Academic corruption: Culture and trust in Indian higher education

William G. Tierney[a,*], Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal[b]

[a] *Pullias Center for Higher Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA*
[b] *Center for Policy Research in Higher Education, NUEPA, New Delhi, India*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Singular acts of academic corruption, such as cheating on an exam, occur in all institutions in all countries. Until recently, however, academic corruption that is systemic has been under-studied and under-theorized. This article focuses exclusively on monetary corruption. The authors focus on their forms and the individuals involved. The article investigates academic corruption in India. By way of a modified case study the authors analyze how corruptions functions at one private college in India. The purpose is neither to propose legislative efforts to stop such activities nor to suggest that the forms of corruption discussed are unique to India. Instead, the article utilizes a theory based on the idea of organizational culture to come to terms with what systemic corruption is and how those within the academy might best confront it.

Singular acts of academic corruption occur in all institutions in all countries. A student cheats on an exam. A professor plagiarizes a text. A vice chancellor offers a position to a relative. Whenever corruption occurs in the academy a vigorous response needs to be developed or the underlying purpose and tenet of academic life is cheapened and distortions to a meritocratic pathway to social mobility occur. Universities, among the oldest organizations in society, are designed to pursue "truth" in the laboratory and in the classroom. Such a noble goal cannot occur in an environment where the pursuit of truth is circumscribed by corruption. The result is not only that the system of higher education is cheapened, but the benefits that a country is able to gain from such an organization is made that much more elusive.

Until recently academic corruption that is systemic has been under-studied and under-theorized. Stephen Heyneman et al. have written about the costs of corruption (2007). Heyneman (2004), (2005) and Rumyantseva (2005) and others (Janashia, 2004) offered a preliminary taxonomic understanding of corruption. But few texts have actually investigated systemic corruption, presumably, because such studies are very difficult to undertake (Welch, 2017). The result is that systemic corruption is something that might get discussed in the hallways of a university or a Ministry when individuals are rumored to have erred, but very few formal analyses have been done about organizations and systems that function in a corrupt manner.

More recently, the work of Sabic-El-Rayess, in particular, has given conceptual meaning to academic corruption through a series of investigations focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014; 2016). Sabic-El-Rayess and Mansur usefully point out that corruption can involve monetary favors as well as reciprocal favors (2014, p. 27). For our purposes here we have focused exclusively on monetary corruption. We focus on their forms and the individuals involved. Although we certainly acknowledge that reciprocal favors are possible, as we shall show, we were more focused on what one needed to do to open and maintain a college. Further, Sabic-El-Rayess and Mansur make the useful distinction between elite and non-elite corruption (2014, p. 28). Again, the distinction is useful but for the case study discussed here there were no elites. The bribes and payments occurred amongst individuals, as we shall discuss, who were simply trying to get by rather than enrich themselves to maintain their wealth or to become wealthy.

Globalization has brought about an opportunity and a danger for academic organizations. On the one hand, insofar as society has moved from an economy dominated by goods and services to that of a knowledge economy, the importance of colleges and universities has become that much more critical. The ability of students to be trained to participate in the economic and social life of a country is paramount. The knowledge that academics create in their laboratories and in their writings has the potential to stimulate the economy and to advance democratic participation by the citizenry. On the other hand, globalization arguably has increased academic corruption. Technologies have made corrupt practices that much easier, and in a hyper-competitive environment where jobs are scarce and casual labor common, the temptation to take a shortcut and create a financial benefit is significant.

In this article we investigate academic corruption in India. We utilize a modified case study to inform our understanding of how corruptions functions. Our intent is neither to propose legislative efforts

to stop such activities nor to suggest that the forms of corruption we discuss is unique to India. Instead, we shall employ a theory based on the idea of organizational culture to come to terms with what systemic corruption is and how those within the academy might best confront it. Along with Heyneman (2014) Philip Altbach has offered a useful argument about why such a study is useful: "Corruption destroys the very core of the university − the concept of meritocracy and the dominance of honest academic inquiry and excellence in teaching and research" (2004, p. 8).

Rather than try to determine how one might think about corruption or analyze it from a philosophical point of view we offer an 'on the ground' approach about how corruption functions in India at a private college. We also are focused not on individual actions such as professorial plagiarism or a single student cheating on an exam. Instead, our focus on academic corruption in India pertains to what has become known as "black money" − the use of rupees to bribe an individual, or groups of individuals. Although there is a constant barrage in newspapers and magazines about black money in higher education (Singh, 2015; Singh, 2016; Anandakrishnan, 2013; Choudaha, 2011; Kasturi, 2009; PTI, 2009) and bemoans its usage, there are virtually no scholarly investigations of the topic because individuals are hesitant to speak about the sorts of bribes that are necessary for a college or university to do business because, as we elaborate below, "everyone does it." The result is that individuals lament that the practice exists but acknowledge that very little can be done to change what has become pervasive not only in higher education but throughout the country. "It is the price of doing business," commented one interviewee.

The respected American jurist Louis D. Brandeis famously stated that "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants" (1913) if one wants to cure a social disease. Black money is one such disease. The purpose of this investigation has been to undertake a case study of one post-secondary institution in order to understand how and why black money functions in India. Until there is an understanding of the causes of black money and how it functions not much can be done to eliminate it.

For the purposes of confidentiality the institution and all of the interviews are anonymous. The theoretical approach employed is a cultural framework that utilizes the notion of trust. We shall suggest that the use of black money in academic institutions is an issue that requires cultural responses framed by the idea of trust more than simply structural reforms that rely on bureaucratic norms and processes. Ours is not a cookbook solution that suggests causality − "If one sees this, then this should be done." Instead, we shall suggest that a cultural framework helps an organization and system's participants think about the obligations one has to one another.

In what follows, we first develop the theoretical notion of organizational culture and consider how trust functions in organizations. We then discuss the methodological framework employed before turning to the data and how one might frame the participants' ideas and comments within the framework of culture and trust. Insofar as our work is based on a modified case study of a private college embedded in the larger issue of 'black money,' our purpose certainly is not to generalize that the sorts of activities we delineate happen exactly in the same manner in all countries. As with many qualitative studies, our intent is to provide insight in a manner that enables first the generation and then the testing and advancement of a theoretical approach that might enable scholars to understand a problem that many see as pervasive but not yet investigated in any concerted manner. As Altbach has noted, "the academic community itself must understand that without integrity and meritocracy there can be no true university. The reality of corruption in higher education must be recognized as a central problem to be analyzed, understood, and rooted out. A first step is to recognize its nature and scope" (2004, p. 8).

1. Understanding organizational culture

Stinchcombe's (1965) classic definition of an organization is a set of "social relations deliberately created, with the explicit intention of continuously accomplishing some specific goals or purposes" (p. 142). To be sure, colleges and universities have different administrative structures and routines that enable work to be accomplished, but organizations in general, and tertiary organizations in particular, also have symbolic structures and processes. An organizational chart affords a formal understanding of decision making from a structural perspective. How individuals communicate with one another offers another way to think about organizational life based on the idea of symbolic interaction. We know, for example, that the Indian Army has a formalized decision-making structure that differs significantly from a group of musicians who improvise Indian traditional music. We also know that individuals in the Army are likely to use formal terms when addressing one another and members of a musical ensemble will employ other terms. Both examples offer understanding about organizational life and how decisions get made. Such illustrations help to understand the culture of the organization, how trust functions, and for our purposes here, how individuals are able to act in a manner that enables or prevents corruption.

Most students of organizational culture will acknowledge that these formal and informal structures and interactions help define organizational culture (Tierney, 1988). Tim Hallett (2003) defines organizational culture "as a negotiated order that emerges through interactions [among] participants, a negotiated order influenced by people with symbolic power − the power to define a situation" (p. 135). Hallett uses Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical work (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1989) to suggest that symbolic power is the ability to define a situation as it is contextualized and negotiated. Contextualization pertains to the larger socially constructed environments in which the organization exists and as we discuss below plays a significant role in how to think about academic corruption. Negotiation is an ongoing interaction that is frequently invisible and unclear, even to those who are involved in the undertaking. Such a point of view, although clearly non-linear and non-functional, paints a more protean view of culture. "We" exist in an organization, although how "we" gets defined is in constant rearrangement and re-articulation. Beliefs are not necessarily shared as if everyone interprets an act or communicative message in the same manner; instead, different perspectives are viewed such that integration and conflict are in co-existence with one another. Insofar as organizations have histories and enacted environments that are in constant reinterpretation, the researcher is more likely to come to grips with not simply stability at a point in time, but instead able to understand change processes. Because the researcher acknowledges that symbols and interpretation are central to organizational life, an understanding of instrumental activities is viewed as more than simply bureaucratic actions or segmented decisions.

The assumption is that colleges and universities are not static entities; they are in constant definition and redefinition. The presumption that everyone will agree or care about a particular definition is as presumptuous as to conclude that differences are so significant that no one will understand or agree with one another. Bertalanffy, the founder of general systems theory, posited that an end may be reached by various routes (1968) and such a point is important to the discussion here. To be sure, causality exists in certain scientific, or empirical, situations. If someone turns the light switch on, light presumably appears. If it does not, a problem exists. In culture, however, systems operate quite differently. Different early experiences in an organization may have similar outcomes; similar experiences and interpretations by individuals may have different outcomes. Organizational predictability becomes difficult, if not impossible. There is not one, but many ways to overcome corruption and create trust. Cultural interpretations always have been mistaken when they have tried to create causal relationships − as if when a manager walks around, then every employee will agree