

# Collegiality versus managerialism - the binary that binds us

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## Abstract

Changes in higher education affecting academic work are often problematised in terms of the decline of the collegial culture in the climate of increased managerialisation and external regulation of academic work leading to a fundamental sense of loss and disenchantment among academics. In this paper we critique the construction of a binary relationship between collegiality and managerialism. We explore the multiple meanings of collegiality circulating in academia and higher education literature and draw on the post-structuralist analytic framework of political and social theory developed by Glynos & Howarth (2007) to analyse what we see as unnecessarily adversarial and simplistic view of collegiality in academia today. We argue that spaces for new imaginings and practices of collegiality could be opened by abandoning the grand narrative of collegiality versus managerialism dichotomy.

**Keywords:** collegiality, managerialism, academic work

## Introduction

Changes in higher education affecting academic work tend to be problematised in terms of the decline of the collegial culture in the climate of increased managerialisation and external regulation of academic work (Anderson, Johnson & Saha, 2002; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Rowland, 2008). Collegiality and managerialism are conceptualised as competing mutually exclusive cultures in higher education literature, focusing on tensions and a stark mismatch between the 'new' and 'old' ways of organizing academic work, and the effects this has on academic identities (see Churchman & Sharron, 2009; Henkel, 2000; Fanghanel & Trowler, 2008; Malcolm & Zukas, 2009; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Nixon, 2004). The perception that collegiality is being eroded in universities as a direct result of increased managerialisation, and that academics seem to be fighting a 'losing battle' against the corporatisation of academic work is well documented in the literature (see Davies & Bendix Petersen, 2005; Sparkes, 2007; Taylor 2008).

Paradoxically, despite the changing working conditions, pervasive audit culture, and increased performativity and competition in academic work, allegiance to collegiality as a value seems to be one of the most resilient qualities of academic work identified by several recent studies (see Spiller, 2010; Archer, 2008; Hakala, 2009).

While the shift to managerialism in higher education is extraordinarily well documented, the depiction of collegiality in the literature lacks depth. Given the apparent significance of collegiality to academic work we argue that it is time to turn to collegiality to explore and theorise it in its own right. In this paper we examine the multiple meanings of collegiality circulating in academia and higher education literature, and problematise the representation of collegiality and managerialism relationship as a binary, revealing the limitations of thinking collegiality in oppositional and simplistic terms.

## Background

From an idealist point of view represented by some authors, collegiality epitomises the highest aspirations of those practicing in academia (Rowland, 2008; Nixon, 2004; Macfarlane, 2007). As a value it is presumed to work to preserve the primacy of knowledge in academia and support the continuity of ideas through well-established academic practices of knowledge dissemination within discipline communities by publication and through new discipline member enculturation into the academic community through teaching and mentoring (Rowland, 2008; Rüegg, 1986; Shils, 1975). Additionally, collegiality is frequently discussed as a mode of academic governance (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Ramsden, 1989). These authors conceptualise collegiality as collective administration and shared decision-making by a group of peers, visible in university structures such as academic board and various committees. Lastly, collegiality is also viewed as a behavioural norm in a workplace whereby it is understood as the individuals' ability to respectfully work with others towards common goals, including social and intellectual engagement with colleagues (Bode 1999; Seigel, 2004; Urgo, 2007).

Critiques of collegiality tend to focus on the academic governance aspects, and unsurprisingly, come from the academic leadership and management perspective, where collegiality is sometimes seen as inherently inefficient and an obstructive hurdle to innovation and change (Ramsden 1989; Fullan & Scott, 2009). Collegiality as a mode of governance is also critiqued for having the potential to concentrate power in small groups of individuals governed by insular 'exclusive, non-accountable and non-observable' structures (Waters, 1989, p. 969), where individual desires and egotism might take precedence over the higher aspirations of the academy. It is, however, recognised that these undesirable effects occur when the 'true meaning' of collegiality is not interpreted and practiced appropriately.

## Complexity around collegiality

Drawing on the post-structuralist analytic framework of political and social theory developed by Glynos & Howarth (2007), which builds on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and neo-marxist ideas, we examine what we see as unnecessarily adversarial and simplistic view of collegiality in academia.

While collegiality does not appear to be a singular and self-explanatory concept, value or norm, an essentialising assumption is often made by authors writing on collegiality implying that its meaning is unproblematic and universally shared (see Rowland, 2008; Macfarlane 2007; Nixon, 2004). We propose that the various meanings of collegiality tend to be conflated in our thinking and writing, which might be working against the very intentions of managerialism critiques. For one, it leads to a disconnect between collegial practices and the idealised notion of collegiality, which becomes an 'empty signifier' – something that stands for everything and nothing (Caesar, 2007).

A simplistic causal relationship is often established in the critiques of neo-liberalism in higher education where it is described how the demands extrinsic to the values of the academy are imposed on those practicing in universities and how the values and identities previously held by academics are systematically taken away by new managerial regimes (Anderson *et al* 2002; Churchman & Sharron, 2009). The fundamental sense of loss and disenchantment caused by erosion of collegial culture in academia is seen as a direct consequence of the rise of managerialism (Anderson *et al* 2002; Ylijoki 2005). The multiplicity of ways academics make sense of and respond to the changing higher education environment as documented by some researchers (see Sutherland, 2010; Clegg, 2008; Taylor 2008) is often neglected.

Collegiality seems to stand for everything that is different in academic work from any other work, and particularly, from managerial practices. This tendency for simplistic interpretation and binary representation of the complex relationships in academia works to maintain the opposition between 'us' and 'them', which allows us to construct a difference and establish a distance from the 'Other' (for example, administration, management or students). The narrative of a threat (the loss of our academic values) allows us to formulate the problem (our values are systematically eradicated) and identify the obstacle (managerialism) to return to the lost harmonious state (collegiality) (Glynos & Howarth 2007). Although inscribing the idea of collegiality with virtuous difference allows us to take a higher moral ground in the debate, we remain gripped by the opposition, which incapacitates us.

### Concluding reflections

We propose a more complex and ambiguous view collegiality, a view that is more partial, situated and closely linked to academic practices. Could we talk about collegiality and managerialism more in terms of 'besides', 'amid' and 'within' instead of 'versus', 'against' and 'despite'? The desire for closure through returning to the lost state of collegial harmony might be preventing us from imagining new futures and the ways we could be working in the academy – maintaining our authenticity and beliefs, critiquing the status quo, but recognizing the challenges in front of us, and engaging with the complex and constantly changing world rather than rejecting it. Could we move laterally in conceptualising the possibilities for the future of the academy? What spaces for new imaginings and practices of collegiality could be opened through abandoning the grand narrative of collegiality versus managerialism? Avoiding closure, essentialism and binary oppositions might be just what is needed to live with contingencies in our supercomplex world (Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008; Taylor, 2008).

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