power is a critical issue because "the stronger the basis of power the greater the power" (French & Raven, 2001, p.326). Diversity of interests within an organization necessitates reliance on different sources of power: "[T]he political model incorporates multifaceted forms of power to overcome diverse interests" (Hardy, 1990, p.410). The bigger an organization, the more diverse are interests, the broader should be the power base.

Bolman and Deal (1997) summarize the sources of power proposed by different researchers: 1) Authority (position power); 2) Information and expertise; 3) Control of rewards; 4) Coercive power; 5) Alliances and networks; 6) Access and control of agendas (decision arenas); 7) Establishing framework: control of meaning and symbols; 8) Personal power (pp. 169-170). They warn against relying on single source of power: "The availability of multiple sources of power constrains authorities' capacity to make binding decisions. Relying solely on position power tends to undermine their ability to influence: they generate resistance and are outflanked, outmaneuvered, or overrun by those more versatile in exercising power" (*Ibid*., pp. 170-171).

French and Raven (2001) identify five bases of power: 1) Reward power, based on the ability to reward; 2) Coercive power, based on ability to punish for failing to conform to the influence attempts; 3) Legitimate power, based on some standard or values by virtues of which

influence can be exerted; 4) Referent power, based on identification with agent of power; 5) Expert power, based on the extent of knowledge ascribed to the agent of power (pp. 321-326). Mintzberg (2001) contends that power is based on the control of: 1) Resource; 2) Technical skill; 3) Body of knowledge; as well as on 4) Legal prerogatives—rights to impose choices; 5) Access to those who can rely on the first four bases (pp. 354-355). This view is supported by Kanter (2001): "The effectiveness that power brings evolves from two kinds of capacities: first, access to resources, information, and support necessary to carry out a task; and second, ability to get cooperation in doing what is necessary" (p.343).

Pfeffer (1981) argues that power resides in its use in decision making: "Pfeffer and colleagues, have studied the use of power. … Instead of associating decision-making power with consensus, however, they have assumed that it automatically leads to political decision-making" (Hardy, 1990, p.398). Power, according to Pfeffer (1992), is based on the following components: 1) Coalition/Interests; 2) Conflict/Disagreements; 3) Bargaining and compromising; and 4) Information used and withheld. Most researchers underscore this importance of information as a resource: "[I]nformation can be an instrument of power" (Feldman & March, 1981, p.176). Therefore, "much of the information in organizations is subject to strategic misrepresentation" (*Ibid*., p.182).

3. Postmodernism views

The traditional views on power were connected either to "personal capabilities: drive, determination, intelligence, inspiration, insight, charisma, and the like" or to "machine functioning … one's function within the structure" (Gergen, 2000, p.531). However, the postmodern era research turned attention to power obtained through the language means (discourse). Pfeffer (1997) argues, "Power is accomplished through talk. … Emotion is, along with language, another important way in which influence is exercised in organizational setting" (pp. 148-149). This new

approach is based on “the realization that the ‘rational sayings’ available to the individual are of indeterminate meaning… What seemed on the surface to be a simple, straightforward piece of wise advice, on closer inspection can mean virtually anything” (Gergen, 2000, p.531).

For Foucault, power is inextricably linked to knowledge: “[T]here is no knowledge without a power question arising, and no power without knowledge” (quoted in Bloland, 2000, p.571). Consequently, there is no such thing as an objective knowledge: “[W]hatever knowledge comes from research in the disciplines is always implicated in power considerations” (*Ibid*., p.572). So disciplines are involved with environmental factors; they become arenas for contests for power and control of subject mater, which is performed through discourse. Foucault’s approach is further enriched by the Lyotard’s discourses as language games, “in which players’ speech is viewed as ‘moves’ directed at legitimating their language game and proving its superiority over other language games” (as described in Bloland, 2000, p.574). Within a language game, power is understood as the capacity or ability to purposefully influence the speech activities of others.

C. Application of the political model to HEIs

The political lens is a powerful tool of organizational analysis, and its advantages and limitations have been the focal point of research in higher education for a long time. The political model of HEI governance was elaborated by Baldridge (1971): “it was left to Baldridge to fully explicate the political model in the context of university administration” (Hardy, 1990, p.398). Within this model, HEIs are viewed as micro-level political systems. The model “grapples with the power plays, conflicts, and rough-and-tumble politics to be found in many academic institutions” (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.135).

1. General and political characteristics of HEIs

Researchers have claimed that as an organization university is unique because it “serves clients, has a highly professionalized staff, has unclear and contested goals, and is subject to much

external pressure" (Julius, Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999, p.115). Baldridge et al. (2000) summarize the following unique characteristics of educational institutions:

> They have ambiguous goals that are often strongly contested. They serve clients who demand a voice in the decision-making process. They have a problematic technology, for in order to serve clients their technology must be holistic and adaptable to individual needs. They are professionalized organizations in which employees demand a large measure of control over institutional decision processes. Finally, they are becoming more and more vulnerable to their environment (p. 131).

The totality of these characteristics makes the HEIs "organized anarchies" (Cohen & March, 2000). Organized anarchies are characterized by an ever-changing political landscape due to the presence of multitude actors with their own interests and expectations, agendas and goals, clout and subordination. However, the garbage can model of decision making proposed by Cohen and March (2000) "was different from both the bureaucratic and political approaches, since it assumed that behavior was nonpurposeful" (Hardy, 1990, p.400).

Due to these characteristics, HEIs are best analyzed from the political perspective: "colleges and universities … have many political characteristics" (Birnbaum, 1988, p.129); "The political college or university can be seen as a shifting kaleidoscope of interest groups and coalitions. The patterns in the kaleidoscope are not static, and group membership, participation, and interests constantly change with emerging issues" (*Ibid*., p.132). The above-mentioned features also determine the distribution of power in HEIs.

Like any political organization, HEIs operate on the following assumptions: (1) Inactivity prevails because people find political life uninteresting and unrewarding, thus leaving the key decision-making to elite groups of administrators; (2) Participation of most people is fluid; (3) HEIs are fragmented into interests groups with different goals and values; (4) Conflict is natural; (5) Decisions are made through negotiations and compromises, not through strictly bureaucratic

procedures; (6) External interest groups have a strong influence on the policy-making process (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.136).

Simsek (2000) summarizes the essence of the political frame applied to the HEIs analysis: "The political frame sees the higher education institutions as essentially political entities where there exist more than one interest group or coalition. Change under the political frame, is a dynamic politicking process among various groups struggling for more control and influence" (p.591). Balderston (1995) concludes, "Coalition building and bargaining have emerged as important features of the internal workings of universities, and the distribution of power—and its retention—becomes crucial to university presidents and academic leaders" (pp. 8-9).

2. Implications for HEIs

The above literature review allows making the following general conclusions about the political nature of HEIs.

First, the political model reveals self-interest, and "self interest often arises in situations where goals conflict, issues are critical, interest groups interdependent, and resources scarce" (Hardy, 1990, p.409). Thus, political model best describes HEIs under certain conditions of scarce resources and competition for clout among agents of power. However, one should beware that dissensus does not equate political behavior if there is no intent to pursue self-serving goals. Disagreements may be a normal part of the consensus building and decision making (*Ibid*., p.403).

Second, because of their inherent characteristics, HEIs possess unique power patterns. These patterns determine political activities, which are aimed at exerting desired influence. Analysis of power distribution and influence exertion in colleges and universities requires viewing them as political organizations.

Moreover, each type of the political analysis should be organization specific. It is important that the political model consider the "broad range of political activity that occurs in

different kinds of institutions" (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.139). Even within the public sector of HEIs, the political perspective is momentous due to the presence of multiple groups with often-conflicting vectors of interests (see part IV-E) and variable due to the variations by types of institutions and their circumstances. As a result, the applicability and usefulness of the political model may fluctuate as one applies it to different HEIs and their contingencies.

Third, the focus in research of politics in HEIs should move from identifying "centers of power and decision-making" to the questions of <u>what to do</u> in situations of power ambiguity. "One does not ask, Who has power? but, What are the consequences of applying power?" (Bloland, 2000, p.572). One should also consider the importance of <u>organized interests</u> when individual interests become reinforced and influential through groups. It is only through this process of group formation that individual interests become salient and instrumental in shaping decision-making and policy-forming processes through exerting pressure on key decision makers.

Fourth, <u>external interest</u> groups greatly influence the policy-making process within the HEIs. Moreover, the sources of power in HEIs are directly connected to the issue of <u>ownership</u>: "Universities may be owned by a political entity, like a state or city, or by private individuals and organizations ...[For example,] In private universities, … a few powerful individuals may dominate" (Brock & Harvey, 2000, p.382). Therefore, the political analysis of HEIs should be carried out on <u>two levels</u>—institutional and environmental—assuming that they are inextricably connected.

Fifth, the nature of universities (the role of faculty, academic values, and so forth) presupposes predominance of certain <u>kinds</u> of power: "The most likely sources of power for academic leaders are expert and referent power rather than legitimate, coercive, or reward powers" (Bensimon, Neuman, & Birnbaum, 2000, p.215). The <u>bases</u> of power include "expertise, information, the ability to control uncertainty, credibility, political access, position, control over

rewards, and sanctions" (Hardy, 1990, p.415). Traditional positional authority is supplanted by the authority based on competence, expertise, and knowledge. The growth of the institutional size necessitates broadening the power base.

Sixth, power in universities is inextricably linked with knowledge and information. The principal functions of the university include production and transmission of knowledge: universities "live on and for knowledge, and knowledge—its creation, dissemination, and application—is crucial" (Balderston, 1995, p.5). Exercise of power is dependent on the control of information; that is why information is "used and withheld strategically" (Pfeffer, 1981, p.31).

Seventh, power in universities is exercised through language means: "The power/ knowledge relationship is embedded in discourses, and discourses are the locations where groups and individuals battle for hegemony and over production of meaning" (Bloland, 2000, p.572). Academic disciplines claim and sustain their power through discourse, which has serious implication for HEIs administration, especially for resource allocations and participation in policy-forming and decision-making processes. This also offers an idea of the management of meaning through symbolic language as a political activity (Pfeffer, 1981), in which "language and symbols are used to influence perceptions and create legitimacy for certain actions" (Hardy, 1990, p.413).

Eighth, the political model has been criticized for "considerable ambiguity about the centrality of conflict and degree of political activity" (*Ibid*., p.398). It does not really reconcile the contradictions between indifference and inactivity of people and clash of political interests, between fluid and active participation in political decision making, and between harmonious coexistence of interest groups when resources are abundant with normalcy of conflict. Both researchers and practitioners should take into account this ambiguity of conflict.

Ninth, the political model is best employed on the analysis of the critical issues in HEIs at a particular point in time, thus providing for the argument that "the political model suffered from

an 'episodic' character" (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.139). Therefore, it is necessary to define what makes an issue critical. The following kinds of issues may become critical and thus evoke political relationships: first, an issue that arises around scarce resources, which are contested by different parties; second, an issue that is perceived by the participants to be important for protecting and promoting their interests; third, an issue that is perceived to determine the interest groups participation in the fundamental processes of decision making and policy formation; and finally, an issue that is perceived either as a major threat to the interest group or a major opportunity that can be achieved at the expense of the other participants. The word "perceived" is used to underscore the subjective character of the political analysis: the perceived phenomena do not necessarily conform to the real state of things or to their assessment by the participants. A combination of the above features may intensify the political character of an issue.

Finally, for practical purposes, the university leaders should consider the following recommendations: (a) Never rely on a single source of power; (b) Do not assume that official position equates power; (c) Analyze the influence of the external agents of power; (d) Use control of information, language and symbolic means as the instrumental sources of power.

III. Power distribution in HEIs

The first question to ask is "Why is power important? Why is power distribution one of the most important political issues in organizations?" First of all, power and political activities serve to acquire and maintain influence in organizations (Shafritz & Ott, 2001, p.298); and it is through influence that any change—positive and negative—can be implemented. Kanter argues that the "true sign of power, then, is accomplishment" (2001, p.343) and productivity of any system depends on its application. Simsek and Louse (2000) write about an organizational change as a paradigm shift: "[T]he selective mechanism for preferring one paradigm over others is access to

power and influence" (p.554). The emergence of new paradigm "coincides with the establishment of new power relations and the appearance of new actors on stage" (*Ibid*., p.554).

Second, in the situation of scarce resources and enduring differences, power becomes the most important organizational resource (Bolman & Deal, 1997) and is contested by different parties. Again, it is important for implementation of new ideas and plans. Finally, through the processes of decision making and legitimating, power is transformed into policy, and "policy decisions… have a major impact on an organization's future" (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.135).

Thus, power is a pervasive phenomenon in all organizations. One should beware, however, that the patterns of distribution and exercise of power are specific to a field and organization ("power is context or relationship specific" [Pfeffer, 1981, p.3]) and depend on numerous internal and external factors.

A. External agents of power of public universities

It is axiomatic that, like any other organizations, HEIs are the products of adaptation to their environment. This adaptation is systemic in nature because it concerns all levels of the organization. "The organizations are often vitally dependent on external support, be it in the form of clientele, federal funding, or public support in fund raising. They all need people to want or need their products and services, and thus provide this external support" (Brock & Harvey, 2000, p.377). Therefore, analysis of power should start from the external perspective and with identifying the major agents of influence.

1. External influencers

The external stakeholders ("external influencers"—Mintzberg, 2001) of the public universities include the following: federal and state governments, legislators, employers, local communities, professional associations, research councils, commercial bodies, donors and benefactors, alumni, foundations, current and prospective students' parents, mass media, general

public, and so forth. These external interest groups have a strong influence on the power distribution and policy-making process within universities: "outsiders demand the right to influence internal decisions" (Julius, Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999, p.115). Some authors even write about "the intrusion of the external forces. Professional and disciplinary associations, accrediting agencies, agencies of the federal government for all institutions and state executive offices for public ones—all have tended to bypass presidents and boards" (Duryea, 2000, p.14).

The US federal government, unlike many other countries, does not exercise direct control over HEIs and policies: it provides support "in areas where there is a clear federal interest even though it is not primarily a federal responsibility. This federal involvement comes in three ways: funding, regulation of federally funded activities, and mandates to the states and institutions to pursue areas of federal interest" (NCPPHE, 2003, p.34). A critical function of the federal government is establishing the legal framework for higher education, while federal finances can be specified as funding certain research and services, and student financial aid.

The primary responsibility for higher education resides with individual states, which create the particular environment for education and determine available educational opportunities. "[S]tates have an obligation not only to fund their systems of higher education adequately, but also to provide an explicit policy framework that informs and guides the actions of individual colleges and universities" (NCPPHE, 2003, p.22). Funding function presupposes exercising power, and an important task of policy makers on the state level is "to ensure that investment in higher education is adequate and equitable" (Alexander, 2003, p.3). As a rule, there is a special coordinating board on higher education, whose function is "to provide some measure of separation between government and the operation of schools, colleges, and universities" (NCPPHE, 2003, p.22).

Because of the financial dependence, public universities are subject to a great control of the state authorities. For example, "public universities are often obliged by state governments to

charge a higher tuition to 'nonresidents'—that is, students whose legal residence is in another state" (Balderston, 1995, p.207). The locus of power is in large measure external.

2. Assessment

Like many other institutions, public universities have to justify their support by society. "[I]mportant people (for example, legislators, parents, students) now want to know what the return is on their investment" (Terenzini, 2000, p.340); universities need "to demonstrate that college and university attendance makes a difference, that students leave colleges and universities with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they did not have when they arrived" (*Ibid*., p.345).

There emerges an external pressure for assessment of universities, which becomes a significant instrument of power: "The implicit sanction is the threat of decentralization, which would render the institution's students ineligible for federal and state financial aid programs" (Balderston, 1995, p.295). Assessment presupposes accountability to a higher authority and can take two forms. "At the individual level, assessment serves a gatekeeping function, sifting and sorting the qualified from the unqualified." At the group level, the "purpose is primarily evaluative and administrative, and the information so obtained may be used for accounting to external bodies" (Terenzini, 2000, p.342). It is in this latter form that assessment becomes instrumental in influencing the internal policy formation at HEIs.

B. Internal agents of power in public universities

1. Internal influencers

The principal internal stakeholders ("internal influencers"—Mintzberg, 2001) of the public university include the following: 1) Governing Board; 2) Other boards and advisory bodies; 3) Administration: President and administrators; 4) Faculty; 5) Academic Senate and professional and administrative committees; 6) Administrative and support staff; and 7) Students (AAUP, 2000; Julius; Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999; Balderston, 1995). Each of these stakeholders has a vote

in the decision-making process and tries to steer the institution in the desired direction. The following factors influence university administration: "greater involvement by faculties in academic and personnel decisions; faculty collective bargaining; greater goal ambiguity; greater fractionation of the campus into interest groups, … greater involvement by trustees in campus operation; and increased bureaucracy and specialization among campus administrators" (Birnbaum, 1989, p.37).

Internal influencers exert a lot of power on the decision-making and policy-forming processes. Brock and Harvey (2000) give an example of the importance of major internal publics in decision making: "The chancellor or president (CEO) is appointed by the board of trustees. In practice, though, a CEO is seldom appointed without substantial input from current administrators and faculty, and often from students and alumni" (pp. 382-383).

These actors are inextricably interdependent and exert influence on each other. This fact provides for application of the political model: "Without interdependence, there can be no politics, and no power" (Birnbaum, 1988, p.132). Interdependence of intrainstitutional components determines the power distribution and political processes in HEIs. "The variety and complexity of tasks performed by institutions of higher education produce an inescapable interdependence among governing board, administration, faculty, students and others" (AAUP, 2000, p.86). So this kind of relationship necessitates "adequate communication … and full opportunity for appropriate joint planning and effort" (*Ibid*., p.86) as well as compromise-oriented mode of internal political activities.

The governing board plays an important role in the power distribution pattern: it is "the agency that both has protected internal autonomy and intellectual freedom and has served as a force to keep institutions relevant to the general public. … The governing board has served as a point of balance for that essential dualism between institutions and academic autonomy and public

accountability which has characterized American higher education" (Duryea, 2000, p.15). It is actually situated at the boundary of a university and may be treated both as an internal and external (individual trustees) agent of power.

There is a major division within universities, which may become the basis for internal conflict. Duryea (2000) identifies two bureaucracies in American universities: the academic bureaucracy, which "claims rights of control over the totality of the academic functions," and administrative, whose task is "to grapple with the immense tasks of management of essential yet supportive services which maintain the university, not the least of which are budget and finance" (p.13). Because they share different values and attitudes, faculty members and administrators often find themselves at odds and view each other as oppositional groups. "Administrative and professional authority are not only different, but mutually inconsistent… [T]he two structures are primarily driven by incompatible systems of authority. The president is embedded in both authority systems and therefore is continually subject to incompatible demands and behavioral expectations" (Birnbaum, 1989, p.39).

Since university is a professional organization, many important decisions are made by expert committees. Consequently, "organizational politics often center around committee politics. Having influence on a committee is frequently equal to having influence over the decision" (Julius, Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999, p.126). This is a unique feature of the HEIs, and it affects the political nature of the organization.

2. Power of university leaders

Effective leaders are usually identified as "those who can use their power to influence the activities of others" (Bensimon, Neuman, & Birnbaum, 2000, p.215). Most HEIs presidents describe leadership as "a one-way process, with the leader's function depicted as getting others to follow or accept his directives" (*Ibid*., p.215). The principal roles of a president under the political

model include the role of mediator and negotiator between stakeholders and interest groups. These role determine his political activities: "[T]he contemporary president must play a political role by pulling coalitions together to fight for desired changes" (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.141).

Cohen and March (2000) underscore that the leadership position provides many temptations to over-evaluate the importance of one's actions: Presidents often "come to exaggerate the significance of their daily actions for the college as well as for themselves. They easily come to see each day as an opportunity to build support in their constituencies for the next 'election'" (p.21). However, contrary to the popular belief about the potentiality of university leaders to implement changes on their own, "presidents discover that they have less power than is believed" (*Ibid*., p.17): their power is very often conventional and diffused, their authority is limited, their colleagues criticize them for both weakness and willfulness, and so forth. On the one hand, presidents perform important symbolic functions and are perceived as powerful by the outsiders. On the other hand, they feel certain limitation of their control and are perceived as less powerful by the insiders who try to carry our institutional reforms.

Presidents of universities are virtually powerless without their teams. Many researchers have highlighted this fact: "The key figure today is not the president, the solitary giant, but the political leader surrounded by his staff. … It is the 'staff,' the network of key administrators, that makes most of the critical decisions" (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.141). Bensimon, Neuman, and Birnbaum (2000) analyze the role of the president's teams: "Top-level leadership teams, particularly the president's cabinet or inner circle of administrative colleagues, may represent one of the few resources over which presidents in fact have some influence" (p.244). They recognize, however, that "the president's team is not the institution's supreme decision-making body" (*Ibid*., p.247). Thus, the team of top administrators must enter into a complicated process of negotiating interests with other major participants.

Strange as it may sound, much of the president's power derives from the fact that most employees do not care. "[T]he president's power lies particularly in *zones of indifference*—areas that few people care much about" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p.171—emphasis in the original). This happens because a "central characteristic of most political communities is indifference" (Birnbaum, 1988, p.137); "most people do not care about all the issues" (Julius, Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999, p.119). Presidents are thus "allowed" to wield power; in other words, HEIs leaders are powerful insofar as the other players do not contest their turf.

III. <u>Decision making in HEIs</u>

A. Political decision making

Political model is based on the assumption that "power and politics determine organizational decisions" (Pfeffer, 1981, p.24). Thus, under the political model, decision making does not appear to be the result of the rational choice of the alternative course of action that offers maximum benefits; it becomes the consequence of interplay of power patterns and conflict of interests, values, and priorities. Environmental factors also start to play a significant role: "Political models of choice further presume that when preferences conflict, the power of the various social factors determines the outcomes of the decision process" (*Ibid*., p.28).

Organizational decision making performs several <u>functions</u>: allocating scarce resources, displaying authority and exercising social values—including the notion of "intelligent choice" (Feldman & March, 1981, p.177). It is in this last function that rational and political models of decision making may be wedded: "given a belief and social norm favoring rationality, such a [rational choice] process might be followed to legitimate a decision made, for instance, on political grounds" (Pfeffer, 1981, p.21). For example, when a HEI undertakes a strategic planning process, the decisions about which programs and departments to cut are to a large extent determined by the

public's expectations and preferences (March 11 Class); however, this political decision may be ostensibly substantiated by purely rational reasons.

Decision-making process under political model has the following unique characteristics (Pfeffer, 1981). First, it is "disorderly and characterized by push and pull of interests. … [Decisions are the] result of bargaining and interplay among interests" (p.31). Second, it does not assume that all issues are equally important and equally worthy of effort. Third, the decision-making process in organization may be very distinct from the pure political and bureaucratic-administrative activities.

Also, political decision making is almost always a group decision process, which is characterized by the following features (Allison & Zelikow, 1999, pp. 264-294): first, higher probability of better quality decisions; second, the agency problem: avoiding pitfalls through increasing the number of participants, but simultaneously including autonomous interests; third, participants' role: dependence of the decision on the composition of the decision-making body; fourth, importance of the existent decision rules; fifth, dependence of the decision on the way problems are framed and reach the group's agenda; sixth, danger of "groupthink"—concurrence seeking mode of thinking that becomes so dominant that it prevents the group from making realistic assessment of the situation (Janis, 2001, p.186); and finally, complexity of joint decisions and actions.

The political model of decision making requires answering the following questions: 1) Why is this decision made at all? Why is this decision being considered at this particular time? 2) Who has the right to make decisions? How will the decision be made? 3) How is the decision-making process diffused among the committees? 4) What are the alternative solutions to the problem at hand? (Badlridge et al., 2000, p.137).

B. Decision making in HEIs

Julius, Baldridge, and Pfeffer (1999) identify the following characteristics of the decision-making process in HEIs: 1) Decisions on many of the critical issues are made by committees of experts; 2) Fluid participation: Because many decision makers are amateurs, they wander in and out of the decision process. Power belongs to those who stay long enough to exercise it; 3) An issue carousel: Decisions are made temporarily and do not last long because issues are pushed full circle; 4) A "subsidiary" process: The longer it takes to make a decision, the greater the chance that the original subject will be burdened with other issues; 5) Conflict over goals is common as decision makers experience pressures from interest groups (p.115). They even suggest the term "decision flowing" explaining, "Decisions are not really made; instead, they come unstuck, are reversed, get unmade during the execution, or lose their impact as powerful political groups fight them. In real life, decisions go round and round in circles, and the best one can hope for in the political battle is a temporary win" (*Ibid*., p.128.).

Looking at the decision-making process in HEIs through the political lens allows making the following general conclusions. First, we believe the political model of HEIs verges on the notion of organized anarchy. This approach views an organization as "a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work"; different actors hold different view about issues (Cohen & March, 1986, p.175). The combination of these factors, with the addition that participants' behavior is also driven by conscious goals, provide for clashes of priorities, interests, values, and goals, thus proving "the inevitability of power and politics in organizations" (Pfeffer, 1981, p.8).

Second, decision-making process in organized anarchies is to a large extent dependent on all parties' participation. "Genuine authoritative participation will reduce the aspirations of

oppositional leaders. … [P]ublic accountability, participant observation, and other techniques for extending the range of legitimate participation in the decision-making processes of the organization are essential means of keeping the aspirations of occasional actors within bounds" (Cohen & March, 2000, p.24). However, one may also find that sometimes one's coalition members prefer not to participate in decision making: "[W]hen the chances for success are low and the benefits can be achieved without participating, the rational self-interested person will not participate" (Birnbaum, 1988, p.149). Thus, facilitating participation also necessitates negotiations with both internal and external players.

Third, in order to attain a political goal, decision makers need to concentrate their efforts and should not put off acting on decisions. "If 'fluid participation' is the rule then most people wander in and out of the issue. If you stick with one or two critical issues, you are more likely to be effective" (Julius, Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999, p.120). In other words, power in decision making belongs to those who spend time to deal with the priority issues. Moreover, decisions are often "performed" to some extent before a political participant is given the legitimacy to make them (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.138), so acting on decisions brooks no delay.

Fourth, with the growth of a HEI, the decision-making power is transferred from the institutional level to the lower levels: "As patterns of authority become confused, … schools or departments become the locus of educational decision-making" (Birnbaum, 1989, p.38); "institutions meet the conflicting demands of interest groups by decentralizing and permitting subunits to operate in a quasi-autonomous fashion" (*Ibid*., p.44). In HEIs "power and responsibility are decentralized, rather than centralized" (Hardy, 1990, p.394). This makes the decision-making process organization specific and dependent on power patterns.

Fifth, it should be kept in mind that most decisions in colleges and universities are still made through bureaucratic-administrative actions, in accordance with standard operating

procedures. Political scrimmage is more likely to start when ‘critical’ (not ‘routine’) decisions are being made. Therefore, “it is important to consider routine procedures of the governance process” (Baldridge et al., 2000, p.138). Thus, once again, political model is more applicable to the situations of critical issue resolution than to everyday activities.

Finally, the decision-making process is determined by the following factors: environmental influence, power distribution patterns, and process of negotiation and bargaining with internal and external constituencies of a HEI.

C. Making decisions on the basis of the Political Field Intensity

Making political decisions presupposes choosing between two major kinds of strategies. Mere practical observations show that majority of people are problem-minded; they have low levels of ambiguity tolerance and try to minimize uncertainty by employing ‘deal with a problem’ strategies. A miniscule minority of people are goal-oriented and identify opportunities in any situation they encounter; they employ ‘achieve a goal’ strategies, which are based on the ultimate result they want to produce (Gorbunov & Sorokin, 2002).

HEIs leaders should make the general decision of what political strategy to choose: (a) to react to ever-emerging political problems and conflicts through ‘reducing-the-uncertainty’ techniques or (b) to opt for achieving the Ideal Ultimate Result (Altshuller, 1991) on the political arena. This latter choice requires rethinking a decision-maker’s perception of the political relations and providing some tool that would facilitate decision making.

This paper offers the notion of the Political Field (PF), which is a proactive way of looking at a political situation. We argue that any given situation is characterized by a unique interplay of multiple factors/parameters at a particular point in time. The term “field” is meant to demonstrate several things: (a) its determinacy by a number of factors that produce it; (b) interdependence of

all its parameters; (c) current-like changeability under new conditions; and (d) different levels of intensity that it may acquire under different conditions.

Just like an electric current generates magnetic field, the presence of these parameters generates a certain type of the political field. And like changing conductivity of a single element in a circuit alters the electric current intensity, a change in any single parameter of the PF can entail changes in the entire system of inter-dependence, thus affecting the intensity of the PF. This view explains the pervasiveness of the political relationships and leads to an idea of the PF manageability.

To purposefully manage the intensity of the PF, one needs to identify its parameters (factors that generate it). Generally, these parameters may be broken down into the following big categories: participants, conditions, resources, and actions. Each of them may be further specified in sub-categories. In order to assess a political situation adequately, decision makers should ask themselves a set of questions that will help identify each parameter. Table 1 is an approximate example of such parameter-questions breakdown.

We believe that this or similar table should incorporate and may enrich a traditional set of questions proposed by researchers (e.g., Baldridge et al., 2000), which skips some important factors and concentrates on a 'participants-problem-causes-solution' line of thinking. It is also intended to preempt and facilitate such steps as asking questions aimed at identifying the causes and alternative solutions (*Ibid*., p. 137) and taking such actions as "agenda setting," "mapping the political terrain," and "networking and building coalitions" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, pp. 179-186).

It is obvious that the PF is not a theoretical concept, but just a way of looking at a political situation in order to make proactive decisions to resolve it. The proposed table offers a practical tool that the HEI administration may consider using when engaged in a political confrontation.

Table 1. Determining the parameters of the PF

Parameters		Questions
PARTICIPANTS		
Participants		Who are the principle participants and chief spokespersons for them? How many players—real and latent—are in field? Who has the real and ostensible power to make decisions?
Coalitions of participants		What are the current coalitions? What is the basis for identifying them as distinct groups of participants? What provides for interdependence among the members of the coalitions? Are the groups homogeneous or heterogeneous? Do the participating groups perform as unified bodies? Do they share goals, expectations, values, etc.? Are any other coalitions possible?
Goals and aspirations		Do the participants have and express clear-cut goals? What do they try to achieve? Do they share the same goal? What are the goals of the subgroups within particular groups, if any?
Position and needs		What is the official position of each party? Does it, at least partly, mirror the position of any other parties? Does it conflict with all the other positions? Is a compromise possible? Is it possible to meet the needs by focusing on the interests?
Interests and preferences Motives and drives		Can we identify the participants' real interests? Does the stated position reflect real interests? Can we identify the real motives behind their positions and actions? Are they sincere in stating their motives? What is their stake in the current situation?
Perspectives and perceptions Expectations		What is their subjective interpretation of the problem? Do they see it as a problem? Do they see as an opportunity to gain some political ground? What do they expect of higher education and HEIs? What do they expect of our HEI? What do they expect of each other?
Values, beliefs, and norms		What do we know about their values and beliefs? Can their values be influenced? How? Which of their values could be compromised in order to reach an agreement? What are their beliefs that may be important? Do they share a unified set of norm?
CONDITIONS & RESOURCES		What are the external constraints—time, space, number of parties, etc.? What are the favorable and adverse conditions? What conditions are likely to happen and what do we want to change? What resources do all participants have? What resources is everybody placing at stake? Is it possible to attract more resources?
ACTIONS		
Strategies		Do the participants have an overarching strategy? Do they seem to be "problem-minded" or "goal-oriented"? What strategies have they employed to date?
Course of actions Level of activity		What is their preferred mode of action—generally and in this situation? What actions have they taken? Have they been active or passive in pursuing their goals to date?
Looking for solution		Are the participants willing to seek a compromise? Are they "win-lose" or "win-win" oriented in general? Do they seem to think that their goal is attainable at the expense of others? What is everybody ready to sacrifice to reach a compromise?

IV. Negotiating conflicts in HEIs

A. Negotiations in organizations

The political model "emphasizes dissensus, conflict, and negotiation among interest groups" (Hardy, 1990, p.402). Thus, negotiation (herein equated with bargaining) among interest groups aimed at attaining desired results is a critical political process both on the organizational and interpersonal levels. "One of the important ways in which interpersonal influence is accomplished is through negotiation" (Pfeffer, 1997, p.150). Negotiation is generally defined as "a subset of conflict, in that parties hold or perceive they hold incompatible goals or interests" (Vasquez, 1996, p.57).

Negotiations are a critical element of the fundamental processes of decision making and policy formation: "From a political perspective, bargaining is central to all decision making. … Negotiation is needed whenever two or more parties with some interests in common and others in conflict need to reach agreement" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p.186); "decisions are the result of bargaining and interplay among interests" (Pfeffer, 1981, p.31). Achieving one's ends is dependent on coalition building and enforcement through constant negotiations. "Good politicians know that much of their job is not influencing decisions as much as it is building a political base for influencing decisions" (Julius, Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999, p.118). Building a political base requires negotiation with the other stakeholders. Terenzini (2000) writes, "A vital and difficult task involves enlisting the support of concerned parties" (p.342) and emphasizes, "one cannot overstate the importance of laying a strong political foundation" (p.344).

Conflicts in organization are resolved mostly through bargaining. Since conflict is natural, inevitable, expected, and pervasive (Bolman & Deal, 1997), it should be taken as a given factor of organizational life. Julius, Baldridge, and Pfeffer (1999) give a piece of advice about conflict: "Don't avoid it. Manage it" (p.121), and specify it in a set of recommendations to university

leaders who endeavor to implement changes. They warn, “Colleges and universities are organizations with low tolerance for conflict. Use this resource wisely” (*Ibid.*, p.122).

Since negotiations are ubiquitous both in and between organizations (Pfeffer, 1997, p.150), a researcher of HEIs should consider this process internally and externally. Negotiators have to perform boundary-spanning roles and engage simultaneously in two processes—negotiations with the representatives of the other groups and negotiations with the members of their own group (Birnbaum, 1988, p.142). This holds true for the HEIs.

B. Conflict and negotiations within HEIs

Internally, conflicts may underlie many processes in organizations. Brock and Harvey (2000) provide an example of internal conflict negotiation process at the departmental level:

> [S]ome professors … will often choose to spend only a small portion of their efforts on teaching. Simultaneously, others professors in the same department, may believe that the primary place of a professor is in the classroom, and so, they will emphasize teaching. Others will spend their time on departmental administration or school-level politics, trying to further their careers in this way. At evaluation time, the departmental head has the difficult job of balancing these conflicting directions of the professors with the needs of the department and distributing the available resources for rewarding the people (p.381).

College and university presidents have to rely on bargaining and negotiations in everyday interactions with faculty, staff, students, and other constituencies because “every decision [of the president] that supports the interests of one group at the same time opposes the interest of another” (Birnbaum, 1989, p.44). The most important negotiations concern the issues of power and responsibility: “Presidents negotiate with their audiences on the interpretation of their power. … The process does not involve presidents alone, of course. The social validation of responsibility involves all participants: faculty, trustees, students, parents, community leaders, government” (Cohen & March, 2000, p.18).

C. Negotiations with outside stakeholders

The relationships with the "external influencers" (Mintzberg, 2001) are very important for determining political characteristics of organizations. Pfeffer (1992) argues that an organization maintains a political character inside to the same extent that it is engaged in negotiations with its outside constituencies. Moreover, these external relationships may be instrumental in shaping the internal politics: "The wise strategist uses support from these external constituencies to influence the internal process. In building coalitions, it is useful to associate with outside groups as well as inside groups, particularly because major decision makers themselves are often tied to outside groups" (Julius, Baldridge, & Pfeffer, 1999, p.118).

For HEIs, one of the most important issues is relationship with the state-level education governing bodies. Underlying these fundamental relationships are negotiations of the public policy issues, such as broad access versus quality. "Balancing the demand for access and the demand for excellence is the root issue of public policy in higher education" (Balderston, 1995, p.219). This process has an ever-lasting character and requires constant attention: "State policymakers and institutions of higher education work in environments that have different incentives, constraints, and requirements. Quite naturally, they view the public interest from different perspectives" (NCPPHE, 2003, p.27). Thus, the negotiating role of the statewide higher education coordinating or governing board becomes critical.

Another important issue of external negotiation process concerns the balance between public expenditures and achievements expected of the public HEIs. "The public university also finds it necessary to appeal to the *politics of excellence* to justify public budgetary support. … Because the interests supporting, respectively, the politics of access and the politics of excellence are often in danger of diverging, advocacy on behalf of a state's public higher education system is a difficult exercise in coalition building" (Balderston, 1995, p.220).

D. Basis for negotiation

The Harvard Negotiations Project (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991) proposed the following principles of "win-win" negotiations: (1) Separate people from problems; (2) Focus on interests, not on positions; (3) Invent options for mutual gain; and (4) Use objective criteria.

Bolman and Deal (1997) argue that this "win-win" approach is not really reflective of the political model and "tactics for value claiming better represent the political frame" (p.188). However, giving up the traditional positional bargaining and applying the above principles to negotiations of HEIs seems appropriate for the following reasons. First, both internally and externally, negotiation process in HEIs, as a rule, involves many parties. This makes traditional positional bargaining ineffective: "The more people involved in a negotiation, the more serious the drawbacks to positional bargaining" (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991, p.7).

Second, positional bargaining may seriously endanger relationships with the important constituencies of HEIs, and public HEIs cannot afford that. "If you expect to work with the same people in the future, it is risky to use value-claiming tactics that leave anger and mistrust in their wake" (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p.186).

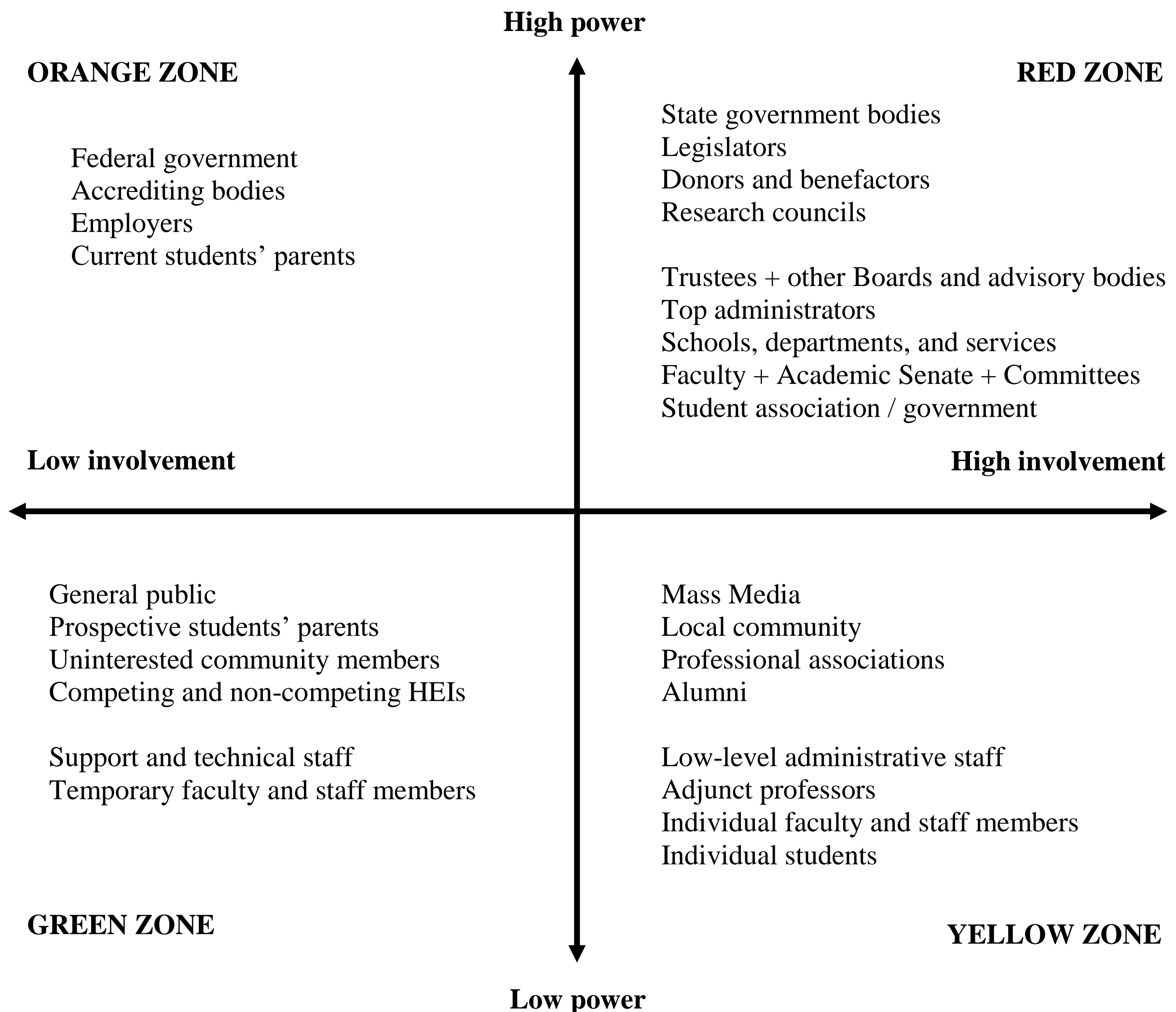
Third, positional bargaining often does not lead to the most effective decision: "As more attention is paid to positions, less attention is devoted to meeting the underlying concerns of the parties" (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991, p.5).

Finally, more often than not, HEIs deal with serious issues that may have significant repercussions. "The more complex the subject matter, the more unwise it is to engage in positional bargaining"; parties should "see themselves as engaged in joint problem-solving" (*Ibid*, p.152). These limitations of the traditional approach to negotiations necessitate the application of the above "win-win" principles or "creating value" (Bolman & Deal, 1997) approach.

E. Determining negotiation priorities

HEIs can identify their negotiations and conflict-resolution priorities by applying the Negotiations Intensity Matrix (see Figure 1). The matrix may take shape of the coordinate system, with two axes representing two dimensions that determine the negotiation process. The first dimension is the continuum between low and high power of the participants; in other words, their capacity to influence decision-making and policy-forming processes within a HEI. This continuum forms the *Y*-axis. The second continuum (the *X*-axis) is between low and high involvement in the processes of decision making and policy formation in the HEI.

Figure 1. Negotiations Intensity Matrix for a public university



The intersection of the two axes forms four quadrants, which we have tentatively called the Red, Orange, Yellow, and Green Zones. Distribution of participants to different zones signifies the necessity to engage in certain kinds of negotiations, with negotiation-intensity slowly reducing from the Red to the Green Zone. This distribution enables making decisions about the importance of participants and negotiation priorities and, and consequently, about time and effort allocations to different groups. Figure 1 is a rough sample of the Negotiations Intensity Matrix for a public university at a given point in time.

The Matrix highlights the interdependence of the major areas of HEIs governance—power distribution; decision making, which transforms power into policy; and negotiation, which allows balancing different positions and interests. It serves as a foundation for setting priorities in dealing with interested parties at particular periods of time.

However, one should keep in mind the limitations of the Matrix. First, the Matrix does not address differences by specific issues. Therefore, it should be considered to be a basis for elaborate situational analysis, not a universal tool for all circumstances. Second, the distribution of the participants to different quadrants is subjective and is used only for strictly operational purposes. Thus, it should be done by a group of experts to avoid individual biases. Third, the Matrix does not have a temporal continuum. Allotting participants to different zones will inevitably change over time, so a HEI should closely monitor these changes and alter its negotiation strategy accordingly. Finally, the Matrix breaks down the participants into external and internal ones, but it does not show the negotiations priorities within each zone. So, the HEI administration should use additional criteria for a more detailed classification of participants: for instance, similarity/dissimilarity of interests, nature and channels of communication (one-way versus two-way and asymmetric versus symmetric [Gruning & Hunt, 1984]), frequency of formal and informal contacts, and history of “past investments” in relationships.

The Negotiation Intensity Matrix may find the following uses in the HEIs governance. First, the Matrix may become the basis for building public relations, understood as ever-evolving process of negotiation (Vasquez, 1996). Thus, instead of perceiving negotiations as a purely "technical-situational" interaction aimed at gaining political ground, this process appears as a long-term evolution of political relationships. Second, it provides opportunities for tacit learning (Polany & Prosch, 1975): while focusing on "classifying publics," the administrators and other users also subliminally internalize the interdependence of governance processes, its changeability over time, and the need to harmonize relationships with different stakeholders. Finally, the Matrix prompts constant monitoring of the political relationships with a purpose of making timely changes in mid- and long-term plans. This helps bridge the gap between the "ideal" planning and "real-life" implementation of the plans in ever-changing political environment.

V. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the applicability of the political model to the HEIs governance. Distinctive features of applying the political frame to three key areas of governance—power distribution, decision-making process, and conflict resolution through negotiation—have been considered. Limitations of the political model prompt the idea of incorporating the fortes of different frames—without merely confusing them eclectically —in a comprehensive model of university governance. Instead of sticking to their unique turfs, the researchers should try to concentrate on finding some common ground that would more fully explicate the processes at higher education institutions.

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