

Organizational Perspectives on Contemporary Crises in U.S. Higher Education: A Conceptual Analysis Based on Manning's Organizational Theory

Ejuchegahi A. Angwaomaodoko

Department of Education, College of Education, Kean University, Union, NJ, USA
Orchid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6300-2017>

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ABSTRACT

American colleges and universities confront a period of sustained institutional strain in which fiscal contraction, legislative encroachment and eroding public trust converge upon governance structures ill equipped to absorb them simultaneously, a condition this paper examined under the title "Organizational Perspectives on Contemporary Crises in U.S. Higher Education: A Conceptual Analysis Based on Manning's Organizational Theory." The paper aimed to examine the financial, political and cultural dimensions of these crises, to analyse how Manning's bureaucratic, political and cultural frames account for institutional responses, and to establish the theoretical relevance of Manning's organisational theory for interpreting the interaction among these pressures. The analysis adopted Manning's organisational theory as its guiding framework, selected for its capacity to accommodate the layered character of institutional behaviour without reducing crisis to a single explanatory variable. A systematic review methodology, guided by PRISMA principles, was employed, drawing on verifiable peer-reviewed journals, working papers and scholarly monographs. The paper indicated that financial retrenchment, exemplified by widespread college closures and programme eliminations, political interference, evident in escalating legislative hostility and direct governance intervention, and declining institutional confidence operate as concurrent and mutually reinforcing conditions rather than isolated episodes. The paper concluded that Manning's multi-frame theory offers indispensable interpretive capacity for understanding these compounding pressures. It recommended governance-sensitive financial monitoring, stronger procedural safeguards around trustee and presidential appointments, and the adoption of multi-frame organisational analysis in institutional crisis response.

Keywords: Organisational Theory, Higher Education Crises, Financial Exigency, Political Interference, Institutional Governance

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems across the world function as organisations that must reconcile academic tradition with external demand for accountability, efficiency and relevance. Universities in Europe, Asia and North America have, in recent decades, been drawn into governance arrangements that mirror corporate structures, a shift that has altered how institutional leaders respond to financial pressure, demographic change and political contestation (Darian-Smith, 2025). Globally, the university has moved from being regarded primarily as a site of knowledge production to being treated as an economic actor subject to market discipline, a transformation that has generated recurring episodes described in the literature as institutional crises (Tight, 2024). Tight's (2024) review of the crisis literature in higher education establishes that scholarly attention to institutional distress is not a recent phenomenon but a persistent genre spanning several decades, one that intensified following the coronavirus pandemic and has since broadened to include

financial exigency, workforce disruption and eroding public confidence.

Within the United States, this global pattern has assumed a distinct configuration shaped by federal funding arrangements, state-level political intervention and a market-oriented tuition structure. Undergraduate enrolment in American public and private universities has followed an uneven trajectory since 2010, with sustained decline through the 2022–23 academic year before a modest recovery, a pattern attributed to demographic contraction, pandemic disruption and diminishing confidence in the economic value of a degree (Riley et al., 2024). Gallup survey data cited in institutional governance reviews indicate that confidence in higher education among American adults fell from 48% to 36% within a span of seven years, a decline distributed across ideological and demographic groups rather than confined to a single political constituency. Riley et al. (2024) interpret this destabilisation through Layton's theory of marketing systems, arguing that reduced state appropriation has shifted operating revenue

responsibility onto students and families, thereby altering the transactional relationship between institutions and the public they serve.

At the regional and institutional level, these pressures converge with governance dysfunction and legislative interference. State legislatures in Florida, Texas, North Carolina and Tennessee have enacted measures curbing curricular content related to race and gender and have intervened directly in presidential appointments, actions the American Association of University Professors (2024) characterises as an escalation of political interference threatening shared governance. Darian-Smith (2025) situates these domestic developments within a broader global drift towards populist governance that has narrowed academic autonomy in multiple national contexts, while cautioning that the American case is distinguished by the intensity of legislative and executive coordination directed at public universities.

It is against this background that Kathleen Manning's organisational theory becomes analytically useful. Manning (2023) presents higher education institutions through multiple organisational frames, including bureaucratic, collegial, political, cultural and anarchic perspectives, each offering a different account of how decisions are made, authority is exercised and conflict is resolved within academic settings. Because no single frame captures the entirety of institutional behaviour, Manning's framework accommodates the layered character of contemporary crises, allowing financial strain to be read through a bureaucratic lens, political intervention through a political lens, and eroding trust through a cultural lens simultaneously.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Existing accounts of the crises confronting American higher education tend to isolate particular dimensions of institutional distress. Financial analyses examine enrolment contraction, tuition dependency and the growing incidence of institutional closures and declarations of financial exigency (Riley et al., 2024). Political analyses examine legislative encroachment upon curricular content, governing board composition and academic freedom (American Association of University Professors, 2024; Darian-Smith, 2025). Sociological and survey-based studies examine the erosion of public confidence and the widening partisan gap in perceptions of institutional value. Each of these bodies of scholarship offers a valid but partial account, and the fragmentation limits the capacity of institutional leaders, policymakers and researchers to understand how financial, political and cultural pressures interact within the internal governance structures of universities.

Tight (2024) observes that much of the crisis literature in higher education proceeds without sustained theoretical grounding, describing symptoms of institutional strain without situating them within an organisational framework capable of explaining why particular institutions respond to comparable pressures in divergent ways. This absence of theoretical integration is problematic because contemporary crises in American higher education rarely originate from a single source; a decline in state appropriation, for example, frequently coincides with legislative pressure over curricular content and a simultaneous decline in public trust, producing compounded effects that single-dimension analyses cannot adequately explain.

The present conceptual analysis addressed this gap by applying Manning's (2023) organisational theory as an interpretive structure for examining contemporary crises confronting American higher education. The analysis proceeds from the premise that financial contraction, political interference and diminished public confidence are not discrete phenomena but interacting pressures whose institutional consequences depend on the organisational frame through which university leadership interprets and responds to them. Without such theoretical grounding, institutional responses risk addressing surface manifestations of crisis while leaving underlying organisational vulnerabilities unexamined, a shortcoming this analysis addressed through a systematic application of Manning's organisational perspectives to the empirical record of financial, political and cultural strain documented in recent scholarly work.

III. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this paper was to conceptually examine contemporary crises confronting United States higher education institutions through the interpretive framework of Manning's organisational theory. The specific objectives of the paper were to:

- i. examine the financial, political and cultural dimensions of contemporary crises in United States higher education institutions.
- ii. analyse how Manning's organisational perspectives, including the bureaucratic, political and cultural frames, account for institutional responses to these crises.
- iii. establish the theoretical relevance of Manning's organisational theory for interpreting the interaction between financial contraction, political interference and declining public confidence in United States higher education.

IV. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Organisational Perspectives

Organisational perspectives refer to the distinct interpretive frames through which scholars and practitioners examine how institutions structure authority, allocate resources and manage conflict. Bolman and Deal (2021) define these perspectives as structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames, arguing that no single frame captures the full reality of institutional life because organisations are simultaneously rational systems, arenas of contested interest and repositories of shared meaning. Kaundinya (2024) extends this reasoning by proposing that organisational theory functions as a three-dimensional tool encompassing environment, culture and social structure, offering a shared vocabulary for interpreting institutional behaviour across sectors. Manning (2023) interrogates these general management-derived frameworks and contends that higher education institutions possess organisational features, including loose coupling, professional autonomy and ambiguous goals, that are not fully accounted for by frameworks developed primarily for corporate and governmental settings, thereby justifying a set of perspectives specific to academic organisations.

Reconciling these positions, this paper adopts organisational perspectives as the range of interpretive frames, bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic and anarchic, through which the internal governance and external environment of a university may be simultaneously examined, following Manning's (2023) contention that higher education institutions require frames attentive to academic culture and professional authority rather than frames transplanted directly from corporate management theory.

Contemporary Crises

Contemporary crises, within organisational and higher education scholarship, denote disruptive conditions that threaten the stability, legitimacy or continued functioning of an institution and that depart from routine operational strain. Tight (2024) interrogates the tendency within higher education scholarship to apply the term loosely to any period of difficulty, arguing that a crisis proper should be distinguished by its capacity to threaten institutional survival or fundamentally alter institutional direction, rather than describing ordinary managerial pressure. Riley et al. (2024) approach the concept empirically, characterising the destabilisation of the American academic system as a condition in which multiple system settings, financial, demographic and reputational, deteriorate concurrently, producing effects that

exceed what any single disruption would generate in isolation.

Adopting Tight's (2024) distinction while incorporating the compounding character identified by Riley et al. (2024), this paper defines contemporary crises as concurrent and mutually reinforcing disruptions to institutional financial viability, political legitimacy and public confidence that depart from routine strain and threaten sustained institutional functioning.

U.S. Higher Education

United States higher education is conceived in the literature not merely as a sector delivering instruction but as an organisational system embedded within federal, state and market structures that jointly determine institutional viability. Riley et al. (2024) describe the American academic system through the lens of interconnected system settings, funding, governance and public perception, that interact to shape institutional stability, framing higher education as a structure whose operation depends on the coordination of multiple external actors rather than on universities alone. Manning (2023) similarly regards American higher education institutions as organisations characterised by dual authority structures, in which administrative and faculty governance coexist and occasionally compete, a characteristic that distinguishes the sector from conventional bureaucratic organisations.

For the purposes of this paper, U.S. higher education is adopted as the network of accredited postsecondary institutions operating within a decentralised system of federal policy, state appropriation and institutional governance, whose organisational stability is jointly produced by academic, administrative and external political actors, consistent with the systemic framing advanced by Riley et al. (2024) and the dual-authority characterisation offered by Manning (2023).

The Financial, Political and Cultural Dimensions of Contemporary Crises in United States Higher Education Institutions

Financial contraction constitutes the most measurable dimension of institutional distress confronting American colleges and universities. Kelchen, Ritter and Webber (2024) assembled the most extensive dataset compiled to date on institutional finances between 2002 and 2023 and found that more than 1,671 colleges closed during this period, with closures concentrated among smaller, tuition-dependent institutions. Their analysis demonstrates that median full-time equivalent enrolment at nonprofit colleges two years prior to closure stood at only 219 students,

while private nonprofit four-year colleges experienced a closure rate of approximately seven percent across the two decades studied. The case of Birmingham-Southern College illustrates the limitations of conventional financial monitoring: the institution closed after the spring 2024 semester despite a comparatively strong balance sheet, following a failed attempt to secure a state-backed bond, a pattern the authors attribute to governance factors that financial ratios alone do not capture (Kelchen et al., 2024). Judson College in Alabama presents a contrasting case in which predictive financial modelling correctly flagged escalating closure probability years in advance of its 2021 closure. At the level of large public institutions, West Virginia University and Pennsylvania State University pursued substantial reductions in academic programmes as they confronted structural budget deficits, demonstrating that financial contraction is not confined to small or tuition-dependent institutions (Kelchen et al., 2024). Ambrose and Nietzel (2024), whose analysis is referenced extensively within this body of research, characterise the growing recourse to declarations of financial exigency as evidence that institutions increasingly view the elimination of academic programmes and tenured positions as a necessary instrument of fiscal survival rather than an exceptional measure.

The political dimension of institutional distress has assumed a distinctive character in the United States, where legislative and executive authorities have intervened directly in institutional governance. Schickler and Rodriguez (2026) analysed 1,044 state and national party platforms issued between 1980 and 2025 and documented a systematic transformation in Republican positioning towards higher education, with the average favourability score of Republican platforms falling from a mildly positive rating in the 1980s to negative 1.6 on a five-point scale by 2024, while 88% of Republican platforms in that year expressed concern regarding the association of universities with liberal policies, groups or ideas. Their case study of New College of Florida demonstrates the practical consequences of this shift: following the appointment of six new trustees by Governor Ron DeSantis in January 2023, the institution's president was dismissed, its diversity office and gender studies programme were eliminated, and nearly a third of its teaching staff and student body departed within a short period (Schickler & Rodriguez, 2026). Darian-Smith (2025) situates such interventions within a broader pattern of democratic backsliding affecting universities internationally, while noting that the coordination between legislative action and executive funding restrictions observed in the

American context, including the withholding of federal research funding from research-intensive universities, distinguishes it from comparable episodes elsewhere.

The cultural dimension concerns the erosion of shared understanding regarding the purpose and trustworthiness of higher education institutions among the American public. Riley, Bryant, Nicewicz-Scott, Watson and Turner-Henderson (2024) interpret this erosion through the destabilisation of what they term academia's system settings, arguing that declining confidence functions as a structural condition rather than a temporary sentiment, compounding financial and political pressures already confronting institutions. Tight (2024) cautions that the crisis literature in higher education has often applied the term loosely, yet acknowledges that the convergence of declining institutional trust with material financial strain marks a departure from earlier, more episodic difficulties. Together, these three dimensions, financial, political and cultural, do not operate independently; the withdrawal of legislative goodwill documented by Schickler and Rodriguez (2026) coincides temporally with the funding constraints documented by Kelchen et al. (2024), suggesting that American higher education institutions confront simultaneous rather than sequential pressures.

How Manning's Organisational Perspectives Account for Institutional Responses to These Crises

The closure of Birmingham-Southern College in 2024, following a failed bid for a state-backed bond and years of publicly documented financial stress, offers a case through which the bureaucratic frame within Manning's (2023) organisational theory becomes analytically useful (Kelchen et al., 2024). The bureaucratic frame interprets institutional behaviour as governed by formal structures, standardised procedures and hierarchical decision-making; the response of West Virginia University's Board of Governors, which eliminated 28 academic majors and 147 faculty positions through a formally documented review process addressing a \$45 million budget deficit, exemplifies this frame in practice, treating financial distress as a problem to be resolved through rule-governed programme elimination rather than through negotiation with affected constituencies (Kelchen et al., 2024). The predictive modelling literature itself operates from an implicit bureaucratic assumption, treating institutional survival as a function of measurable financial indicators such as liquidity, leverage and enrolment trends that can be monitored and acted upon through administrative decision-making (Kelchen et al., 2024).

The political frame, by contrast, interprets institutional behaviour as arising from contests over power, resources and legitimacy among competing constituencies both internal and external to the institution. The takeover of New College of Florida provides a demonstration of this frame: Governor DeSantis's appointment of trustees aligned with his political objectives, followed by the dismissal of the sitting president and the installation of an ally, illustrates how external political authority can override internal governance structures that would, under ordinary circumstances, be understood through collegial or bureaucratic frames (Schickler & Rodriguez, 2026). Manning's (2023) political frame accounts for this response by directing attention to the distribution of formal authority over trustee appointments, a structural vulnerability that legislative actors have increasingly exploited as state platforms have shifted from largely favourable positions towards higher education in the 1980s to near-uniform criticism by 2024 (Schickler & Rodriguez, 2026). The withholding of federal research funding from research-intensive universities documented by Darian-Smith (2025) represents a parallel application of political leverage operating at the federal rather than state level, again illustrating institutional responses shaped less by internal deliberation than by external contestation over resources.

The cultural frame, which Manning (2023) associates with the symbolic and interpretive dimensions of institutional life, accounts for responses oriented towards restoring meaning and legitimacy rather than resolving material scarcity or political contest directly. Riley et al. (2024) document that declining public confidence has prompted institutions to engage in symbolic repositioning, including public acknowledgements of institutional shortcomings intended to signal responsiveness to external criticism, even where such statements do not alter the underlying financial or political conditions driving the erosion of confidence. This cultural response differs qualitatively from the bureaucratic elimination of academic programmes and the political renegotiation of governing authority, since it operates primarily through communication intended to repair a damaged relationship between the institution and its public rather than through structural or procedural change. Read together, these cases demonstrate that no single frame within Manning's (2023) organisational theory accounts fully for institutional responses to contemporary crises; rather, the same institution may deploy bureaucratic retrenchment, political accommodation and cultural repair simultaneously,

depending on which pressure, financial, political or reputational, is most acute at a given moment.

The Theoretical Relevance of Manning's Organisational Theory for Interpreting the Interaction between Financial Contraction, Political Interference and Declining Public Confidence

Manning's (2023) organisational theory holds practical value for interpreting American higher education crises precisely because it resists reduction to a single explanatory variable, treating institutions as sites where bureaucratic, political and cultural forces operate concurrently rather than in isolation. This multiplicity of frames corresponds directly to empirical evidence indicating that financial contraction, political interference and declining confidence do not occur as separate episodes but as conditions that reinforce one another. Riley et al. (2024) demonstrate this empirically through their finding that reduced state appropriation has shifted an increasing share of operating revenue responsibility onto tuition-paying students, a financial development that occurs simultaneously with the legislative interventions documented by Schickler and Rodriguez (2026) and the reputational erosion these authors associate with institutional destabilisation.

A concrete illustration of this interaction can be found in West Virginia University's 2023 restructuring, where a stated financial deficit of \$45 million provided the formal justification for the elimination of academic departments, including its entire world languages programme, while the university simultaneously faced a decade-long decline in enrolment that had reduced its student body by ten percent since 2015 (Kelchen et al., 2024). Applying Manning's (2023) bureaucratic frame in isolation would characterise this episode as a rational institutional response to fiscal necessity; applying the political frame reveals that such budgetary decisions occur within legislative environments in which state funding for higher education has become contingent upon the ideological posture of institutions, as evidenced by the finding that Republican state platforms advocating increased resources for higher education fell to zero after 2010 (Schickler & Rodriguez, 2026). Neither frame alone accounts for the outcome; their combination clarifies why administrators facing financial contraction increasingly anticipate political consequences when allocating remaining resources, a dynamic Manning's (2023) framework accommodates by treating institutional decision-making as simultaneously bureaucratic and political rather than as a purely technical exercise.

The New College of Florida case demonstrates the practical value of the cultural frame in interpreting how political interference translates into altered institutional identity rather than remaining confined to governance mechanics. The departure of nearly a third of the institution's faculty and student body following the 2023 trustee appointments indicates that political intervention produced consequences extending beyond formal governing structures into the lived culture of the institution, a dimension that a purely bureaucratic or financial analysis would not capture (Schickler & Rodriguez, 2026). This cultural erosion, in turn, has implications for public confidence at a national scale, since Riley et al. (2024) find that publicised episodes of institutional dysfunction contribute disproportionately to a general decline in trust that extends well beyond the institutions directly involved. Manning's (2023) organisational theory therefore offers practical guidance for institutional leaders and policymakers seeking to anticipate how a single disruption, whether financial, political or reputational, is likely to propagate across the other dimensions of institutional functioning, rather than treating each crisis as a discrete and independently manageable event.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Manning's Organisational Theory

Manning's organisational theory was propounded by Kathleen Manning, professor of higher education and student affairs administration, and articulated most comprehensively in her text *Organizational Theory in Higher Education*, now in its third edition published in 2023 by Routledge. The theory did not originate as an isolated framework but as a synthesis and extension of earlier organisational scholarship, most notably the four-frame model developed by Bolman and Deal (2021), which Manning adapted specifically to the governance conditions of colleges and universities. Manning's contribution lies in her contention that higher education institutions possess organisational characteristics, including loose coupling between administrative and academic units, professional autonomy among faculty, and ambiguous or contested institutional goals, that general management theory developed for corporate and governmental organisations does not adequately capture. Her theory therefore proposes a set of interpretive perspectives, commonly rendered as bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic and, in more recent formulations, cultural and anarchic frames, through which the internal governance and external environment of an academic institution may be examined.

The major assumptions underlying Manning's theory begin with the premise that no single

organisational frame is sufficient to explain institutional behaviour in its entirety. Manning (2023) assumes that colleges and universities are simultaneously rational bureaucracies governed by rules and hierarchy, communities of scholars governed by shared professional norms, arenas of contested interest governed by the distribution of power among competing constituencies, and cultural systems governed by shared meaning, ritual and symbol.

A further assumption is that these frames coexist rather than compete for singular explanatory authority, such that an accurate account of institutional behaviour requires the application of multiple frames concurrently rather than the selection of one frame to the exclusion of others. Manning also assumes that higher education institutions differ meaningfully from corporate organisations because of the dual authority structure in which administrative and faculty governance operate in parallel and occasionally in tension, a condition that conventional bureaucratic theory, with its assumption of unified hierarchical command, does not adequately address.

This assumption of duality extends to Manning's treatment of institutional goals, which she regards as inherently ambiguous and subject to ongoing negotiation among stakeholders rather than fixed and universally agreed upon, in contrast to the goal clarity typically assumed within classical management theory.

The strength of Manning's theory lies principally in its capacity to accommodate the layered character of institutional behaviour without forcing analysts to select a single, necessarily incomplete explanation. Because the theory treats bureaucratic, political and cultural dynamics as simultaneously operative, it allows a researcher to examine financial retrenchment, legislative intervention and reputational erosion within the same institution without treating these as unrelated phenomena requiring separate theoretical frameworks.

A further strength lies in the theory's specificity to the academic setting; unlike frameworks imported wholesale from business administration, Manning's theory was constructed with explicit attention to the professional autonomy of faculty, the ambiguity of educational goals and the loosely coupled character of academic departments, features that distinguish universities from firms and government agencies.

The theory also possesses considerable flexibility, permitting application across institutional types ranging from small liberal arts colleges to large public research universities, and across national contexts, provided appropriate adjustment is made for differing governance traditions.

The theory's principal weakness concerns the difficulty of empirically operationalising multiple

concurrent frames within a single analysis. Because Manning does not specify clear decision rules for determining which frame ought to predominate in a given circumstance, application of the theory can become descriptive rather than explanatory, particularly when an analyst applies several frames without demonstrating how they interact causally rather than merely coexisting as parallel narratives.

A further limitation is that the theory, having been developed with close attention to American higher education governance structures, including shared governance arrangements between faculty senates and administrations that are not universal internationally, may require substantial adaptation before it can be applied with confidence to higher education systems organised along markedly different governance principles.

The theory has also been criticised, implicitly through the broader organisational literature on which it draws, for offering limited guidance regarding the conditions under which one frame becomes dominant over others during periods of acute institutional stress, leaving open the question of why bureaucratic retrenchment might prevail in one crisis while political accommodation prevails in another.

Despite these limitations, Manning's theory demonstrates clear and strong application to the crises examined in this paper. The bureaucratic frame accounts directly for the formally documented programme eliminations pursued by West Virginia University's Board of Governors in response to its budget deficit, a decision process consistent with Manning's characterisation of bureaucratic institutions as governed by rule-based, hierarchically sanctioned procedure (Kelchen et al., 2024). The political frame accounts for the trustee-driven transformation of New College of Florida, in which external legislative authority was exercised to override existing governance arrangements, precisely the dynamic Manning's theory anticipates when institutional goals become contested among competing constituencies possessing unequal power (Schickler & Rodriguez, 2026).

The cultural frame accounts for the departure of a substantial proportion of that institution's faculty and student body following the trustee intervention, a response better explained by the erosion of shared institutional meaning than by bureaucratic procedure or political calculation alone. Taken together, the case evidence examined in this study confirms Manning's central assumption that no single frame is sufficient, since the same institutions that responded to financial contraction through bureaucratic retrenchment simultaneously confronted political interference and cultural erosion, a compounding pattern that Manning's

multi-frame theory is uniquely positioned among higher education organisational theories to interpret.

VI. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a systematic literature review, structured to interrogate contemporary crises in United States higher education through the interpretive framework of Manning's organisational theory rather than through the collection of primary empirical data. The approach follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol as a guiding structure for source identification and selection, adapted for a conceptual and theoretical analysis in which the objective is not statistical synthesis of quantitative findings but the systematic integration of existing scholarly evidence around a defined theoretical framework.

The methodology proceeds through four stages consistent with this tradition: identification of relevant literature through targeted search strategies, screening of identified sources against defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, eligibility assessment of the resulting sample against the specific objectives of the study, and thematic organisation of the retained sources according to the financial, political and cultural dimensions established in the conceptual review.

Source identification proceeded through searches of academic databases and publisher platforms, including peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers issued by recognised research institutions, and scholarly monographs published by university and academic presses. Search terms combined variations of higher education crisis, financial exigency, college closure, political interference, academic freedom and organisational theory, applied individually and in combination to capture the range of literature addressing the three dimensions examined in this paper.

Sources were included in the review where they satisfied four conditions. First, each source was required to be traceable to a real, identifiable author or set of authors, published through a verifiable peer-reviewed journal, university press, or recognised research institution, thereby excluding anonymous, hypothetical or unverifiable material.

Second, sources were required to address, directly or substantively, at least one of the three dimensions of institutional crisis examined in this study, namely financial contraction, political interference, or the erosion of public confidence in American higher education.

Third, empirical sources were required to provide sufficient methodological detail, including data sources, sample characteristics and analytical approach, to permit assessment of the reliability of

their findings, a criterion satisfied by sources such as Kelchen, Ritter and Webber's (2024) machine-learning analysis of institutional closures and Schickler and Rodriguez's (2026) platform-coding study.

Fourth, sources addressing organisational theory were required to demonstrate direct relevance to higher education governance rather than general management contexts alone, a criterion that guided the inclusion of Manning's (2023) text as the central theoretical resource while retaining Bolman and Deal's (2021) foundational framework as a point of theoretical comparison. Sources were excluded where they consisted of newspaper reportage, blog commentary, advocacy statements issued by interest organisations, or unverified online material, consistent with the requirement that all cited material remain fully traceable and academically defensible.

VII. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations attend this methodology and warrant acknowledgement. The reliance on a conceptual and qualitative synthesis rather than primary data collection means that the study's conclusions are contingent upon the accuracy and interpretive choices of the original authors whose work is reviewed, a constraint particularly relevant to politically contested subject matter such as the analysis of party platform positioning, where coding decisions, however methodologically rigorous, retain an element of interpretive judgement.

The study's exclusive reliance on English-language, United States-focused sources restricts its capacity to generalise findings to higher education systems governed by different legal, political and funding structures, notwithstanding the comparative gestures made towards global patterns of academic freedom restriction. Finally, the application of Manning's organisational theory as the primary interpretive framework, while justified on the grounds established earlier in this study, necessarily privileges the dimensions of institutional behaviour that this theory is constructed to illuminate, namely bureaucratic, political and cultural dynamics, and may therefore underrepresent alternative explanatory factors, such as demographic or macroeconomic conditions, that fall outside the theory's primary analytical scope even where they contribute materially to the crises under examination.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The paper examined against the three objectives guiding the analysis, indicate that contemporary crises confronting United States higher education institutions cannot be adequately understood

through single-dimension explanations, a conclusion that both confirms and extends the positions advanced by the authors reviewed throughout this paper.

The first objective, to examine the financial, political and cultural dimensions of contemporary crises in American higher education, is substantiated by the empirical record assembled by Kelchen, Ritter and Webber (2024), whose dataset spanning more than two decades demonstrates that financial distress is neither rare nor confined to marginal institutions. Their finding that flagship public universities such as West Virginia University and Pennsylvania State University pursued substantial programme eliminations alongside smaller private colleges complicates the assumption, implicit in earlier higher education finance literature, that institutional prestige or public funding status confers meaningful insulation from fiscal contraction.

This finding invites a degree of interrogation, however, since Kelchen et al. (2024) themselves acknowledge that their predictive models performed unevenly across institutional types, correctly anticipating the closure of Judson College years in advance while failing to predict the closure of Birmingham-Southern College despite its comparatively strong balance sheet. This inconsistency suggests that financial indicators alone, however rigorously modelled, cannot fully account for institutional outcomes, a limitation the authors attribute to governance factors that lie outside conventional financial reporting. This admission strengthens rather than weakens the present study's argument, since it points precisely towards the kind of governance-sensitive, multi-dimensional analysis that Manning's (2023) organisational theory is constructed to provide.

The second objective, concerning the political dimension of institutional crisis, is most directly addressed through the findings of Schickler and Rodriguez (2026), whose analysis of more than a thousand party platforms offers unusually long-range empirical evidence of a transformation in the relationship between American political parties and higher education. Their argument that Republican hostility towards universities originated among nationally oriented ideological activists rather than emerging from grassroots voter sentiment merits particular scrutiny, since it departs from conventional accounts of issue polarisation in American politics, which typically describe partisan realignment as originating at state and local levels before ascending to national platforms. Schickler and Rodriguez (2026) support this claim by demonstrating that the shift in Republican platform language began at the national level in the mid-1990s, well before the emergence of the so-

called diploma divide in party identification or any measurable decline in Republican voters' confidence in higher education. This temporal sequencing is persuasive, yet it raises a question the authors themselves acknowledge only partially: if elite-driven ideological activism preceded rather than followed mass sentiment, the durability of the current political climate surrounding universities may depend more on the continued investment of ideologically motivated donors and organisations than on any lasting shift in public attitudes, a possibility with direct implications for how institutional leaders ought to interpret and respond to legislative pressure.

Darian-Smith's (2025) treatment of academic freedom as a matter of international concern complements this finding but is comparatively less precise in its empirical grounding, relying on a broader comparative argument regarding democratic backsliding rather than the granular, platform-level evidence Schickler and Rodriguez (2026) provide; this difference in methodological rigour suggests that the American case, while consistent with global patterns of political interference in higher education, possesses distinguishing features, particularly the coordination between state-level trustee appointments and federal funding restrictions, that require the more specific evidentiary base offered by domestically focused research.

The third objective, addressing the theoretical relevance of Manning's organisational theory for interpreting the interaction among financial, political and cultural pressures, is supported by the compounding pattern evident across the cases examined. Riley, Bryant, Nicewicz-Scott, Watson and Turner-Henderson (2024) frame this compounding effect through the language of destabilised system settings, a formulation that, upon closer examination, functions as an empirical description of what Manning's (2023) theory anticipates conceptually.

Where Riley et al. (2024) demonstrate that financial and reputational pressures deteriorate concurrently rather than sequentially, Manning's framework supplies the interpretive structure for explaining why concurrent deterioration produces institutional responses that no single frame, bureaucratic, political or cultural, can fully account for in isolation. Tight's (2024) caution against the imprecise application of the term crisis within higher education literature offers a useful corrective to this study's own vocabulary; his argument that genuine crises should be distinguished from routine managerial strain by their capacity to threaten institutional survival is a standard this study's case evidence satisfies, given that West Virginia University's programme eliminations, New College

of Florida's governance transformation and the broader pattern of college closures documented by Kelchen et al. (2024) each involved threats to core institutional functioning rather than incremental adjustment.

Manning's (2023) organisational theory occupies the central position in this study because it alone among the theoretical resources considered possesses the structural capacity to accommodate the layered evidence generated by the three objectives without collapsing that evidence into a single causal narrative. Bolman and Deal's (2021) four-frame model, from which Manning's theory draws its foundational structure, was developed for organisations in general and assumes a relatively unified locus of authority capable of adopting a structural, human resource, political or symbolic orientation according to managerial choice.

Manning's adaptation of this model to higher education recognises that American colleges and universities lack this unified locus of authority, since faculty governance, administrative authority and, increasingly, external political bodies each exercise partial and frequently competing control over institutional direction. This recognition is precisely what allows Manning's theory to explain the West Virginia University case with an analytical precision that a generic organisational framework could not achieve: the university's Board of Governors exercised bureaucratic authority to eliminate academic programmes, while faculty governance bodies simultaneously passed symbolic votes of no confidence in institutional leadership, a dual response that Manning's theory anticipates through its explicit acknowledgement of parallel administrative and academic authority structures rather than treating faculty dissent as a deviation from expected organisational behaviour.

The theory's justification for this study is further strengthened by its capacity to explain why political interference, once introduced into an institution's governance structure, produces cultural rather than merely administrative consequences. The departure of a substantial proportion of faculty and students from New College of Florida following its 2023 trustee-led transformation cannot be adequately explained through a bureaucratic or political frame alone, since neither frame accounts for the erosion of institutional identity and shared purpose that accompanied the formal governance changes documented by Schickler and Rodriguez (2026).

Manning's (2023) cultural frame, which treats institutions as repositories of shared meaning susceptible to disruption independent of formal procedural change, supplies the missing explanatory dimension. In this respect, the theory does not merely describe the case evidence

retrospectively but demonstrates genuine predictive value, since its foundational assumption that no single frame suffices is precisely what the compounding financial, political and cultural pressures documented throughout this study confirm. The theoretical framework therefore does not simply organise the subject matter of this paper; it accounts for why the subject matter resists organisation under any narrower theoretical alternative, thereby justifying its selection as the analytical foundation for the present study.

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper examined contemporary crises confronting United States higher education institutions through the interpretive framework of Manning's organisational theory, and the findings across the three objectives converge on a single, defensible conclusion: financial contraction, political interference and declining public confidence are not discrete phenomena affecting American colleges and universities in isolation but concurrent and mutually reinforcing pressures whose institutional consequences cannot be adequately understood through single-dimension analysis. The empirical evidence drawn from Kelchen et al. (2024) longitudinal dataset on college closures, Schickler and Rodriguez's (2026) platform-level analysis of political realignment, and Riley et al.'s (2024) account of systemic destabilisation demonstrates that institutions such as West Virginia University and New College of Florida experienced bureaucratic retrenchment, political override and cultural erosion within overlapping timeframes rather than as sequential or unrelated events.

Manning's (2023) organisational theory, applied through its bureaucratic, political and cultural frames, proved analytically indispensable precisely because it accommodates this compounding character, offering an interpretive structure capable of explaining why institutional responses to crisis rarely conform to a single rational logic and instead reflect the simultaneous operation of formal procedure, contested authority and symbolic meaning. The paper thus establishes that a theoretically grounded, multi-frame approach to institutional analysis provides a more accurate account of the American higher education crisis than approaches that isolate financial, political or cultural strain as independent variables, and it affirms Manning's continued relevance as an interpretive resource for scholars and administrators seeking to understand institutional behaviour under conditions of sustained, layered pressure.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Institutional leaders and governing boards should adopt financial monitoring practices that incorporate governance-sensitive indicators alongside conventional fiscal metrics, since the evidence examined in this study demonstrates that financial ratios alone failed to predict institutional distress in cases such as Birmingham-Southern College, whereas earlier attention to governance vulnerabilities may have provided more timely warning.
- ii. University governing boards and state higher education authorities should establish clearer procedural safeguards around trustee appointment and presidential removal processes, given that the case of New College of Florida demonstrates how the absence of such safeguards permits external political authority to override institutional governance with limited internal recourse.
- iii. Institutional researchers and policymakers should apply multi-frame organisational analysis, following Manning's bureaucratic, political and cultural perspectives, when designing responses to institutional crisis, since single-frame interventions addressing only financial or only political dimensions are unlikely to address the cultural erosion that frequently accompanies and outlasts the resolution of the original administrative or political disruption.

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