

Chapter I

The Political Economy of Knowledge Management in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss the economic and political implications of knowledge management in higher education. First, I examine the linkages between KM and capitalism, with the help of theoretical frameworks that connect increasing managerialism in higher education with the promises of profit-making in the New (Knowledge) Economy. Next, I discuss the politics of information and the ways in which knowledge is stratified in postsecondary institutions. Third, the social dynamics of information and communications technologies (ICT) are explored in the context of higher education institutions. These perspectives provide a counter-balance to the decidedly functionalist views of much of the knowledge management

literature. The intent of the chapter is to provide a foundation for the rest of the volume and the more specific studies of KM in higher education to follow.

Introduction

As the external environment increased pressure upon institutions of higher education to become more productive and business-like, it is not surprising that business management techniques are promoted as the best vehicles for change (Ewell, 1999). In the Information Age, the management techniques that have been the most popular in the private sector pertain to e-business, the art of combining the marketplace with high technology and opportunities provided by the Internet. E-business initiatives are also becoming common in higher education, with Web-based portals linking academic units to shared databases and common business rules (Katz et al., 2000). Distance education courses are hosted on the World Wide Web, and “e-learning” has become standard jargon in the field. Academic managers have embraced information technology since the age of the mainframe computer, which has resulted in the development of techno-centric institutional infrastructures, electronically-driver business cores, and wired classrooms in colleges and universities throughout the industrialized world.

Ushered into academe on the heels of information technology and institutional restructuring, knowledge management promises to lead to better decision-making capabilities, improve academic services, and reduce costs (Kidwell, Vander Linde, & Johnson, 2001). KM is often loosely defined, but its central purpose is the action of “transforming information and intellectual assets into enduring value” (Kidwell et al., 2001, p. 3). Founded on the notion that “intellectual capital” is a hidden asset of many businesses, KM seeks to bring this essential knowledge to light in order to make organizations more competitive. In the arena of higher education, KM is being touted as a method that will increase institutional innovation (Lyman, 2000). Getz, Siegfried, and Anderson have stated that, “higher education occupies a strategic role in productivity growth, not only because it is an industry itself, but also because it is a source of new ideas and trains the managers that affect productivity throughout the economy” (Getz, Siegfried, & Anderson, 1997, p. 605). It is in this context that

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