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ARTICLE

Metamimesis: Consultants as a Mechanism of Institutional Isomorphism in Higher Education

Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur
Rhode Island College

Colleges and universities across the United States spend billions of dollars a year on consultants, and often, these consultants earn their fees by telling administrators how to be more similar to peer or competitor institutions. This paper seeks to understand the role of consultants in spreading institutional isomorphism across the higher education field. It draws on documentary evidence to ask whether, in cases where change is driven by consultants, it is accurate to say that changes have occurred due to mimetic isomorphism, or whether instead mimetic isomorphism is a convenient excuse enabling Breckert's (2010, p. 158) "distraction from authorship," and advances a new model of meta-mimesis in which isomorphic pressures shape the hiring of consultants who themselves disseminate particular practices to the colleges and universities with which they work.

In summer 2023, the higher education conversation exploded with news of devastating program cuts at West Virginia University (Powell, 2023), including dismantling the study of all non-English languages at the University, closing one of only two programs in puppetry in the country, and terminating the master's degree in public administration, despite the fact that some of the closed programs cost less than they brought in revenue. Cutting liberal arts programs has become a trend, so it would be easy to assume that West Virginia University implemented these cuts because they observed their peer institutions making the same decisions. But that explanation is too simple.

Within days of the announcement of the cuts, it became clear that the decision-making process had been guided by the consulting firm rpk GROUP. The client list of this firm includes a wide variety of other higher education institutions and industry trade groups, ranging from community colleges to private institutions, from state systems to public flagships. Perusing it recalls many other recent notable instances of profound cuts, like those to the Vermont State College System and Utica College. Rpk GROUP's entire business is designed around the idea that such cuts are necessary: its website states, right on the front page, that "Traditional methods for supporting higher education business models are no longer effective, and innovation disconnected from the business model is not sustainable" (rpk GROUP, 2023, sec. 2).

None of this is to say that cuts can always be avoided or that WVU's financial state was healthy. But observing rpk GROUP in action makes clear that such questions are never asked. Alternative routes to stability, like effective political engagement designed to raise public investment, cutting executive compensation, or reducing spending on the most expensive programs (whether academic, student life, or facilities), do not figure in the discussion.

The publicly-available contract (rpk GROUP, 2023) between WVU and rpk GROUP, valued at up to $875,000 for approximately six months of work, states hourly billing rates of up to $500—even the executive assistant bills $100 an hour, in a profession in which mean hourly wages in 2022 were $34.16 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Other contracts are even larger, such as the $4.7 million contract the University of Florida inked with McKinsey to develop a strategic plan, a contract withheld from public scrutiny under "trade secrets" and "business proprietary information" exceptions to the state freedom-of-information law (Shanley, 2023, para. 10).

While rpk GROUP consultants do have some background in higher education, they do not have a stronger and more relevant background than the existing employees of WVU, who surely have the skills, abilities, and experience to perform the contracted work, work like that needed to "develop and potentially lead training efforts and workshops for academic leaders…around effectively managing resources and meeting financial objectives," to "establish a rubric for program evaluation that integrates metrics," and to conduct a "review of faculty workloads across various types of instructor categories to identify possible areas of untapped teaching capacity given current and projected campus enrollments," according to the contract (West Virginia University, 2023a). WVU offers academic programs (West Virginia University, 2023b, pp. 15-17) in areas such as accounting, business administration, data analytics, economics, and higher education administration (some of which are now on the chopping block) with faculty who have the expertise to perform much of this analysis, as well as institutional research personnel.

The WVU story is just one example among many of academic restructuring guided by higher education consultants. The question arises: why is this happening? It is insufficient to say that higher education consulting firms heavily promote themselves to administrators, and it is insufficient to point to the ideologies of neoliberal austerity capitalism that guide higher education decision-making. Rather, this paper argues that consultants create a meta-mimetic process in which isomorphic pressures

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shape the hiring of consultants who themselves disseminate particular practices to the organizations with which they work. Mimetic and mimesis, here, refer to organizational patterns of imitation in which organizations copy the practices of other organizations perceived as successful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), while meta is used to indicate the higher-order self-referential nature of this process. In other words, metamimesis refers to copying practices that then result in the further copying of other practices. In the case of WVU, this involved administrators choosing to hire rpk GROUP based on its engagement at other institutions of higher education, and then rpk GROUP recommending—and WVU carrying out—actions similar to those that had been recommended elsewhere. Thus, this paper argues that organizations feel mimetic pressures to hire consultants—often particular consultants—and that the consultants themselves then can become the source of mimetic and/or normative isomorphic pressures on organizations. Consultants bring to bear evidence of isomorphism as part of making the argument for specific changes, leading to a context in which innovations appear to spread on isomorphic lines. But it is not necessarily the innovation itself that is spreading.

Neoinstitutional Theory and Organizational Change

Neoinstitutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) suggests that in circumstances of uncertainty, organizations facing similar internal and external constraints will alter themselves such that homogeneity is increased across the institutional field, a process called institutional isomorphism. There are three mechanisms by which this process can occur (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983): coercive isomorphism, where change is forced by external authorities like state regulators; normative isomorphism, where change occurs as organizations seek to align themselves with norms of practice; and mimetic isomorphism, where organizations copy what they see as the practices of other successful organizations, perhaps most especially when those other successful institutions are their competitors (Scott, 2015). Dimaggio and Powell (1991) argue that organizations are most likely to respond to isomorphic pressures when they face factors such as uncertainty, resource constraints, a high degree of professionalization, regular interactions with state agencies, and limited availability of alternative models. These factors are factors particularly prevalent among colleges and universities, and thus observers might expect higher education institutions to be especially susceptible to institutional isomorphism. It is indeed the case that there is a high degree of isomorphism among them (Meyer et al., 2005). Furthermore, the pursuit of isomorphism is a key element of organizations' efforts to gain legitimacy (Pederson & Dobbin, 2006) and, as Tuchman (2009) has argued, copying what other institutions are doing reduces the risk of failure.

A variety of scholars have found limitations of the neoinstitutional approach for understanding organizational change in higher education. Changes adopted in response to isomorphic pressures may have limited durability (Hashem, 2002), imitation may not occur as expected (Kraatz & Zajac, 1996) or be able to respond to problems the institution cannot control (Tuchman, 2009), internal factors like capacity may be far more important than isomorphic pressures in shaping outcomes (Barman & MacIndoe, 2012), and organizations may find ways to resist isomorphic pressures (Oliver, 1988).

Institutional isomorphism is far from the only model for explaining organizational change. Many scholars point to the role of market forces in shaping and constraining higher education institutions (Avery et al., 2013; Becher & Trowler, 1989; Berman, 2012; Berman & Stivers, 2016; Davis & Binder, 2016; Epple et al., 2013; Hoxby, 2000; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001), while others argue that market models are not a good fit for colleges and universities for a wide variety of reasons (Bok, 2003; Cantor & Courant, 1997, 2001; Kirp, 2003; Winston, 1999). Social movements scholars have pointed to the important role of internal contention in creating change on campus (Arthur, 2011; King, 2008; Rojas, 2007; Yamane, 2001). Administrators and leaders make changes for a large variety of reasons, logical and not, as illuminated by Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) garbage can model of decision-making.

The literature on diffusion provides arguments for how and when innovations will spread. Adoptions of innovations are more likely when individuals or leaders are more interested in change; when organizations are less centralized, less focused on rule-following, more interconnected, and larger; when they have uncommitted resources and a high degree of knowledge and expertise; and when the social system is more open (Rogers, 2003). While prior researchers have found that transparency aids diffusion—as complex technologies, for instance, may fail to diffuse because actors do not have the skill or knowledge to implement them—Briscoe and Murphy (2012) argue that controversial practices may work differently. Finding ways to obscure organizational change can moot the controversy around innovation.

In part, this is because media coverage and interest group attention may be limited by the obfuscation of change. In addition, professional experts can be used to reduce attention to change (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012), and experts use the experiences of prior clients to justify their guidance. Professionals "inhibit attention and influence from potential adversaries" (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012, p. 578), and the use of consultants can help create a new form of administrative opacity that can shield organizations from claimsmaking (Cottom, 2020). Opacity makes it harder to mount effective resistance, thus making it possible for innovations to diffuse across the institutional field without necessarily having become institutionalized or legitimated (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012). Consultants are a key part of this process, as they "circulate crisis narratives and diffuse private sector management ideas" (McClure, 2017, p. 576). As in Arthur's (2011) study of student activists, consultants bring to bear evidence of isomorphism as part of making the argument for specific changes, leading to a context in which innovations appear to spread on isomorphic lines. But it is not necessarily the innovation itself that is spreading.

Drawing on resources produced by higher education consulting firms such as EAB, this paper outlines the ways in which consultants appeal to their own external legitimacy to spread particular practices and ideologies across the organizational field and proposes a theoretical expansion of neoinstitutional theory so as to grapple with metamimesis, the process by which, as Horbyk et al. (2021) put it, acts become interactive mimeses of other acts. In particular, the paper focuses on the spread of Berman's (2022) economic style of thinking as justification for higher education policies and practices. The paper ultimately asks whether, in cases where change is driven by consultants, it is accurate to say that changes have occurred due to mimetic isomorphism, or whether instead mimetic isomorphism is a convenient excuse enabling "distraction from authorship" (Breckert, 2010, p. 158). It concludes by considering mechanisms for resisting isomorphic pressures.

The Landscape of Higher Education Consulting

Consulting firms emerged from the interstices between accounting and engineering (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002b) as boundary organizations that "… specialized in mediating the relationships among more established fields" (Medvetz, 2012, p. 114). The growth of management consultancies is, in part, a response to the growing size and complexity of modern organizations (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002a). At times, the consulting sector of the economy has grown twice as fast as client sectors (Ernst & Kieser, 2002). Today, management consulting revenues are concentrated in North America and Europe, with "70% of consulting fees worldwide generated in only 5 nations," Germany, the UK, France, the US, and Canada (Sturdy, 2018, p. 539). In 2021, estimates of global management consulting revenues were $700 to $900 billion (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023), though the fact that many firms remain privately held makes complete analysis impossible.

The roots of consulting are in providing advice for private-sector companies, but over time, consulting work has moved into the public and nonprofit sectors. Analyses of public-sector consulting work have shown that consultants tend to see public institutions as wasteful and poorly performing (McClure, 2017). Consulting employees generally believe that public-sector workers do not have sufficient expertise and are not innovative, despite the fact that consulting employees are hired based on their confidence, ability to think fast, and effectively use "superficial knowledge," rather than based on domain-specific knowledge or relevant skills (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 125). This set of narratives regarding the supposed deficiencies of the public sector and the excellence of the private sector, which has spread far beyond the management consulting world itself, further increases pressures to engage in public-sector contracting (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Public-sector consulting reshapes government in line with a particular vision (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023), a vision that includes privatization, enhanced competition, and outsourcing, as in the economic style of thinking (Berman, 2022). Consulting firms import models from other economic sectors regardless of these models' efficacy or appropriateness for the context at hand, and advocate against government regulation and in favor of market-based approaches to problem-solving (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022).

Colleges and universities may be especially unsuitable clients for the application of mainstream management consulting approaches, given their fluid, open decision structures; orientation to goals other than profit; employment of discursive and deliberative practices; and focus on the limits of knowledge, among other factors (Serrano-Velarde & Krücken, 2012). Furthermore, higher education institutions have missions that are messy and complicated, which flies in the face of the consulting goal of helping streamline organizations to focus on their core missions (Selingo, 2012). And colleges and universities remain, in some sense, a premodern form—which consultants are part of the push away from. Consultants often do not understand the contextual complexities facing higher education institutions (Meshreky & Workman, 2019). For example, suggestions may ignore the fact that cutting grant-related costs may not produce savings (and can even reduce revenues) and the reality that regulatory or political factors may make many recommendations impossible or unpalatable. Despite providing a common toolkit to client institutions, consultants often fail to register which solutions are unlikely to be implementable and continue to suggest them time and time again. However, specific details about past achievements in using these tools are limited, with presentations focusing primarily on "future and promised effects" (Røvik, 2002, p. 120). Thus, decisions about hiring consultants are done primarily on the basis of reputation (Kipping, 2002) and an "impression of value" (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 4) rather than observed results.

In addition, due to the circulation of knowledge throughout academic communities, "academic leaders are much more willing than peers in other sectors to share their experiences or ask colleagues from other universities for advice" (Serrano-Velarde & Krücken, 2012, p. 283). In research on consulting in Japan, Sturdy (2018) found that this willingness to learn from supposed competitors (along with government, higher education, and supply-chain partners) is part of why management consulting has less of a foothold in Japan than in other advanced economies, with public-sector management consulting nearly non-existent. Thus, as in Japan, the adoption of innovations can and does occur in higher education without the presence of consulting firms.

Today, there are hundreds of higher education consulting firms in the United States alone, ranging from specialized local sole proprietorships to arms of the largest and most well-known entities like McKinsey, Deloitte, and Bain. The use of management consulting firms—as opposed to consultants with domain-specific expertise in particular administrative functions or in higher education administration—took off in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Selingo, 2012). While public-sector management consulting remains a small fraction of the overall consulting market, it may be the fastest-growing sector (Cerruti et al., 2019).

It is difficult to get accurate or useful data on the size of the industry, but some estimates exist. IBISWorld, an industry research firm, estimates that 2022 education consulting revenue reached 2.9 billion dollars, but this figure includes K-12 consulting and excludes "education branches of larger consulting firms" (IBISWorld, 2022, ch. 1). If we use a more expansive definition of consulting, including companies that provide online program management, educational technology, and enrollment management, total spending on higher education consulting exceeds $35 billion per year and is estimated to exceed $45 billion a year by 2025 (Marcus, 2021). Institutions of higher education in the United States had revenues of $993 billion in academic year 2020-2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Considering this figure in light of the data presented above suggests that about four percent of higher education revenues in the United States are being spent on consultants and related outside service providers. Clearly, the industry is large, and it appears to be growing.

Why Consultants?

There is a robust literature on why management turns to consultants. The received wisdom about why managers, including higher education managers, hire consultants is that managers see consultants as "objective" outsiders who can help push change projects through and as "a veil behind which managerial action can be engaged and change can be monitored" (Serrano-Velarde, 2010, p. 140). Consultants are seen as privileged outsiders who can create change where insiders cannot (Galwa & Vogel, 2023), and they provide managers with an approach to addressing organizational problems when organizational capacity or skills are not up to the task (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002a).

Consultants can confer external legitimacy and can draw on bridging capital to bring new ideas—including those from other organizational fields—to organizations (Birnbaum, 2000). They can tell administrators what they want to hear, or at least package their advice in a form that sounds sufficiently like what administrators are expecting to hear. In many cases, consultants are hired by an administrative unit that is not the one with which they will work, and the impacted unit is not given a voice in the hiring (Galwa & Vogel, 2023). Thus, they can also be used by administrators and managers to sell deeply unpopular reforms while keeping their own hands clean. And sometimes, consultants can be used in pointedly strategic ways. Arthur (2011) shows how campus change agents (here, student activists) can exploit the logic of neoinstitutionalism as part of internal campaigns for change. Similarly, Breckert (2010) shows that institutional entrepreneurs look to external models to legitimate the change they already wanted to make, strategically downplaying their own role and engaging in what Breckert (p. 158) calls "distraction from authorship."

Heller (2002, p. 267) outlines nine different "managerial motives" for seeking consulting engagements. Five of these relate to using consultants as tools for internal advantage-seeking or disadvantage-avoidance (for instance, navigating intra-organizational competition or fending off disapproval for making unpopular decisions). One is that consultants can help managers associate themselves with management fads, while another is the use of consultants as simply a form of outsourcing. Finally, managers may be seeking a second opinion or actually engaging in the exploration of a problem which requires external knowledge.

Consulting finds an opening by exploiting the reduced longevity of higher education administrators, replacing collective, institutionally-specific knowledge with abstract managerial ideals (Ruef, 2002). Firms are brought in because of their supposed expertise and knowledge—but must first "gather information and knowledge from the client" (Serrano-Velarde, 2010, p. 134), making the work of consulting a coproduction between consultant and client (Wood, 2002). This knowledge-gathering leads to an epistemic conflict with academics, as academics focus on falsifiable knowledge and logical validity in analysis, neither of which consultants see as necessary or useful for decision-making. Yet beyond the knowledge they accrete through their work, which becomes part of what they sell to the next client (Galwa & Vogel, 2023; Serrano-Velarde, 2010), consultants rarely have specialized, formalized expertise (Fincham, 2003). Rather, they have toolkits of techniques and an understanding of market dynamics and management fads. Consultants are "fashion setters" and "knowledge brokers" (Seidenschnur & Krücken, 2019, p. 114)—and even if they do not have specific knowledge (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002a), they "make clients believe that they have advanced knowledge" (Seidenschnur & Krücken, 2019, p. 114).

Furthermore, "consultants increasingly take over the role of certifiers of rationality. They signal internal and external constituencies that expert knowledge is being applied to all functions and in all levels of an organization" (Ernst & Kieser, 2002, p. 55). Consulting does not traffic, exactly, in truth, but rather in power (Salaman, 2002). The work of consultants is thus an apt site for applying the concept of "policy-based evidence" as a performance to further pre-determined goals (Griffen, 2023). When using policy-based evidence, one determines in advance what policy one wishes to propose and finds (or sometimes manufactures) evidence that fits that policy purpose—as opposed to the use of evidence-based policy to determine, hopefully on empirical grounds, which policy is likely to be most effective. The "untruth" (Salaman, 2002, p. 251) of consultancy and the ways consultants use evidence are additional factors giving rise to the struggle for authority between academics and consultants.

Given the fact that consulting projects “translate wider socio-political projects into organizational realities” (Salaman, 2002, p. 257), academic resistance to consulting initiatives is part of academic resistance to pressures seeking to transform academic work away from longstanding ideas of scholarship and shared governance. For example, consultants may recommend reorganization as a cost-saving strategy, pointing to successful reorganizations elsewhere, while internal faculty constituencies ask for cost-benefit analyses over a longer time horizon and the incorporation of outcomes assessments into any changes planned (Cooper et al., 2020).

In the case of higher education, the use of consultants can be a response to uncertainty that helps drive institutions towards conformity (Tutterow & Evans, 2016), just as neoinstitutional theory might predict. Consultants can also provide a backstop to prevent academics from gumming up the wheels of change, thereby enabling managers to push their desired outcomes through (Serrano-Velarde, 2010). Selingo (2012, p. 9) quotes a Bain partner as saying that “[t]he fear of faculty backlash really tamps down on the ability of presidents to change universities.” Yet evidence suggests consultants may not be so able to push change forward. When consultants submit a report, shared governance procedures at many institutions provide for review and comment (e.g. Cooper et al., 2020). Such review may show that consultants’ recommendations are not in line with accreditation standards or other important priorities. The received wisdom—the idea that management consultants, as outsiders, can facilitate change rather than imposing a solution of their own—conflicts with consulting as practiced by contemporary higher education consulting firms. If the same solution (e.g. a proprietary software package) is proposed to all clients, perhaps the mechanisms of consulting have shifted? Serrano-Velarde (2010) notes that consultants are agents for the diffusion of practices across institutional fields—as can be observed in the case of management fads (Birnbaum, 2000).

Consultants add complexity, despite claiming to streamline management processes (Ernst & Kieser, 2002). How? Through functional differentiation, reinterpretation of management knowledge, and the manufacturing of demand. Demand is manufactured in part through encouraging managers to see more—and more unmanageable—complexity that thus drives demand for consultants, in part through the spread of management fads and fashions that require consultants for implementation, in part through public relations strategies that legitimate consultants as the repair outfit, and in part as consultants take on functions that have been outsourced. Managers are attracted to this process because it “greatly reduces the danger that the projects associated with the implementation of a fashion are rated a failure” (Ernst & Kieser, 2002, p. 60). However, consultants may also reduce internal legitimacy and cause “institutional illness” (Birnbaum, 2000, p. 189) via misdiagnosing institutional problems or providing inappropriate solutions, often due to their lack of deep familiarity with organizational processes, practices, and circumstances. At times consultants may be operating in the realm of confirmation bias, and “consultancies generally reinforce the strength of experienced clients rather than compensate for the weaknesses of the inexperienced” (Wood, 2002, p. 59).

Consulting companies work, in part through cultivation of networks of former employees, to maintain connections with potential clients. Today, 46% of presidents did not begin their academic careers on the faculty (Cottom et al., 2021). Presidents with corporate backgrounds have more corporate connections (28%) than academic presidents (4%), and new presidents often rely on prior contexts to make sense of their new institution (Cottom et al., 2021), so corporate presidents inevitably bring in more corporate sense-making. In addition, particular groups of personnel within colleges and universities may be especially likely to seek engagement with consultants. For example, “personnel experts” play an important role in the spread of practices across corporations (Sutton & Dobbin, 1996, p. 808) and the same may be true in higher education.

Consultants typically make money regardless of the nature of their impact on their clients. Consulting firms occasionally admit that cost savings from their work may be negligible (McClure, 2017). Firms often refuse pay-for-results compensation (Kipping, 2002) on the grounds that the firm has no control over the degree to which the client follows through—or, if they do accept such arrangements, they do so with no cap on the size of the ultimate payout and no guardrails to prevent the pursuit of outcomes that might enrich the consulting firm at the client’s expense (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022). One common billing structure involves a “cost-plus-fixed-fee” model in which the consulting fee (plus expenses) is guaranteed no matter the outcome, leaving all risk with the client (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 73). Even with less problematic contracts, many risks are unknown at the time of contracting and anticipated risks can be impossible to quantify in terms that can be incorporated into the contract. Consulting firms often find ways to blame clients’ own actions for any shortcomings in contracting outcomes. Furthermore, there are basically no legal provisions to prevent conflicts of interest in consulting (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Bogdanich and Forsythe (2022) highlight such conflicts as consulting simultaneously for the FDA and pharmaceutical companies seeking regulatory advantage; tobacco companies at the same time as health care companies and regulators looking to reduce tobacco-related health care impacts; and Chinese strategic interests at the same time as the United States Department of Defense. These instances are not examples of an end run around ethics rules, but rather normal and accepted practice for consulting firms.

Management consultants determine the success of their projects by evaluating their compliance with budget and schedule, degree of target achievement, profitability, and expansion and extension (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016). Notably, client satisfaction is not typically relevant; analyses of consulting projects rarely discuss failures; and when failures are reported, these are blamed on the client (Røvik, 2002). It is difficult if not impossible to measure consultant effectiveness, due to lack of client knowledge about the task and methods, social aspects of consulting, intangibility and singularity of consulting projects, and causal complexities such as the role of other factors (Ernst & Kieser, 2002), as well as the fact that the outcomes of consulting projects involve complex changes that obfuscate alternative paths (Kipping, 2002). Austerity pressures and downsizing further reduce internal capacity, at times leaving managers and administrators with little choice but to turn to consultants. The lack of institutional knowledge and overwork of existing employees can reduce internal ability to evaluate potential consulting contracts and assess the outcomes of those which are in process or which have been completed (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). For example, in June 2023, Hampshire College announced that it would terminate its internal information technology department and instead hire an outside consultant to provide IT services (Schulman-Hall, 2023). In explaining this decision, the manager in charge of information technology noted that it was necessary because the department was short-staffed and the consulting firm had the necessary experience. Simply hiring appropriate personnel to resolve the staffing problem does not appear to have been a consideration.

What Consultants Do

Scholars disagree about which types of work fall under the umbrella of consulting. While strategy and IT systems consulting are nearly always included, some argue that the umbrella should be broadened to include various types of outsourcing. In addition, even the acquisition of software can embroil organizations in consulting relationships, as many software packages are bundled with their own consultants who get paid to help implement the software, train users, and load organizational data into systems.

Outsourcing (e.g. Sodexo) thus can be understood as a kind of consulting, and outsourcing causes a hollowing-out of internal capacity and knowledge (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). This is especially the case when institutional memory and context-specific knowledge are "tacit" and have been built up over time (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 157). Consultants can capitalize on this by lowballing initial contracts and ramping up costs once organizations are dependent—even working pro-bono at times when spending is politically unpopular in order to better position themselves for later or having their work for public-sector or non-profit organizations paid for by an anonymous private donor and then transitioning that experience into more work later (Selingo, 2012). Losing internal capacity to outsourcing and consulting means organizations have no choice but to continue using these services. Internal capability and expertise are needed even to effectively evaluate the promises made by consulting organizations. Weaking the public sector through outsourcing can reduce public trust, and downsizing can reduce the capacity for organizational learning and innovation, for among other reasons that "[t]he tacit knowledge that consultants develop remains with them" (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 160) rather than with the firm or government agency. Furthermore, "[o]ften the capabilities for managing the delivery of the service in-house would be completely lost after they had been outsourced, and so the costs of re-insourcing were very great" (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 97), as is the case among higher education institutions that have contracted with Online Program Managers (OPMs). Thus, "[c]onsultants sell a remedy for a situation that they have in part caused themselves" (Ernst & Kieser, 2002, p. 72).

Consultants working with higher education institutions (McClure, 2017) establish that higher education has problems; assert that leaders do not have the capacity to make the needed changes; present common solutions, some of which bear little relation to what institutions do—for instance, arguing that institutions should move "away from the 'handcrafted' approach by teachers" (p. 583); try to upsell clients on additional services, for example, writing the efficiency report and then proposing themselves as the solution for implementing changes suggested in the report; complain about the very organizational complexity that is integral to what higher education institutions do; and ultimately get paid multimillion dollar fees. In presenting their reports, consultants draw on shared drives filled with "ready-made slide decks" (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022, p. 244), enabling them to quickly prepare sleek presentations that look customized but may offer little specific to a given client. Indeed, public discussion of the Huron Group's consulting engagements with institutions such as American University and the University of New Hampshire has included clear evidence that report files are reused across clients (see @nathankhensley.bsky.social, 2023).

Consultants pull not just from ready-made slides, but also from a set list of suggestions (as in the programmatic cuts rpk GROUP advocates), some of which show little understanding of specific higher education contexts or higher education in general; many cannot or will not be implemented, but consultants allege it is cultural problems on campus that get in the way of implementation. In an autoethnographic account of working in higher education management consulting, Melaku (2022) reports that management consultants seek to privatize and standardize knowledge and decision-making processes, "repackaging" corporate strategies to apply to "fundamentally different issues" (p. 31) and framing this work as both important and urgent. As part of this approach, consultants argue that universities should be benchmarking themselves against the most efficient organizations, not against their peers (Selingo, 2012). Furthermore, pro-innovation bias is very common among change agents like consultants (Rogers, 2003), and this bias may encourage change agents to ignore negative or unintended consequences of their work. As Armbrüster and Kipping (2002, p. 100) write, "[t]he inherent logic [of consulting] is that change is always necessary, and consultancies' business is to induce and accompany it."

Thus, consultancy ideas "re-imagine or re-invent the organization….[and] define the role of senior management as the authority that has the responsibility and capacity knowledge to define the structure and design the process of the organization" (Salaman, 2002, p. 253). They also "shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives of management" (Salaman, 2002, p. 254) by implementing new forms of measurement and accountability. Consultancy ideas

> *"act as a relay between societal discourses of the economy and programs and principles of organizational restructuring. They thus support internal processes of governmentality by aligning them with wider societal authoritative discourses of economic and political management" (Salaman, 2002, p. 255).*

In doing so, consultants both define problems and offer solutions that resonate "with the values of economic management advocated and legitimized by socio-political discourses of the market" (Salaman, 2002, p. 255).

Besides their work for individual campuses, consulting firms also create industry reports for posting on their websites and sharing with potential or current clients as a form of marketing designed to drum up new business and publish articles favorable to clients without disclosing the client relationship (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022). Such publications can have consequences for organizational practice (Selingo, 2012) when organizational insiders take their recommendations to heart.

And who is it that produces all of these reports? Staff consultants, who are rarely hired for domain-specific knowledge and skills. Rather, they are hired for pedigree and for "deep-level cultural homogeneity" (Rivera, 2015, p. 139), yet consulting has an unusually low retention rate. Industry attrition may be due to the mismatch between hiring employees on the basis of their involvement in particular forms of leisure (such as elite-linked athletic activities) and the grueling work hours expected of entry-level consulting employees (Rivera, 2015) or between the ideals of young people who want to address social problems and the reality of firms working with morally questionable clients (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022) as well as the industry's toxic culture (Sull et al., 2022).

Higher Education Consulting in Action

A deeper dive into the actual products of higher education consulting engagements can illuminate the practices discussed above. This discussion will rely both on previous analysis of consulting outcomes and on documentary evidence in the form of consulting reports produced by higher education consulting firms, with a particular focus on EAB. EAB, formerly known as the Education Advisory Board, is a full-service higher education consultancy providing management strategy consulting as well as a suite of software applications and related services. It claims to serve over 2,500 educational institutions. In describing its work, EAB (2023a, FAQ 2) writes: "We drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities in five major areas: enrollment; student success; data & analytics; institutional strategy; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I)."

EAB offers various membership packages, but moderately-sized public institutions can expect to spend tens of thousands of dollars a year to belong, before any costs for specialized research, software, or consulting, which can be purchased separately from membership. The author's institution, which subscribed between 2013 and 2021, spent about $30,000 to belong in year one of the contract; projected costs would have been over $107,000 in fiscal year 2024 had the contract continued (document on file with the author). This membership model helps client institutions hide consulting expenditures among other subscriptions like library databases and lead generators (Fleming, 2022), thus making it more difficult for community members to object: freedom-of-information requests for consulting expenditures will not turn up spending on EAB and similar services. EAB's reports state that "Each member shall not sell, license, republish, distribute, or post online or otherwise this Report, in part or in whole" (Fairfax et al., 2022, p. 2; Hubbard et al., 2018, p. 2), yet some reports are posted on the Internet—presumably by public institutions that have legal responsibility to make the materials upon which they spend their money public. With these instances as exceptions, taxpayers, tuition payers, and other organizational insiders often have little idea when and how consultants are being used (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). The resources available in the members-only library often provide little beyond what could be obtained by reading higher education publications like InsideHigherEd and The Chronicle of Higher Education. So why do institutions belong? Most plausibly, because their peers do.

EAB reports feature case studies of client institutions who have adopted the specific solutions they sell, with clear fiscal outcomes (Hubbard et al., 2018) but no empirical, generalizable analysis of these outcomes or their relationship to student experience or accomplishment. Materials refer to "peer-tested best practices research" (Hubbard et al., 2018, p. 13), yet research of the sort EAB conducts suffers from a variety of problems that make it unlikely to be able to identify best practices, including selection bias, weak internal validity, a lack of generalizability, and other issues (Bretschneider et al., 2004). Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele, and Wu propose a checklist of factors important for designing and conducting best-practices research, including criteria related to case selection which EAB could not fulfill given that it looks only at its own clients. For example, in one report, EAB profiled retention efforts at four unnamed institutions and one unnamed consortium without any information about why these particular cases were selected or how representative their experiences were (Beaudoin, 2012). Many consulting firms assemble materials for such reports by "copy-and-pasting anecdotes from a handful of cases" as this is "much quicker than conducting research via other channels" (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023, p. 124).

Readers who want to learn about the experiences of an institution described in an EAB report are unlikely to be able to do so via normal methods of data-gathering—for example, a case study (Fairfax et al., 2022) refers to the implementation of Navigate MyPath at Trident Technical College. But while it is possible to determine what Navigate is and that Trident Technical College uses it, the MyPath phrasing appears nowhere on Trident Technical's website. There are other colleges that have webpages referring to MyPath, though many of them do not reference Navigate. Other case studies provide little context about the institution: an analysis of early alerts at two institutions, broken down by student race (Fairfax et al., 2022), provides no information about the racial demographics of those institution's student bodies, making it impossible to determine whether the indicated rate of alerts going to Black and Latinx students is or is not disproportionate.

Institutions also hire EAB to produce basic market research reports (see Appendix B, Graduate Executive Committee, 2018), along with marketing suggestions. One such report (Rosenfeld, 2019) suggests that the institution use word-of-mouth marketing, search engine optimization, a useful website, and a social media presence, and provides links to members-only resources on how to do each of these (generally common and well-understood) things; the report also includes suggested "networking contacts" (p. 17) involved in similar programs at other institutions. EAB provides tools like checklists for how to write an email to a student in need of support (Fairfax et al., 2022). Nearly all EAB reports consulted advocate for the purchase of EAB-owned software packages. Purchased software often drives practice, instead of institutions choosing software that fits with good practice. For example, academic advising and predictive analytics software seems to push advisors towards more prescriptive advising and away from the developmental advising model that is the gold standard in the field (Coffin, 2018).

EAB markets one software package that provides predictive analytics on which students are more or less likely to succeed (Feathers, 2021); at some schools, race is used as a "high impact predictor" (para. 2) that leaves students of color much more likely to be labeled as high-risk. The software suggests high-risk students be pushed to change majors, an approach higher education scholars like Kirkebøen et al. (2014) critique. EAB-provided training and consulting claims that this software is in part designed to help avoid individual bias—though it is impossible to avoid bias when bias is baked into algorithms (Cottom, 2020; Eubanks, 2017). Institutions employing the algorithm do not necessarily know race is included or how it is used, as the algorithm is proprietary. Furthermore, most of EAB's predictive models exclude financial considerations, which are quite important to retention, especially among students from the lowest-income groups (Alon, 2011; Bettinger, 2004). These forms of algorithmic decision-making can obfuscate and privatize access to information (Cottom, 2020).

Other firms behave similarly. A 2021 report by Accenture uses fancy quantitative methods and references to the most prestigious schools (Stanford, Northeastern, MIT, Harvard) to make the firm and its consultants sound like they know what they are talking about. What they are really advocating, though, is the purchase of particular software packages, employing a "zero-base [budget] mindset," using their toolkit, and consulting with their "professional advisors" (Accenture Research, 2021, p. 4; 28), the same kind of standard advice nearly any consulting firm would provide to nearly any client. Notably, though, this report does devote some space to a higher-education-specific argument: that higher education institutions need to act differently because they are competing with providers of non-degree credentials. But the analysis proceeds to explicitly exclude vocational certificates in fields like cosmetology and culinary arts from consideration as part of higher education (Accenture Research, 2021) with no explanation.

In an analysis of 21 higher education consulting engagements involving seven different management consulting firms (not including EAB), most undertaken by large public universities, EAB staff find that the "vast majority" of consulting engagements result in "recommendations to automate HR processes, consolidate preferred vendor contracts, centralize particular IT services, and retrofit equipment to reduce energy consumption" (Meshreky & Workman, 2019, p. 4) as well as engage in organizational redesign and cut labor costs, and most result in similar projected savings. Typically, universities achieve 70-75% of "base case" saving projections and 40% of "best case" projections (Meshreky & Workman, 2019, p. 6). The report concludes with a lengthy checklist—ranked by difficulty—of the more common consultants' recommendations so that institutions can perform a "Comprehensive Efficiency and Effectiveness Audit" (Meshreky & Workman, 2019, pp. 24-27) internally. Studies have found that typical savings generated from a consulting engagement are about 30% lower than consulting firms advertise, and that consultants steer public-sector clients away from seeking public support and towards profit-seeking (McClure, 2017).

Fleming (2022), in his analysis of 16 higher education consulting firm reports related to COVID, shows that consultants see crises as opportunities, what he calls "crisis opportunism." These reports share several common features: negativity about the non-financialized orientation of higher education; crisis as an opportunity to infuse colleges and universities with neoliberal solutions that just happened to be "lying around" (p. 4) prior to the crisis; the use of buzzwords to advocate for buzzy technologies;

suggestions for innovations based on consumerism rather than on learning science; and reductions in both staff numbers and consultative decision-making. Fleming argues that were the consultants' suggestions and predictions taken to their logical conclusion, the consulting firms would be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in which, by positioning themselves as 'more expert' in business than the business-school faculty, the role of business schools can be eroded in favor of corporate education platforms—though business schools may also benefit from being able to place their alumni at consulting firms.

While consulting firms claim that they engage in implementation, not policymaking (Bogdanich & Forsythe, 2022), consultants promote organizational changes based on a particular logic, and as such are part of the spread of what Berman (2022) calls thinking like an economist. Bureaucratization and rationalization are part of this process—even ideas like class scheduling grids (Barrow 1990) can be understood as an element of a corporatized model of higher education operations. For-profit higher education innovated by adopting a "fully rationalized educational structure, the likes of which being touted in some form as efficiency solutions to traditional colleges who have only adopted these rationalized processes piecemeal" (Cottom & Tuchman, 2015, p. 6), and "the traditional college sector continues to eschew for-profit colleges as somehow not 'real' college, while simultaneously embracing the organizational processes that distinguish for-profits from traditional colleges" (Cottom & Tuchman, 2015, p. 7), a comment that is even more striking when viewed in connection with the Accenture report discussed above. Given the well-documented patterns of undisclosed conflicts of interest in the consulting industry, one might speculate that consulting firms are encouraging public and not-for-profit institutions more like for-profit ones while simultaneously advising for-profit institutions as to how to increase their market share and enhancing their pre-existing focus on financialized and profit-driven activities (see, e.g., Cottom, 2017).

A Digression into Expertise

As noted above, mainstream management consulting firms hire consulting employees based on pedigree and on a specific set of intellectual skills and not based on domain-specific knowledge or expertise. The analysis here looks at the biographical statements posted for the 356 individuals listed on the "Our Experts" page of the EAB website (EAB, 2023b). To obtain this data, a web scraper, Octoparse, combed each of the 356 expert profiles, downloading the experts' professional biographies and educational backgrounds. In cases where information was missing or unclear, LinkedIn profiles, links to which usually available on the profile pages, were used for clarification. This analysis is dependent on what EAB and the individual employee wished to highlight, and it is possible that individuals have additional relevant background that is not highlighted on their profiles. If so, the omissions would be a telling comment on the degree to which EAB values domain-specific expertise.

The profiles were coded based on academic degree attainment, subject matter focus of degree, and prior education-related work experience. The academic degree attainment code notes Experts' highest earned degree, with categories of no degree attainment recorded, bachelor's, master's, law degree, and doctorate. Certifications and post-baccalaureate certificates were not coded; no individual included an associate's degree in their profile as the highest degree earned. Individuals were coded with the doctoral degree code if they were listed as having an in-progress doctoral degree (in most cases these individuals listed specific dissertation foci and had prior listed master's degrees), but those who were listed as currently working on master's degrees were coded with the highest degree as bachelor's given the lack of information about degree progress.

In terms of subject matter focus of degree, degrees focused on higher education; any other aspect of education (such as international education, special education, or teaching English to speakers of other languages); public policy or public administration; or other; those who had earned an MBA specifically were also coded separately, given the documented preference of management consulting firms for MBA graduates.

The coding of prior experience is more complex. Experts were coded as having K12 experience if they recorded working as a K12 teacher or in a K12 system office, but not if they worked in limited-time fellowships (like Teach for America or a teach-English-in-Korea program). They were coded as working in higher education is they recoded any work experience in a higher education institution other than that clearly obtained as a work-study, resident assistant, or similar student job, or in the case of very temporary assignments. Work experience only for an alumni association was also excluded, as was employment for nonprofit or government organizations that may have related in some way to education but that did not involve direct work in an educational institution, such as work for the Peace Core, state legislature, or UNICEF.

The analysis finds that 46.8% of the 356 "Experts" working at EAB have no education beyond a bachelor's degree, while 42% have master's degrees and 9% have or are currently pursuing doctoral degrees. Among the remainder, five have law degrees and three were not recorded on the website as having had earned degrees. Looking at the educational focus of their degrees, 12.9% had at least one degree focusing on higher education and 11.5% had at least one degree focusing on some other aspect of education, while an additional 5% had degrees in public policy or public administration. 41% of master's degree holders had degrees in education or higher education, while 24.7% of master's degree holders had MBAs. Half of those who had earned or were currently pursuing doctoral degrees were studying some aspect of higher education. On the other hand, less than 5% of those whose highest degree was a bachelor's degree had a degree in education or a policy-related field. A very wide range of academic fields was represented among the Experts, including everything from percussion performance to finance, from sociology to international relations, from strategic communication to mathematics.

Considering prior work experience, 62.5% of Experts did not list any prior education experience in their biographies, while 30.3% had higher education experience and 6.7% had K-12 experience. A crosstabulation of field of study and work experience shows that 52.2% of EAB's experts have neither studied education or a related field nor worked in education. Even where employees do have education work experience, that experience may not be relevant to their current assignments at EAB. For example, an Expert who works in enrollment management consulting has prior higher education work experience is in development. Approximately 100 of the 356 experts note prior experience in development or fundraising (some also have other education work experience) and few work in capacities directly related to development at EAB. In contrast, about 40 Experts note prior experience in admissions and enrollment management, which is a core area of EAB service.

This analysis has several limitations. A fuller analysis would have obtained LinkedIn profiles wherever feasible and gone further in quantifying the extent of individuals' expertise. In the current analysis, someone who worked as an admissions officer at their alma mater for a few years after college graduation cannot be distinguished from someone with 15 years of progressively responsible student services leadership at multiple campuses. The analysis also did not consider the experts' alma maters, which is a limitation given the documented preference of management consulting firms for hiring employees who have graduated from a narrow range of institutions (Rivera, 2015). However, in looking over the institutions from which EAB employees graduated, it seems that the firm recruits from a far wider educational background than do firms like McKinsey, Accenture, Bain, and the Boston Consulting Group. Furthermore, despite the fact that over 50% of Experts have not worked in higher or K-12 education or earned a degree in education or another related field, in comparison with the mainstream management consulting firms it does seem that EAB represents a greater concentration of domain-specific knowledge and expertise than can be found elsewhere.

Yet it remains the case that nearly every higher education institution has a far greater concentration of higher education expertise among its faculty, staff, and administration (and in some cases, students) than does EAB, barring only the very smallest colleges. Of course, as discussed above, there are a variety of circumstances in which hiring consultants may be the best path forward—for instance, when temporary staffing limitations mean capacity or expertise is insufficient for a project. But where such reasons do not exist, it is notable that higher education institutions choose to look to consulting partners with little non-consulting expertise in higher education rather than to their own internal experts.

Metamimesis

Heller (2002, p. 265) argues that organizational change stems from factors like technology, social change, economic factors, and regulation, and that consultants serve as "midwives" to this process. Yet organizations continue to hire consultants. Consultants working in the public sector bring with them a variety of transformations of public sector work, including shifts to the use of performance pay, privileging of financial metrics, and viewing of citizens (or, in the case of higher education, students) as customers (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Consultants implement these reforms because of the perception that they know what they are doing, but it is probably the case that they are diffusing the practices rather than employing expertise. Consultants' own marketing materials focus heavily on peer influence, highlighting how many similar organizations are already contracting with that consultant, demonstrating the importance of isomorphic pressures on the contracting process.

It is clear, then, that there are mimetic pressures, and probably normative ones too, to hire consultants. In some contests, coercive pressures from state regulators or donors may additionally lead to coercive isomorphism. One might argue that consultants are serving as conduits of diffusion, spreading the information necessary for the mimetic transfer of innovations. But given how thin consultants' reports are on real evidence, it is perhaps not the case that they are actually the conduit.

Consultants facilitate and legitimize isomorphism (Seidenschnur & Krücken, 2019) and shape and transform management ideas (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002b) as they "circulate management knowledge" (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002a, p. 9). While Barrier and Musselin (2016, p. 379) argue that consultants are "not a source of isomorphic conformity but rather a strategic tool to promote desired action," this analysis does not tell us how and why administrators consult with consultants in the first place. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall (2002a, p. 12) argue "that the use of consultants is characterized by herd behavior; that is, that the use of consultants by dominant actors in an industry will lead others to follow suit." When managers hire consultants, they are primarily "concerned about the signal it sends to others" Kipping 2002:39).

Thus, the hiring of consultants can be understood as an example of metamimesis, or a process by which mimetic pressures to engage in a particular behavior or practice (here, consulting engagements) results in the spread of an innovation along lines that may appear to be mimetic themselves but in actuality are produced as a secondary effect of the original behavior or practice. This paper argues that metamimesis is the right theoretical lens for considering the impacts of management consulting in higher education, given the clear evidence that colleges and universities hire consultants when other similar institutions have done so and that higher education consulting firms draw from a common toolbox of recommendations in constructing their management advice. The presence of metamimesis does not imply the absence of other sorts of isomorphic pressures—clearly, colleges and universities remain interested in trying what their successful or competitor peers are doing and remain subject to coercive and normative pressures. But metamimesis provides another pathway for institutional isomorphism, one in which an innovation can spread despite being neither legitimated nor institutionalized in the field (Briscoe & Murphy, 2012) and despite a lack of evidence that the innovation is effective or useful.

While this paper only considers the role of metamimesis in the case of management consulting in higher education, such practices are likely found in a variety of other contexts. One example might be the invention of complex legal products designed to help firms capitalize on renewable-energy tax credits (Sabar, 2023). It is possible to argue that the increased use of generative AI might spur meta-mimetic isomorphism, too. As the use of such AI spreads, written products such as recommendation letters, corporate policies, and press releases may come to resemble each other more closely. This would not be because the drafters of such documents were seeking to mimic styles common in their organizational field, but rather because the AI technology, through its predictive language model, provides its "clients" with similar but not identical text they adopt as a consequence of having adopted the AI itself.

Moving Forward

There is no shortage of narratives about the various crises that higher education must contend with, from the supposedly-looming demographic cliff to the dawn of artificial intelligence chatbots—or, in the case of WVU, annual debt service at levels exceeding projected budget shortfalls. It is in times of crisis that leaders most feel the need to seek new perspectives and chart new paths. Yet time and time again those new perspectives lead down the same well-trodden path. Sometimes that path is one that helps colleges and universities emerge intact from the crisis. Sometimes that path is one that descends into disaster. In both cases, leaders are increasingly likely to have called on consultants to help find the way. And while it is a mark of a good leader to know when to ask for help and draw on the expertise of others, it remains an open question whether higher education consulting firms are indeed supplying help and expertise—or, even if they are, whether they are supplying help and expertise that could not have been obtained in a more cost-effective manner internally or via institutional partnerships. Making decisions in times of crisis is hard, and hiring consultants seems easy. The forces of mimetic isomorphism are powerful, and their claim on legitimacy potent. But it is uniqueness that establishes organizational identities (Pederson & Dobbin, 2006), and consultants are unlikely to provide the singular recipe that makes an individual campus shine.

Some commentators might throw up their hands in despair, mumbling about the corporatization of higher education and the capitalist rent-seeking of these hanger-on consulting firms. But the fact that such firms exist, and the fact that they heavily promote themselves to administrators, does not necessitate their level of ubiquity across the higher education landscape. Thus, this paper asks not why administrators feel compiled to hire consultants, but rather how consultants have become among the "powerful forces [that] emerge that lead [once disparate organizations] to become more similar to one another" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Scholars of consulting have previously drawn connections between consulting work and organizational theory, arguing that consultants may serve as agents of normative isomorphism by disseminating managerial expertise (Serrano-Velarde & Krücken, 2012). This paper builds on those analyses to propose a specific form of institutional isomorphism, meta-mimeses, in which it is not that innovations are transmitted mimetically, but rather that the use of change agents is transmitted mimetically, and then these change agents ultimately promote a set of common innovations. In other words, organizations may not be copying particular practices from their peers or competitors. Instead, they may be hiring the same professional-services firms—especially consultants—and implementing practices recommended by those firms from firms' standard toolkit of recommendations.

The hiring of consultants can be understood as an example of metamimesis, or a process by which mimetic pressures to engage in a particular behavior or practice (here, consulting engagements) results in the spread of an innovation along lines that may appear to be mimetic themselves but in actuality are produced as a secondary effect of the original behavior or practice. Metamimesis is the right theoretical lens for considering the impacts of management consulting in higher education, given the clear evidence that colleges and universities hire consultants when other similar institutions have done so and that higher education consulting firms draw from a common toolbox of recommendations in constructing their management advice. The presence of metamimesis does not imply the absence of other sorts of isomorphic pressures—clearly, colleges and universities remain interested in trying what their successful or competitor peers are doing and remain subject to coercive and normative pressures. But metamimesis provides another pathway for institutional isomorphism, one in which an innovation can spread despite being neither legitimated nor institutionalized in the field and despite a lack of evidence that the innovation is effective or useful.

Though the presence of consultants may seem inevitable, those interested in resisting the continual incursion of consulting firms into the work of higher education do have paths forward. As Louis Brandeis (1913, p. 10) wrote over a century ago, "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most effective policeman." Brandeis wrote these words in an essay concerning efforts to increase disclosures about banking activities, but they are no less true in relation to the activities of consulting firms. Clients in general—and public-sector clients especially—can insist on disclosures and transparency in consulting contracts (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023), including full disclosures of firms' work with competitors and other conflicts of interest. Such standards are not unusual: the American Bar Association's Model Rules of Professional Conduct prohibit lawyers and law firms from representing two parties where a concurrent conflict of interest exists unless both parties provide informed, written consent, and lawyers are firmly prohibited from representing both parties in a given legal proceeding (ABA, 2023). These rules extend even to matters involving former clients. Similar rules are in place for realtors. Public-sector clients can also insist on the ability to make public the results of any consulting engagement, avoiding the temptation to rely on deliberative process privilege exemptions in some freedom-of-information laws to shield reports from disclosure. Contracts can include knowledge-sharing provisions to ensure that consulting firms do not obtain a proprietary interest in the knowledge they have gathered from the client such that they can avoid providing the client with the data, information, and resources the firm has gathered during the consulting engagement, and procurement processes can be revised to avoid low-balling and inappropriate pro-bono contracts (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023).

Avoiding management fads requires consulting widely with all relevant constituencies, including those opposed to change (Birnbaum, 2000). Such consultation enables sensitivity to historical context, past practice, organizational culture, and existing resources, and makes it possible to avoid repeating prior mistakes. Academic audiences are often more willing to consider innovations proposed by colleagues (Birnbaum, 2000) than those proposed by outsiders. Thus, a participatory, transparent process (Gardner, 2015) in which the people on the ground can propose real ideas may be more effective at bringing about organizational change than a consultant-driven process (Cooper et al., 2020). Additionally, higher education institutions may want to consider whether they actually need to "invent more change" when "change in higher education is constant" (Birnbaum, 2000, p. 239). Those contracting with consultants might also consider limiting the scale of the contract and avoiding prime contracting, in which a consultant is hired who then in turn subcontracts most or all of the work (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023).

Berman (2022) argues that moving away from the economic style of thinking requires building new intellectual frameworks that understand the political nature of policy problems. Such frameworks would enable the recognition of the public sector as a value-creator for society (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). If we recognize the wealth of experience, skill, and expertise in the public sector, new possibilities become imaginable. Perhaps states, nations, large university systems, and similar public entities could consider building their own internal consulting arms, along the lines of those developed in Japanese firms (Sturdy, 2018). Such entities would enable organizations and agencies to continue benefiting from what consulting purports to offer—outsiders who can bring a different perspective to organizational problems and spread knowledge from outside the organization—without as much risk of solutions that are irrelevant to the context and with a greater ability to avoid corporatized logic.

Future scholarship on meta-mimeses should examine the process of contracting with consultants and other professional-services firms. In the case of public-sector clients, it is possible to use state freedom-of-information laws to obtain documents related to the contracting process. This would enable an analysis of the degree to which both consulting firms and client organizations refer to peers in the process of building a business relationship. Such an analysis could also look more closely at contracts themselves, in particular to examine bundling of services and software, presence of predatory terms, and concealment of information necessary to the evaluation of the contract (Hamilton et al., 2022). In addition, the products of consulting engagements, such as reports, can sometimes be obtained through such requests, making it possible to examine similarities in the advice given to multiple client organizations.

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Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur (marthur@ric.edu)
