

Crace, Logan; Gehman, Joel; Lounsbury, Michael

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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Düsternbrooker Weg 120

24105 Kiel (Germany)

E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)

<https://www.zbw.eu/>

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AN UNSETTLING CRISIS OF COLLEGIAL GOVERNANCE: REALITY BREAKDOWNS AS ANTECEDENTS OF INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS

Logan Crace^a, Joel Gehman^b and Michael Lounsbury^a

^aUniversity of Alberta, Canada

^bGeorge Washington University, USA

ABSTRACT

Reality breakdowns generate reflexivity and awareness of the constructed nature of social reality. These pivotal moments can motivate institutional inhabitants to either modify their social worlds or reaffirm the status quo. Thus, reality breakdowns are the initial points at which actors can conceive of new possibilities for institutional arrangements and initiate change processes to realize them. Studying reality breakdowns enables scholars to understand not just how institutional change occurs, but also why it does or does not do so. In this paper, we investigate how institutional inhabitants responded to a reality breakdown that occurred during our ethnography of collegial governance in a large North American university that was undergoing a strategic change initiative. Our findings suggest that there is a consequential process following reality breakdowns whereby institutional inhabitants construct the severity of these events. In our context, institutional inhabitants first attempted to restore order to their social world by reaffirming the status quo; when their efforts failed, they began to formulate alternative possibilities. Simultaneously, they engaged

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in a distributed sensemaking process whereby they diminished and reoriented necessary changes, ultimately inhibiting the formulation of these new possibilities. Our findings confirm reality breakdowns and institutional awareness as potential drivers of institutional change and complicate our understanding of antecedent microprocesses that may forestall the initiation of change efforts.

Keywords: Taken-for-grantedness; institutional theory; collegial governance; collegiality; sensemaking; institutional change; reality breakdown; institutional awareness

INTRODUCTION

Theorists have long recognized that social reality is the result of a consequential process of construction done by actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), but this is not always apparent to those that do the constructing (Weick, 2020). Social worlds are inhabited by individuals (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) who typically take-for-granted and perceive as objective the fundamental elements of their subjective reality, leaving them largely unquestioned (Jepperson, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutions provide social order and inhabitants often remain unaware that things could be otherwise (Zucker, 1983). Increasingly, scholars are recognizing that this lack of awareness may be more vulnerable than previously thought (Harmon, 2019; Steele, 2021).

In this study, we show how *reality breakdowns* temporarily generate awareness of the constructed nature of the social world. When their activities are disrupted, inhabitants may obtain awareness of their institutional surroundings and transition into an “unsettled” period (Swidler, 1986) wherein taken-for-granted norms and practices become actively reconsidered (Gehman, 2021). This process may stimulate inhabitants to consider alternatives to a problematic present (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) which can inspire and facilitate changes in their institutional arrangements (Dacin et al., 2002; DiMaggio, 1988; Micelotta et al., 2017). Yet, when cracks begin to form in their established social reality, inhabitants often rise to the defense of the established social order and actively attempt to reaffirm the status quo (Lok & de Rond, 2013; Steele, 2021). Reality breakdowns generate institutional awareness with the potential to stir the hearts and minds of inhabitants and can serve as moments of inspiration that instigate transformation, as well as moments that reaffirm the status quo.

Unpacking the intricacies of such reality breakdowns is thus pivotal to understanding the conditions under which different types of responses are likely to materialize. Although there is a great deal of research on *how* actors successfully shape their social worlds across various theoretical perspectives, including institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008), cultural entrepreneurship (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2022; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, 2019), institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2013; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), social movements (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017), and others, there is far less understanding of what initially motivates these processes in the first place. Scholars have called for increased

attention to microprocesses (Creed et al., 2010) and argued that reflexivity and awareness are important and neglected elements (Lawrence et al., 2013; Weick, 2020). Reality breakdowns are the initial junctures for catalyzing such processes. Shifting the locus of scholarly attention to these happenings may surface important insights into the precipitating dynamics underlying motivations to transform or preserve social worlds. This is particularly salient when a reality breakdown appears to be a catalyst for change but fails to motivate substantial action.

Our primary aim in this paper is to unpack *how inhabitants respond to and handle reality breakdowns*. We pursue this line of inquiry in the context of collegial governance – a highly entrenched institution in the field of higher education. Our longitudinal ethnographic study follows the collegial governance system at a large North American university prior to and through an unexpected and significant disruption. The time-honored tradition of collegial governance is one of the most extreme examples of a pervasive institution in the academy and we use this empirical setting to foster greater understanding of how institutional inhabitants react to reality breakdowns.

Our findings reveal that inhabitants engaged in a highly consequential process whereby they constructed the severity of the breakdown. The multivocal nature of collegial governance led to a wide range of perceptions of the severity of the breakdown which inhibited their ability to take collective action. Inhabitants who perceived the breakdown to be severe attempted to affirm the status quo by reversing the institutionally divergent decision, but this effort ultimately failed, leading to an effort to develop change proposals. However, throughout this process inhabitants engaged in various forms of cognitive sensemaking – that is, attributing the reality breakdown to anomalous conditions, orienting toward the future, and designating change as formidable – which served an important function by diminishing the formulation of these new possibilities. As a result, what might have been a moment for transformation ultimately passed with little consequence. Our findings shed light on the neglected phenomenon of reality breakdowns by foregrounding the extremely consequential process of severity construction and focusing on an environment with extreme heterogeneity among inhabitants. We contribute to the literature on institutions and sensemaking by highlighting how sensemaking processes play an important mediating role between institutional awareness and change efforts. We show how even when institutional inhabitants develop institutional awareness and the capacity to imagine new possibilities for their social worlds, sensemaking efforts can diminish and reorient the need for change. Our findings also contribute to the literature on organizational institutionalism (Greenwood et al., 2008) by highlighting the potentially enhanced role of codified rules during periods of institutional awareness.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Reality Breakdowns

Institutions are composed of “reciprocal typifications” derived from beliefs about the roles of actors and their behaviors in given situations that provide order in the flow of the social world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Put plainly, social worlds are

constituted by a set of expectations regarding who can do what and when. Taken-for-grantedness arises whenever conformity to these expectations of the social world becomes unquestioned (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). These expectations create a virtual or “as-if” reality that fosters a lack of awareness about the elemental components comprising the social world and possible alternatives. In the words of neoinstitutionalists “for things to be otherwise is literally unthinkable” (Zucker, 1983, p. 25). Such taken-for-granted expectations are relatively unreflexively inherited by new inhabitants, supporting harmony and the longevity of the ordered nature of social reality (Gehman, 2021). When social worlds are characterized by such arrangements, they are said to be in a more settled period (Swidler, 1986).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that a breakdown or crisis can occur whenever a happening challenges the socially defined reality. Because institutions are composed of typicalities, any atypical or unexpected occurrence or action risks disrupting the harmony and stability of the social order. Note that while reality breakdowns do challenge socially defined reality, they are not inherently negative events. Although this idea has been invoked infrequently in the decades since Berger and Luckmann’s initial work, scholars across different domains have posited similar arguments. In Table 1, we summarize these disparate prior studies to illustrate the theoretical language deployed and similarities in conceptualizations of what we refer to as reality breakdowns.

Swidler (1986) described certain junctures that transition settled arrangements characterized by taken-for-granted traditions and common sense into more unsettled periods in which the social world can be questioned. In doing so, she drew explicitly on Kuhn’s (1962) empirical demonstration of scientific paradigm shifts as a case of how belief systems “break down.” Weick (1993) introduced a similar concept using the theoretical language of a “cosmology episode,” which occurs when belief in the orderly nature of the universe is severely disrupted. Actors are met with bewilderment when their reality ceases to function as expected. More contemporary studies have applied a practice-theoretic approach, coining the term “practice breakdown” to refer to situations in which unexpected events disrupt the flow of practice (Lok & de Rond, 2013; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Steele

Table 1. Summary of Prior Studies on Reality Breakdown.

Source	Theoretical Language	Locus of Awareness	Severity
Steele (2021)	Oddity/breach	Interaction	Oddity or breach
Lok and de Rond (2013)	Practice breakdown	Organization	Minor or major
Yanow and Tsoukas (2009)	Practice breakdown	Individual	Malfunction – total breakdown
Weick (1993)	Cosmology episode	Organization	Varies (inferred)
Swidler (1986)	Juncture/breakdown	Individual/collective	N/A
Berger and Luckmann (1966)	Breakdown/ crisis in reality	Individual/collective	N/A
Kuhn (1962)	Anomaly/ breakdown/crisis	Field	Anomaly or breakdown

(2021) argued that taken-for-grantedness is precarious and inherently vulnerable to unraveling when oddities or breaches prompt inhabitants to question what is really going on. In this way, the original institutional impetus is reactivated and revitalized (Gehman, 2021).

The common thread linking these seemingly disparate works is a mutual interest in happenings or moments that violate institutional inhabitants' expectations – hereafter, *reality breakdowns*. As Weick (2020, p. NP18) noted, “an ‘awareness’ of constructed life is not a constant,” and it is precisely these reality breakdowns that make inhabitants aware of the constructed nature of their social systems. When disrupted by a reality breakdown, institutional inhabitants acquire the capacity to reflexively and explicitly consider socially constructed elements of their social world. Surprise is clearly fundamental to the notion of a reality breakdown, but scholars have theorized that such disruptions also vary substantially along two important dimensions: locus of awareness and severity.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggested that breakdowns can manifest either individually or collectively, and different scholars have focused on different loci of awareness. For example, Yanow and Tsoukas (2009) theorized the individual locus of awareness with an emphasis on how individual practitioners can be disrupted by surprising occurrences. They further suggested that the severity of such breakdowns for practitioners can range from simple *malfunctions* at one end of the continuum to *temporary breakdowns* to *total breakdowns* at the other end. Steele (2021) drew on ethnomethodology wherein the interaction is the relevant locus of awareness. From this perspective, *oddities* are akin to malfunctions that start with an individual, but almost immediately become apparent to others present in the interactional encounter. Failure to correct such oddities can produce *breaches* that are more severe and have effects that extend beyond the immediate interaction. Others have focused on collective breakdowns affecting coherent assemblages of inhabitants. Weick (1993) as well as Lok and de Rond (2013) focused on breakdowns in organizations, whereas others focused on more nebulous or distributed loci of awareness (Kuhn, 1962; Swidler, 1986). Even when the locus of awareness is collective, reality breakdowns are argued to vary between minor and major severity depending on the nature of the disruption (Lok & de Rond, 2013).

Responses to Reality Breakdowns

Organizational theorists' interest in reality breakdowns relates to their potential to impact the stability of social systems, regardless of their severity or which locus of awareness is given primacy. Therefore, of primary importance is how institutional inhabitants respond to them and what they do with their newfound institutional awareness. In the next two subsections, we highlight two overarching responses that are theoretically possible.

Institutional Change

One fundamental component of Swidler's (1986) notion of unsettled periods is that during such periods of upheaval actors are able to conceive of new strategies

of action. The reflexivity and awareness that accompanies a reality breakdown is thus an opportunity for institutional inhabitants to not only reconsider the current system, but also generate novel ideas about how to do things differently. Directly referring to Swidler's work, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) described this as a projective activity oriented toward imagining new possible futures. In their view, agency is always *toward* something, the key takeaway being that a reality breakdown can shift what precisely agency is oriented toward. This can occur regardless of which locus of awareness is being considered, stirring motivation for change in both individuals (Creed et al., 2010; Toubiana, 2020) and more macro-level collectives (Kuhn, 1962; Weick, 1993). Therefore, reality breakdowns and the formulation of alternative possibilities can motivate institutional inhabitants to modify their arrangements.

Institutional change has proven to be an enduring topic that has captivated scholars' interest for decades (Dacin et al., 2002; DiMaggio, 1988; Micelotta et al., 2017), and reality breakdowns are clearly relevant to this literature. However, it is critical to highlight that reality breakdowns represent the very first moments in which the seeds of doubt and chaos are planted in the hearts and minds of institutional inhabitants. In the process of institutional change, such breakdowns are viewed as precursors to any effort to modify institutional arrangements. Steele (2021) purported that breaches can serve as catalysts, while Lok and de Rond (2013, p. 189) similarly argued: "In cases in which total breakdowns trigger a new course of action, practices can change." The core point here is that institutional inhabitants engaging in change efforts is an effect where the cause is a reality breakdown and its resulting awareness of the constructed nature of reality.

As Micelotta et al. (2017, p. 1892) observed, a wide range of approaches to institutional change "provide a vocabulary to categorize tactics and strategies." These include perspectives as diverse as institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), social movements (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017), institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008), cultural entrepreneurship (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2022; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019), and others that seek to illuminate the dynamics underpinning institutional change. However, while such answers help elucidate *how* actors are able to modify institutional arrangements, they do not adequately explicate *why* precisely they are motivated to do so. We argue that an important question is both *why* actors decide to embark on this journey as well as *why now*. Focusing on the phenomenon of reality breakdowns and resulting institutional awareness enables such questions to be explored.

Our approach shares an affinity with theoretical arguments underpinning work on exogenous shocks (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Fligstein, 1991) or environmental jolts (Meyer, 1982) which argue that changes are instigated by "happenings" rather than manifesting randomly. However, as illustrated in the terms "exogenous" and "environmental," these frameworks often draw on ecological perspectives and view changes as being external and top-down. They do not necessitate surprise and are caused by "some external force or legislative *deus ex machina* smacking into stable institutional arrangements" (Clemens & Cook, 1999, p. 447) which forces the organizations in an environment to adapt. In contrast, a reality

breakdown emphasizes institutional awareness and how institutional inhabitants' understanding of the social world fractures unexpectedly when faced with disruption. Also, as explained in the next subsection, organizational adaptation is not an inevitable outcome of such disruptions, but rather only one possible result.

Reaffirming the Status Quo

Even though reality breakdowns can enable inhabitants to reflexively consider previously taken-for-granted elements of the social world and imagine possible alternatives to these arrangements, they may not capitalize on or leverage these opportunities. [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#) used the theoretical language of "crisis maintenance" to refer to the way in which reality breakdowns are addressed by actors. More recently, scholars have directed significant attention to the role of "custodians" who actively address these disruptions to preserve stability ([Dacin et al., 2010, 2019; Wright et al., 2021](#)). The thrust of this argument is that even in social worlds ostensibly characterized by stability, actors may sometimes be required to engage in efforts to sustain this permanence.

[Emirbayer and Mische \(1998, p. 1006\)](#) suggested that during unsettled periods, "actors might resist change and hold tightly to past routines"; likewise, [Steele \(2021, p. 349\)](#) noted that "participants feel the need to reassert and retrench the status quo." Reality breakdowns frequently result in institutional inhabitants rising to the defense of their established social order. In some cases, preserving the stability of the social system is primarily a cognitive endeavor in which reality breakdowns are largely neglected. For example, happenings that ought to have been actively considered by institutional inhabitants can sometimes be neglected and normalized, thereby enabling the social world plasticity to absorb abnormalities ([Lok & de Rond, 2013; Weick, 1993](#)). [Steele \(2021\)](#) likewise noted that when oddities call into question the intelligibility of the social order, actors are generally able to correct the peculiarities of the interaction. This harkens back to the original phenomenologists who argued for the need to bracket out the natural attitude and see past all that is taken-for-granted ([Gehman, 2021](#)). In other cases, actors reverse the actions that caused the disruption, thereby restoring order and eliminating the need for change ([Lok & de Rond, 2013](#)). This amounts to reinstitution, a revitalization of the original institutional project by making the task personal ([Gehman, 2021](#)).

Precipitating Dynamics

The study of reality breakdowns answers calls by scholars to study the earliest moments of microprocesses of institutional change ([Creed et al., 2010; Seidel et al., 2020; Smets et al., 2012](#)). By foregrounding institutional awareness and the unraveling of taken-for-grantedness ([Gehman, 2021; Harmon, 2019; Steele, 2021](#)), reality breakdowns allow us to study the currently neglected role of reflexivity ([Lawrence et al., 2013; Weick, 2020](#)). For organization theorists, the puzzle is to unpack the contingencies under which such occurrences lead to the reshaping of social worlds as well as those in which they fail to do so. Despite clear

recognition of a range of possible responses to these events, scholars have yet to explain why some cases elicit particular responses and others do not. The primary argument for precipitating conditions under which different types of responses are likely to materialize is variation in the characteristics of the breakdowns.

One critical element of theoretical importance is variation in severity. Relatively mundane malfunctions or oddities are argued to elicit basic corrective responses that can swiftly overcome breakdowns (Steele, 2021; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Lok and de Rond's (2013) empirical work demonstrates that institutional inhabitants respond to minor breakdowns with mere containment activities, which could be as simple as smoothing over or neglecting breakdowns altogether. On the other hand, they discovered that major breakdowns require more serious restoration, such as reversing the actions that caused the disruptions. Thus, one explanation would be that severe breakdowns lead to change and less severe breakdowns lead to reaffirmation of the status quo. However, they observed no institutional change efforts associated with either major or minor breakdowns in their empirical context, suggesting that even severe reality breakdowns can lead to reaffirming the status quo rather than modifying institutional arrangements.

In summary, reality breakdowns occur across different units of analysis such as individuals, interactional encounters, and collectives, whether tightly interwoven or more distributed. Such breakdowns occur with varying levels of severity and create opportunities for reflexivity and institutional awareness. We also know that responses during subsequent unsettled times can include efforts to reaffirm the status quo as well as efforts to modify institutional arrangements. However, we have very little understanding from prior literature about why institutional inhabitants exhibit markedly different reactions. This gap is incredibly important, because institutional transformation processes are often studied after they occur and are traced back to disruptive events. This results in a success-biased literature that misses the counterfactual stories in which substantially similar events lead to unrealized possibilities for change. There seems to be a knowledge void regarding the intermediate steps between a reality breakdown and efforts, which may determine institutional inhabitants' course of action. Our inductive study supports a better understanding of this phenomenon by following a reality breakdown and responses to it during the ensuing period of institutional awareness.

METHODS

Studying reality breakdowns is a challenging task because, from a pragmatic perspective, they may fade into obscurity with little historical record, particularly when institutional inhabitants manage to successfully reaffirm the status quo. Furthermore, by definition, breakdowns are unexpected, making them unlikely to be predicted *ex ante*. Ethnographic techniques (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) with a longitudinal orientation, together with a stroke of serendipity (Merton & Barber, 2004), enabled us to capture this phenomenon. Our research setting was a large North American university that experienced a massive reduction in government funding. In response, the incoming President launched a strategic change initiative which included, among

other things, a redesign of the structure of the academic units at the university. Initially, we sought to study structural transformation. However, during the process, there was an unexpected assault on collegial governance. This reality breakdown was unanticipated and shocking, both to us and to the institutional inhabitants we were observing. This reality breakdown we observed was the product of sheer fortunate serendipity, but was so fascinating that it was impossible not to direct our attention to this captivating phenomenon. Having already observed the events leading up to this moment, we leveraged a prime opportunity to unpack how the involved actors responded in real time.

Research Context: An Assault on Collegial Governance

Collegial governance, also called shared governance, is thought to have originated in ancient Roman civil courts and the church before proliferating to higher education (Strand, 1992). Collegial governance is often referred to as a core academic principle and a “tradition,” which mirrors the exact terminology in Swidler’s (1986) characterization of more settled arrangements. Myriad configurations of collegial governance can be found in universities around the world (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). In North America, a university typically has an academic senate composed of ex-officio members, appointed members, and elected representatives in conjunction with a governing board (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988; Hills & Mahoney, 1978). In our case, the academic senate was responsible for academic affairs of the university, subject to the authority of the university’s board, and was composed of a wide range of actors, including members of central administration, deans of all academic units, students, faculty members, and others such as library support staff.

In their ethnographic work, Lok and de Rond (2013) focused on the selection system for boat race competitors in a specific social world. Likewise, collegial governance can be conceptualized as a “decision-making system” in a specific social world – in this case, a university. Thus, we sought to understand what differentiates collegial governance from other types of decision-making systems.

The focal university’s website and the guidebook for academic senate members described dimensions of collegial governance, such as respect and openness, meaningful engagement, and participatory and inclusive decision-making. We also participated in the training for new senate members in which the governance team described collegial governance as a participatory decision-making system. The field-level understanding of collegial governance was substantially aligned with the university’s practices. Other local universities described collegial governance in similar ways; one even copied the focal university’s guidelines verbatim. Examples of common themes include “diversity of views,” “respect,” and “participation.” In sum, collegial governance practices facilitate participation and meaningful engagement in decision-making by a diverse array of organizational members.

Collegial governance differs from decision-making systems that might be found in other types of organizations or enterprises without mechanisms for member engagement. In the focal university, inclusiveness was achieved through three mechanisms.

First, the university had a bicameral structure with two governing bodies: the senate which was primarily responsible for academic affairs, and the board which has senior oversight of the university and handles its conduct, as well as management and control practices. The senate was a legislatively mandated governing body, unlike a corporation which typically has only a board of directors. Second, the majority of academic senate members were elected by their constituents (i.e., faculty and students). Each academic unit (e.g., engineering, business) was allocated a proportionate number of student and faculty representatives. Finally, the senate operated on a one-person, one-vote basis. Many decades prior to our study, the senate’s structure was strategically designed to have twice as many elected faculty as ex-officio positions and parity between the number of elected students and faculty. The intent was to ensure that each group would need to persuade other groups of the merit of their ideas.

Fig. 1 is a graphical representation of the composition of the focal university’s senate and board during our study period. To ensure anonymity, we report relative rather than absolute numbers for each group. The total number of academic senate members was in the hundred range. The board was a much smaller group, with less than 30 members, most of whom were appointed by the head of the department of education in the jurisdiction that provided government funding. The board also included elected representatives from both the non-academic and academic staff unions, a faculty member representing the academic senate, a student representative, and alumni of the university, as well as the presidents of the undergraduate and graduate student unions.

Empirical Case

The jurisdiction that funds the university is well known as highly conservative. For more than four decades, the government was controlled by the conservative party. A liberal leaning government led the jurisdiction from 2014 to 2019, at which point a newly formed conservative party united different factions and re-seized control. Members of this party began implementing an extreme right-wing agenda and attacking traditionally liberal institutions, including public sector unions and universities. The focal university’s budget, largely reliant on

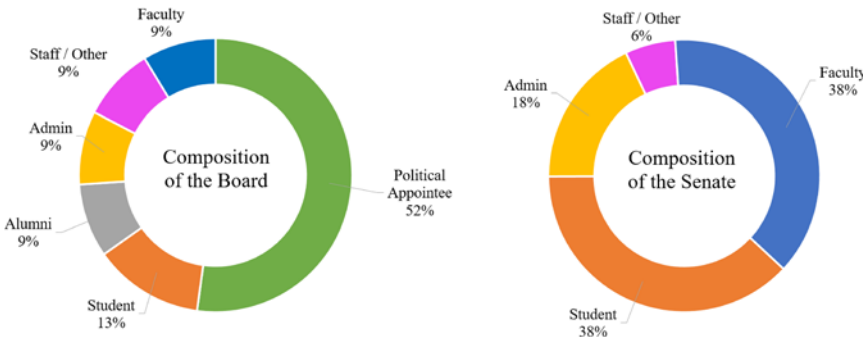


Fig. 1. Composition of the Governing Bodies.

government funding, was slashed dramatically by nearly 7% (from approximately \$468 million to \$435 million) in the first year, followed by two even more drastic reductions in each of the next two years. Overall, the government reduced the amount of funding provided to the university by nearly one-third, a decrease of approximately \$124 million. To respond to these extreme austerity measures, the incoming President announced a proposed restructuring initiative focused on increasing efficiency by centralizing functions, and by extension, eliminating jobs. In designing this initiative, the university signed a multimillion-dollar contract with a consulting group that marketed itself as a higher education specialist and the architect behind similar university efficiency reforms in Australia and the United Kingdom. One part of this plan was academic restructuring to consolidate academic units into larger, more efficient ones.

The President's academic restructuring initiative was announced without a concrete proposal. Instead, communication emphasized the general idea that the university could cut costs while preserving the core mission of teaching and research. The President initiated the process by establishing a steering committee to help formulate draft proposals in consultation with the university community. The committee had no formal authority, but would present its proposed models to the academic senate. As the entity that handles academic affairs in the collegial governance system, the senate was charged with deliberating these proposals and editing them as necessary before voting on a recommendation that the President, who chaired the academic senate meetings, would then take to the governing board for final approval. This process unfolded over a seven-month period.

However, during the deliberations, the President developed a preference for a model that diverged from what the academic senate ultimately voted to recommend. When he brought the proposal before the board, he expressed his disagreement and preference for an alternative model. He subsequently recused himself from voting on or discussing the matter at the meeting due to a conflict of interest, leaving the board to make the final decision. The board discussed the merit of both models, but ultimately diverged from the academic senate's recommendation in favor of a compromise that was more closely aligned with the President's preferred model. In [Table 2](#), we present an outline of key events leading up to the decision.

The board's decision to amend the recommendation constituted a significant disruption to the academic senate. Most members had been operating under the notion that the academic senate's decision would be "rubber stamped" by the board such that all of their engagement had been a battle for the fate of the university. Thus, the board's decision to reject their recommendation was an unexpected disruption that raised their awareness of the nature of their collegial governance system.

Data Collection

In an ethnographic study, the primary data source is field observations. Since the university is a public entity, meetings of the governing bodies and all sub-committees were open to the public. Agendas were publicly posted by the governance team on the university website prior to each meeting and we observed those relevant to our research. We also registered for their FYI list which enabled

Table 2. Timeline of Events Leading to Reality Breakdown.

Time	Event
March	Presidential search committee announces the new incoming President
May	President presents the idea of academic restructuring to the academic senate
June	Steering committee is formed and townhall consultations with the broader community begin. Academic senate votes to endorse the principles of the academic restructuring initiative
June–September	Community consultations continue and the steering committee formulates initial proposals which are released in an interim report
September–December	Academic senate deliberates and develops a proposal that ultimately is sent to the board for final approval
December	President expresses disagreement with the proposal, and the board amends the recommendation to align it with his preference

us to receive reminders and meeting materials via email in advance of meetings. Because our study period coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, all meetings were held virtually and observed via Zoom or a YouTube livestream, depending on the size and nature of the assembly. In addition to these more formal meetings, we attended an array of more informal events (e.g., town halls and roundtables) to gain insights into the process.

We also conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with members of the senate. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews began with open-ended questions followed by key questions related to collegial governance. The primary function of the interviews was to ascertain insiders’ perceptions of collegial governance and the reality breakdown from those involved. For example, we typically asked participants for their thoughts about the board’s decision to amend the motion recommended by the senate and inquired about their views on collegial governance. While a great deal of information about the stances of different actors could be gathered from observing meetings, these interviews served as a critical source of knowledge about the stances of those who seldom spoke during such meetings and revealed how some actors’ perspectives diverged from their public statements.

Finally, we gathered documents from diverse sources, such as governing body meeting agendas and minutes which contained important graphical and textual data about meeting topics, emails between senate members, articles from the student newspaper, social media and blog posts, etc. These assorted documents augmented our understanding of discourse occurring in markedly different relational spaces and from actors with more peripheral roles in collegial governance.

Analytical Approach

Because our primary goal was inductive theory building (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), an iterative approach was appropriate for data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We iterated between data collection, analysis, and relevant literature as the process unfolded in order to make sense of the theoretical

significance of the empirical story. Although this was a non-linear process with some leaps of creative ingenuity (e.g., [Langley, 1999](#)), our analytical strategy can be distilled to a few important aspects that were central to our derivation of theory from the data.

At the outset of our empirical work, we focused on identifying the agendas of the academic senate members and attempting to discern how institutional inhabitants used the collegial governance system. During the first seven months of the process, we were primarily interested in whether and how academic senate members used tools of the social world in attempts to shape the process and outcomes toward their preferred ends. We had anticipated that the board's decision would mark the end of the decision-making process. After the reality breakdown occurred, we returned to our data collected while the structural transformation was unfolding. Attention to collegial governance in the ongoing discussion exploded in a single day, thus it was pivotal for us to explore any relevant data that we might have inadvertently overlooked before the reality breakdown increased its saliency. Our primary aim was to ensure that we accounted for any explicit references to collegial governance by members of the academic senate prior to the breakdown. We searched the database for the phrase "collegial governance" so that we could record any such incidents and which senate members were involved, if any.

Then, we shifted the focus of our analysis to the reality breakdown and its aftermath. It was important to analyze in great detail how institutional inhabitants responded. We were able to categorize most members of the senate based on their role at the university (e.g., faculty and student) and academic unit (e.g., business and medicine). As we attempted to identify response patterns associated with particular categories, it quickly became apparent that the meaning of collegial governance was highly salient to institutional inhabitants. Therefore, in addition to placing a stronger emphasis on meaning in our data collection efforts, we analyzed institutional inhabitants' understandings of collegial governance and variations in their responses to the reality breakdown. Finally, as [Lok and de Rond \(2013\)](#) highlighted, breakdowns that are severe enough can attract attention from external audiences whose reactions may be consequential. Thus, another dimension of our analysis focused on understanding the responses of both institutional inhabitants and other interested parties who could potentially shape the aftermath of the reality breakdown. Next, we present our findings and theoretical insights, from pre-breakdown activities through the reality breakdown to institutional inhabitants' reactions to the disruption.

FINDINGS

Pre-breakdown Activities

Prior to the reality breakdown, collegial governance was largely taken-for-granted. In analyzing the pre-breakdown data, we found that an overwhelming majority of members of the academic senate had never even uttered the term prior to the board's decision. Although collegial governance was largely taken-for-granted, it

was by no means uneventful. Many actors described higher than normal levels of involvement and engagement from members of the academic senate, as illustrated in the following exchange between a faculty member and a dean:

Dean: One of the things that I was most optimistic about in this whole process was just the sheer level of engagement ... it was real engagement. It was probably the most engagement I had seen at the university since I arrived.

Faculty: I agree with you [dean], and in fact, I haven't seen that level of engagement since I came in, which was 1999.

Under normal circumstances, the academic senate tended to handle more mundane topics such as academic programming. Thus, members described the structural transformation as "the most important work many of us will ever do" (Admin) and made claims such as "the future of the university is at stake" (Faculty). It is worth noting that tensions were high during the process; this massive change initiative did not unfold smoothly, with frictions surfacing during consultations and town halls. Nevertheless, at this point, most inhabitants did not question the collegial governance system and the rules of the game; rather, they were playing the game and contentions arose as they deployed their selected strategies of action.

Generally, senate members attempted to use the collegial governance system to achieve their desired outcomes. During discussions in committee meetings, members tried to acquire information about the proposals, offer new ideas that could be implemented, express approval or disapproval for different models, etc. In [Swidler's \(1986\)](#) terms, collegial governance provided the toolkit that actors used to the best of their ability to shape the proposal's formulation. This approach seemed to be quite effective. One senate member retrospectively described it as "a collegial process up until that point" (Faculty). Indeed, the final proposal that was sent to the board contradicted the steering committee's preference; it had been formulated by a group outside the steering committee and was added to the agenda through the mechanisms of collegial governance. One administrator reflected:

Frankly, I am proud of [the senate] for the way that it engaged in a very, very significant way. And nobody will say that is exactly what they had envisioned, but I think we would all agree that a collegial process was executed and that was the consensus result. (Admin)

This sentiment was shared by some of the most actively engaged senate members who supported and had helped create the rejected model:

I think the thing that was meaningful to me is that when it matters, people mobilized, and they did something, and we had an opinion, and the opinion actually was approved by [the senate]. So, the system kind of works. (Faculty)

Reality Breakdown and Awareness

The board's decision to amend the senate's recommendation was an idiosyncratic event in the university's history. Although the education act in the jurisdiction stipulated that a university board had the authority to modify or reject

recommendations from the senate, the board had historically abstained from exercising this power:

It's just been generally accepted that [the senate] is the be all and end all on most academic decisions, and this certainly felt like one of them. (Student)

[The senate] has been put in a position that it has never been [in] before by the decisions of the board and by decisions of the leadership. (Faculty)

For the board to have gone in a direction that is different from that of [the senate] is unusual, I think it is fair to say, and I think probably unprecedented in most of our living memory of the governance relations at the [university]. (Admin)

Perhaps the most common reaction to the breakdown was a reflexive awareness of the concept of collegial governance. For senate members, this disruption unraveled its taken-for-grantedness: "I am at a loss as to what collegial governance means for us, [the senate] and the university" (Staff). Collegial governance became a central topic in the senate's discourse and a significant amount of time was devoted to discussing the events of the board meeting and collegial governance more broadly. Institutional inhabitants explicitly questioned what it meant to have a collegial governance system: "It felt like [the senate] was disrespected. And that's where I started to wonder: Do I really know what collegial governance looks like and how it is envisioned" (Faculty)? In light of their newfound awareness that the board could overrule their decisions, several members also questioned the academic senate's role in such a system:

I also wonder what is the role of [the senate]? ... So, after we spend all these hours, are we just chopped liver? I have better things to do of course. (Faculty)

The question that I still have is: What happens next time the senate has to make a big academic decision that affects the future of the university? And that's where I think a lot of the distrust in collegial governance lies, because now the board has set a precedent that that is something that can happen. (Student)

Through our interviews and ethnographic work, it rapidly became clear that members of the senate did not agree on the meaning of collegiality. Rather than reflexivity and awareness of something "factual" like a piece of objective information, we found the reality breakdown revealed different understandings of collegial governance. First and foremost, collegiality was seen as something ambiguous; one student representative referred to it as "an abstract concept." When we asked participants what it meant, they frequently responded with "That's a good question" and then struggled to articulate their understanding. Others noted how they had consulted various sources on the meaning of collegial governance following the breakdown: "I had looked up the definition just to be clear, and to my understanding it was obviously collegial, right?" (Student); "When I first got on the [Senate] somebody provided me some information ... I went back and I looked at one of the PowerPoints a month or so ago" (Faculty).

Despite this overall ambiguity, there seemed to be at least some convergence around the idea of collegial governance as involving participatory decision-making. As we highlighted earlier, this is how it is conceived at the macro-level across higher education. Informants described it as being an inclusive

conversation or discussion that involved diverse views and voices prior to making decisions, or as a student put it: “Good discussions leading to good decisions that are well informed and that have the participation of people across campus.” Some informants also referenced a structural component for participation that involved explicit consultation with the senate:

It has to be inclusive and ... then the inclusion has to be codified ... It requires structures that specifically state that ... certain things have to be done in a participatory fashion. (Faculty)

There has to be this kind of fulsome, healthy disagreement sometimes, debate often, and there have to be processes built in around that to allow people to express their understandings of how the processes should flow. (Student)

I guess like making decisions in consultation with [the senate] and through [the senate] is ... the main way that I interpret collegial governance. (Faculty)

Despite this general consensus that collegial governance involves participatory decision-making, there were two primary points of divergence. The first was an emphasis on “collegiality” as a cultural component that included friendliness and respect in discussions with others. “One of the things that I do always try and mention in conversations of collegiality is ensuring that the situation we create and the culture we create is friendly and open” (Student); “It has to be respectful on all sides and carried out professionally. Everyone has to be held to a certain standard of decorum of professional behavior” (Faculty). Other institutional inhabitants used language such as animosity, antagonism, or hostile to describe a cultural atmosphere that was non-collegial. “People get very, very angry and they speak very passionately about these things and I don’t think that that’s collegial” (Student).

The second point of divergence was around the notion of authority. Some senate members interpreted collegial governance as meaning that authority on academic matters was to be vested in the senate: “What it means is that the university should be fundamentally run by the academics” (Faculty). Others disagreed, arguing, “Some of the interpretations are really far more grassroots than was intended by the guiding documents” (Faculty). Such institutional inhabitants viewed the university’s bicameral governance structure as indicating that authority was vested in the board: “When it comes to the mandate of the institution, as per the [education act], the board does play a role in it” (Student). These actors often referenced the education act as highlighting that in the collegial governance system, the board was a well-intentioned participant that brought its own expertise to participatory decision-making.

Interestingly, few categorical patterns explained these divergent conceptualizations of collegial governance. For example, respectful communication was raised by students who perceived a power imbalance in the senate, so we initially suspected this to be a unique aspect of their understanding of collegial governance. However, senate members in other categories also cited respectful communication as a central component. Likewise, not all students articulated this view, with one arguing that there had been “conflation of the idea of collegiality with friendliness or niceness.” We observed a great deal of variation within groups, with some very explicit rejections of both dimensions.

These understandings of collegial governance which were both ambiguous and divergent can be described as “multivocal.” Multivocality is used across different literatures to refer to things that are subject to multiple interpretations (Ferraro et al., 2015; Furnari, 2014; Ocasio & Joseph, 2005) and shares an affinity with the notion of polysemy (Gümüşay et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2018). A faculty representative noted that senate members embraced “radically different ideas on the [senate’s] role.” This multivocality was important because different interpretations of collegial governance also shaped perceptions of the reality breakdown. One senate member astutely noted: “I am afraid that our discourse is functioning on different levels. I am afraid that some people think collegial governance has been achieved last term and some people vehemently disagree” (Staff).

The multivocality surrounding collegial governance helped shape how institutional inhabitants reacted to the disruption, and therefore helps explain the vehement disagreement. The process operated much like a jury attempting to convict a criminal, but all jurors basing their verdicts on different definitions of the crime such that little consensus could be achieved. For members who felt that collegial governance was more about the academic senate possessing authority, the magnitude of the disruption was severe. For those who felt that collegial governance primarily involved having an engaged discussion before the board made the final decision, the magnitude of the disruption was considerably less significant. As inhabitants developed institutional awareness in the wake of the reality breakdown, they began to reflexively evaluate elements of their social world in attempts to identify what truly constituted collegial governance. Indeed, because a formal discussion commenced in the senate, there was basically no way to avoid this institutional awareness, making it a pivotal moment for all institutional inhabitants. Yet, each inhabitant experienced a consequential process whereby they constructed the severity of the breakdown; importantly, this process was shaped by their individual interpretations of collegial governance and other substantive characteristics of the breakdown. For example, some focused on the fact that the board compromised while others acknowledged that the President had a tough job.

Well, it’s kind of a hybrid. It wasn’t full out, just disregard. A lot of people were super upset; they’re like “They totally disregarded [our recommendation]. It’s bullshit!” ... sort of [crying] bloody murder: “This is unbelievable!” And I’m like, “Well, it’s kind of a hybrid. Is it that unbelievable?” (Faculty)

The President in this case was particularly controversial because he did not speak at that meeting, which is to say he did not advocate for what was decided ... I think that that’s led to concerns about his leadership. But you know, I understand. He is new in the job. It’s a tough job. (Faculty)

Some institutional inhabitants had relatively muted reactions, describing themselves as indifferent or not having strong opinions. Others suggested that the vocal members were polarized, but that a lot of the quieter senate members had adopted more reasonable positions in the middle. Notably, some members of the senate did not perceive the breakdown as being severe: “I have no concerns about the decisions of the board, the [education act] and the university governance systems are abundantly clear that [the senate] recommends to the board” (Admin);

"We have this power structure where the board makes the final decision ... the power structure is important because it exists, and not only does it exist, but we are accountable to using it" (Student).

On the other hand, many members of the academic senate perceived the breakdown to be quite severe. Their reactions often were quite emotional, describing the actions of the board and the President as disappointing and frustrating: "Man, I was frustrated. Like, I am not going to lie. I was extremely frustrated by the [board's] decision. And I was also very frustrated by [the President], the way he approached that situation" (Student); "That was ... depressing. ... honestly, I want to express a feeling here rather than a rational statement" (Faculty). This sentiment was shared by senate members with varying degrees of involvement in the process, including members of the senate who were rather reserved, having spoken very little during the meetings and events we observed. One member described it as "disillusioning and disheartening" (Faculty) and another as "deeply disappointing" (Student). In sum, although all members became aware and reflexive about the nature of their social reality, the multivocal nature of collegial governance led to an array of reactions as diverse as the members of the senate.

Attempts to Reaffirm the Status Quo

Alongside this newfound reflexivity with regard to collegial governance was a series of aspersions about both the board's decision and the President's actions in what was perceived as a failure to support the senate's recommendation. In fact, some actors were using social media platforms such as Twitter to share live responses to the board meeting immediately after the decision was made. For example, the following social media posts were made by faculty members who were not on the academic senate: "The board has just declared war on collegial governance"; "Excuse me for asking, but who died and made the board majority the Rulers of the Universe(ity)? Oh right, the board majority did."

Both the graduate and undergraduate student unions at the university likewise issued statements expressing their lack of support for the board's decision. Although many responses on social media were nearly instantaneous, people continued to discuss the topic for a period of time after the event. A letter was formulated and sent to the chair of the board by the presidents of the two staff unions at the university who referred to the decision as "a direct contradiction of the spirit of [the senate's] recommendation – a recommendation that was arrived at after careful and extensive consideration, deliberation, and debate – and an affront to the principle of collegial governance." Similar letters were sent to the chair of the board by the faculty association at a neighboring university and two different professional associations in the same jurisdiction. A particularly noteworthy piece was an editorial in the student newspaper which took a highly antagonistic stance, referring to the event as signaling the death of collegial governance at the university and calling the board meeting a live execution.

The President was also subjected to this wrath because he did not support the senate's recommendation. The day after the decision, a senate member wrote

that his declaration was “a direct betrayal of the collegial governance principles and processes of the university” (Faculty). A formal letter signed by roughly 40 department chairs at the university was sent to the President soon after regarding his actions at the board meeting. A similar letter was drafted and signed by both senate members and non-senate members of the university community. The letter read as follows:

Your statement to the board raises a serious issue with respect to collegial governance ... Based on this recent course of events, it would seem that you, as President, may offer your own personal viewpoints rather than favouring a more neutral reporting of the [senate’s] recommendations, and that this can happen without any forewarning to [the senate], thus undermining the collegial governance processes at the university.

More than mere harsh words, there were also calls to return to the model that the senate had recommended. The letter from the unions concluded with the following statement: “We call on the Board to reconsider its decision, respect collegial governance and bi-cameral decision-making, and approve the recommendation sent to it by [the Senate].”

This point is critical because, as we noted earlier, this was something that [Lok and de Rond \(2013\)](#) found in their empirical work. Namely, the status quo was upheld by restoring social order through the reversal of decisions that conflicted with the principles of the selection system. In our setting, the new model was not scheduled to be launched until seven months after the board’s decision, which created a window for the decision to potentially be reversed to address the disruption and restore peace. Interestingly, as a product of the variation in perceived severity stemming from the multivocality of collegial governance, a large proportion of the senate membership did not participate in these demands, and the board did not relent and reverse the decision as requested. Additionally, some institutional inhabitants actively attempted to invoke formalized rules as they searched for ways to force such a reversal. For example, one senate member was exploring whether the board was allowed to consider a recommendation without first sending it to one of its subcommittees, as per a procedural policy at the university. Others directly consulted legislation in the jurisdiction.

I mean, the other thing about collegial governance is just like, LEGALLY who has the authority to do what? Right? So that’s why myself and others were looking at the [education act], and it’s like, the board does have ultimate authority. So technically, they could, I guess, make any decision they want. (Faculty)

Post-breakdown Response: Toward Alternative Arrangements

Despite these strong responses, the board effectively ignored the senate. The board described its decision as “exactly the process outlined in the [education act]” in a blog post on the day of its release, but remained silent thereafter. The President was much more responsive to the aspersions and at the first two meetings following the event, both of which were subcommittee meetings, he explained his thought process and allowed attendees to express their concerns. Essentially, he argued that he was in a peculiar position as both chair of the senate and a member of the board, but believed he had a legal fiduciary responsibility to express

his personal opinion in his role as a board member. He followed this with a blog post explaining his reasoning to the broader university community and prepared to explain it to the full senate as well, but upset members of the senate were not satisfied.

Given that the decision was not reversed despite attempts to do so, institutional inhabitants began to embrace the idea that some changes were necessary. “There should have been another way of actually presenting the [senate] proposal to the board with enough substance, with enough explanation, so it might have an honest chance” (Faculty). As articulated by one faculty member, the reality breakdown caused some to question the integrity of the entire system: “This is a failure of such magnitude that it calls into question the integrity of the governance of this entire institution ... The question now is: What is to be done?”

These institutional inhabitants began to imagine possible changes that could be made to address the failure of collegial governance going forward. To facilitate this collective discussion, the academic senate voted to add an item to the agenda to discuss this matter which ballooned into an entire extended length meeting. They invoked a parliamentary procedure from Robert’s Rules known as “Committee of the Whole” which had essentially two net effects. First, the President stepped out of the role of chair and ceded it to a faculty member for the duration of the senate deliberations. This essentially gave the senate free reign to discuss whatever it wanted, particularly since one of the two issues at hand was the President’s role. Second, rather than making decisions, the committee of the whole made recommendations to the main senate body, making it a rather low-stakes environment. In other words, the sky was the limit in formulating recommendations for change.

Sensemaking Mechanisms

Interestingly, institutional inhabitants continued to engage in a cognitive sensemaking process that diminished and reoriented the recommendations. We identified three sensemaking mechanisms: attributing the reality breakdown to anomalous conditions, orienting toward the future, and designating change as formidable.

Some actors engaged in sensemaking by attributing the reality breakdown to anomalous conditions, such as the reduction in funding, the new government, and the pandemic.

The [university] alone has seen over \$100M in cuts and we are all feeling the effects of it. This is a year where we are in the middle of a pandemic and that has made it even more challenging ... so when we talk about collegial governance, I think we really need to be discussing these points. (Student)

Many institutional inhabitants attributed the reality breakdown to the funding reduction, as this was the primary motivation behind the structural transformation in the first place. The President often referred to the funding shortfall as a financial crisis; indeed, the entire strategic change initiative was predicated on managing the problematic situation in an effective manner. Likewise, some academic senate members attributed the breakdown to the budget cuts and the

unreasonable timelines for implementing them. In doing so, they framed the disruptive shock as an abnormal event under extreme circumstances that would be unlikely to reoccur. "Editing the motions as was done, not ideal governance, but, we are in a pressure cooker situation. We have timelines that are not our choosing, and destinations that we have to reach that were set by others" (Admin).

Institutional inhabitants also attributed the reality breakdown to the new government responsible for the funding reduction. Even senate members who supported the President's model had negative things to say about the role of the government in the process. In addition, the new administration had prematurely ended the terms of some government-appointed board members. Some believed that certain board members had been replaced with political "cronies" who were responsible for the unprecedented decision to amend the senate's recommendation.

The real problematic nodal point here is between the [government] and the [board] ... if that had been dealt with the way it was envisioned by the people who put this in place, we would not be having these problems between the [board] and the [senate]. (Faculty)

Inhabitants who employed the second sensemaking mechanism, orienting toward the future, tended to view the reality breakdown as less severe and wanted to focus on tackling what they viewed as pressing threats to the university's survival. One administrator referred to it as being "in the middle of the swamp" and emphasized the need to forge ahead to escape the morass. A few members similarly focused on what they perceived as larger threats, such as a government proposal to implement "super-boards" that would oversee multiple higher education organizations. They strongly advocated moving forward to pursue the university's mandate of teaching and research with a focus on survival. They felt that arguing about collegial governance was a distraction and a waste of time, and some inhabitants even suggested that the debate would only play into the government's hands: "The last thing you want to do is show the [government] that there's turmoil. Like, at the end of the day, our real enemy is not us. And we shouldn't be fighting with each other like this" (Student); "I'm afraid that the way we responded to that just reveals even more how dysfunctional we are to those politicians, so I don't think we helped ourselves a lot" (Faculty).

The final sensemaking mechanism was designating specific types of institutional changes as formidable, if not impossible to achieve. Inhabitants actively assessed the amount of effort it would take to plausibly bring about the transformations they were imagining. The education act was salient in this regard. "I don't think it's anything that can be particularly enforced like through policy, especially 'cause most of that has to go through the [education act]" (Student). One way to address the issues that caused the breakdown would be to change the formalized rules, which was perceived to be a formidable task. "It's true. They have that power. Okay. There's nothing we can do about that, unless we change it, and that's difficult to impossible to do anyway" (Faculty); "I also feel like even if the [education act] did give [the senate] more authority, like if the government doesn't like it, they could just change it too" (Faculty).

Even members of the senate who believed the board should not possess the authority to override them perceived that it would require a monumental amount

of work to mobilize against a government that clearly did not support them and change the legislation. Unsurprisingly, this mechanism was used by members of the senate who perceived the breakdown to be severe.

Outcomes

These sensemaking mechanisms were important mediators in institutional inhabitants’ interpretations of the necessity and desirability of change, ultimately reorienting recommended proposals and limiting their scope. For example, although actors developed institutional awareness of the concept of collegial governance and initially perceived a need for transformation, attributing the reality breakdown to anomalous conditions allowed them to interpret the disruption as necessitating less urgent modifications. The senate’s locus of attention shifted inward, away from the board, as members began focusing on aspects such as dynamics of the senate itself. For example, the notion of collegiality as culture was given a shocking amount of attention during the deliberations. One faculty member told us in an interview that although she had initially thought the committee of the whole was a good idea, she was dismayed by the “anti-collegial” discussion at the meeting, which was quite contentious. Another issue that emerged pertained to the composition of the academic senate and the appropriate proportions of administration, students, and faculty members. This was interesting, given that the senate had approved the original model by approximately 80% of the vote. The focus had shifted so much toward internal matters that recommendations related to the sources of the reality breakdown had all but disappeared. Rather than achieving the initial goal of imagining new possibilities to address sources of the perceived failure of the collegial governance system, the process yielded primarily superficial recommendations with one exception. Notably, this occurred even though the meeting was run as a committee of the whole controlled by a faculty member and thus had nearly unlimited potential to generate new possibilities. We summarize the recommendations developed by the committee of the whole in [Table 3](#).

The first recommendation to hold a vote of no confidence in the President and chair of the board was overwhelmingly defeated. Two recommendations

Table 3. Recommendations of the Committee of the Whole.

Action	Passed	Part of System Affected
To hold a vote of confidence in the President and the Chair of the Board	No	None
To reaffirm the equal participation of all members of the senate	Yes	None
For the senate to be involved in the implementation of the model	Yes	None
To investigate ways to improve senate deliberations and accessibility	Yes	Senate
To conduct a review of the process that led to the approved model	Yes	Senate
To investigate the establishment of a joint board-senate committee	Yes	Senate and board

were unrelated to change at all. The first suggested a reaffirmation of the senate’s collegial culture, and the second pertained to the implementation of the model that had been approved by the board rather than changes to the collegial governance system. Two recommendations related to improving dynamics unrelated to the roles of the board and the President in senate proposals. Among the six recommendations, only one sought to address a component of the reality breakdown by suggesting the creation of a joint body between the board and the senate to increase communication. Notably, although some institutional inhabitants suggested that the senate should be able to submit recommendations directly to the board when the President disagreed with them, no procedural changes were proposed.

DISCUSSION

To explore how institutional inhabitants respond to and attempt to address reality breakdowns, we undertook a processual ethnographic study of collegial governance in a large North American university undergoing a strategic change initiative implemented by the incoming President. We followed collegial governance from its initial taken-for-granted state through a disruption that brought the concept to the forefront of discourse and studied the responses of institutional inhabitants. In Fig. 2, we present a theoretical model illustrating the process that we uncovered through our empirical work. The model demonstrates how the reality breakdown created institutional awareness that led institutional inhabitants to question their social world and construct the severity of the breakdown. Those who perceived the breakdown to be most severe attempted to restore order by demanding a reversal of the decision. When their efforts failed, institutional inhabitants attempted to imagine alternative possibilities. However, this process was “compressed” by simultaneous sensemaking regarding the efficacy and

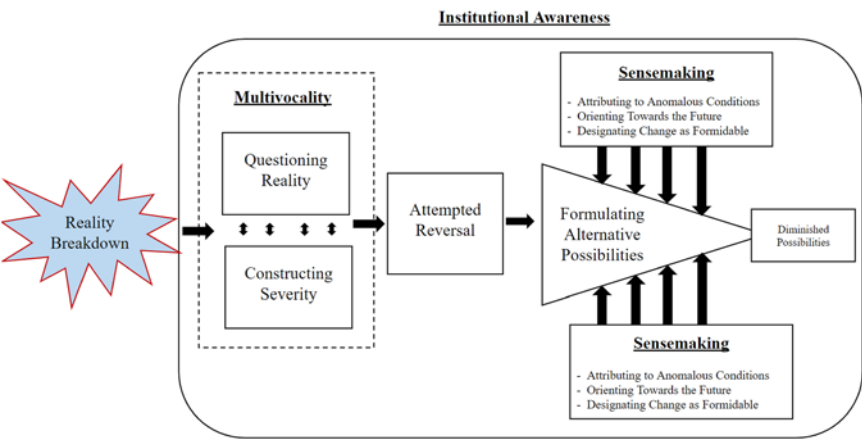


Fig. 2. Response to a Reality Breakdown.

desirability of change via the mechanisms of attributing the reality breakdown to anomalous conditions, orienting toward the future, and designating changes as formidable. The final result was a diminished and reoriented set of recommendations. We discuss the implications of our findings and theoretical model in the remainder of this section.

Reality Breakdowns and the Social Construction of Severity

Our findings contribute primarily to the study of reality breakdowns. Although [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#) initially articulated that breakdowns in reality could threaten the stability of social reality, they are rarely a central research focus. Research on reality breakdowns answers calls to unpack the role of reflexivity and institutional awareness as an initial motivating force ([Lawrence et al., 2013](#); [Weick, 2020](#)) and enables us to understand the earliest moments in micro-processes of change efforts ([Creed et al., 2010](#); [Smets et al., 2012](#)). Reality breakdowns unravel the taken-for-grantedness of elements of the social world ([Steele, 2021](#)) and instigate unsettled periods ([Swidler, 1986](#)) in which institutional inhabitants become aware of these elements.

Our primary contribution builds upon groundbreaking ideas related to variation in the severity of disruptions ([Lok & de Rond, 2013](#); [Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009](#)). While scholars have argued that disruptions may vary in their severity, they have paid relatively less attention to how severity actually manifests. Generally, the severity of reality breakdowns being studied is considered to be similar across institutional inhabitants ([Lok & de Rond, 2013](#)). However, our findings suggest that severity is not an inherent characteristic of reality breakdowns, but is constructed by institutional inhabitants via an incredibly consequential process. Some inhabitants may perceive a breakdown as quite severe and exhibit strong emotional reactions, while others may perceive it as trivial and conclude that only slight corrective action is necessary. The construction of severity is critical because institutional inhabitants typically need to be aligned to take significant action ([Lok & de Rond, 2013](#); [Steele, 2021](#)).

We found that collegial governance is both ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations; thus, we describe it as multivocal, a concept that has been invoked in an array of contexts ([Ferraro et al., 2015](#); [Furnari, 2014](#)). The multiplicity of meanings fosters interpretive flexibility ([Pinch & Bijker, 1984](#)) among a diverse array of actors, and the multivocal nature of collegial governance makes the process of constructing severity all the more intriguing. In settled times, largely taken-for-granted expectations may persist as long as multiple interpretations of the reciprocal typifications do not conflict. However, when a breakdown occurs, institutional inhabitants become aware of and reflexively consider the nature of their social world and recognize the existence of a multiplicity of meanings. Although reality breakdowns threaten the validity and viability of the collegial governance system's foundational principles, multiple interpretations may inhibit attempts to initiate change. It is interesting to note that differences in the perceived severity of the breakdown shaped reactions to the disruption within the same assemblage of inhabitants in our setting.

In future work on reality breakdowns, exploring differences in how institutional inhabitants construct the severity of breakdowns could prove fruitful. Our setting can be described as a somewhat extreme case because principles of the collegial governance system explicitly supported a “diversity of views” thereby intentionally bringing together people with markedly different backgrounds. For example, the final recommendations were put forward by those with backgrounds in history, political science, computer science, particle physics, and literature. However, other contexts may have relatively little heterogeneity and thus different dynamics. Multivocality seems to facilitate responses oriented toward survival, whereas a more mutual understanding may facilitate responses that enable institutional change because institutional inhabitants are likely to hold similar views regarding the severity of the breakdown. Another important question relates to how the process of constructing severity may differ based on the characteristics of reality breakdowns. We noted, for example, that for some, the board’s compromise reduced the perceived severity of the failure of collegial governance. Additionally, documents that codify rules in detail do not exist in all settings, which could further complicate institutional inhabitants’ sensemaking process. Thus, important questions remain about how and why this severity might be constructed differently under different circumstances.

Sensemaking and the Antecedent Microprocesses of Institutional Change

Our second contribution to the literature concerns specific sensemaking mechanisms following a reality breakdown and the development of institutional awareness. Our findings share affinities with earlier research while revealing intriguing points of divergence that fortify our knowledge of responses to reality breakdowns. For example, [Lok and de Rond \(2013\)](#) found that institutional inhabitants attempt to restore the stability of the social order after reality breakdowns by reversing actions that do not align with expectations. In their context, the coach was the prime source of authority, but when he made a decision that was misaligned with the principles of the selection system, institutional inhabitants of the boat club questioned that authority and attempted to reverse the decision.

Although our empirical case unfolded similarly, our findings diverge because the attempt to restore the status quo through reversal was a resounding failure, whereas the efforts of the boat club were successful. In our case, the failure to achieve a reversal prolonged the process as different actors cast aspersions upon the relevant parties and taken-for-grantedness continued to unravel. Thus, failed attempts to uphold the status quo and stabilize the social world led to a perceived need for change. However, institutional inhabitants continued to attribute the reality breakdown to anomalous conditions, orient toward the future, and designate changes as formidable, all of which served to diminish and reorient the recommendations.

A great deal of research has been conducted on how institutions can be changed in literatures as diverse as social movements ([Briscoe & Gupta, 2016](#); [Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017](#)), institutional entrepreneurship ([Battilana et al., 2009](#); [Hardy & Maguire, 2008](#)), cultural entrepreneurship ([Glynn & Lounsbury,](#)

2022; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019), institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), and others. Yet, these perspectives tell us primarily about the tactics and strategies that are deployed (e.g., mobilization, theorization, framing, or boundary work) once actors have decided to pursue change, and are thus much less informative about why they decide to engage in such efforts in the first place. By focusing on the initial moment of institutional awareness that serves as a potential catalyst, we can unpack how inhabitants decide whether or not to engage in change efforts and where these efforts are targeted. This foregrounds the important role of microprocesses in shaping responses to reality breakdowns. In our context, the situation certainly could have led to the imagination of new possibilities and a radical change effort to bring them about, as many prior works have found. Surprisingly, this was the road not taken.

Our findings also strengthen links with the literature on sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Although scholars have previously suggested a connection between institutions and sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006), studies at the interstice of these theoretical domains have generally emphasized how sensemaking is shaped by institutions and vice versa (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). Notably, our findings suggest that more attention should be directed toward the role of sensemaking in motivating institutional change efforts specifically. Reality breakdowns lead inhabitants to reflexively question the foundations of institutions. This newfound awareness of the constructed social world that they inhabit also leads to sensemaking of both current institutional arrangements and alternative possibilities, including how they might be implemented. Such moments of institutional awareness can simultaneously motivate change efforts and efforts to reaffirm the status quo, but sensemaking seems to be a key mechanism underpinning the process whereby institutional awareness can lead to variable outcomes.

Major findings from prior research on reality breakdowns show that inhabitants are largely successful in reversing decisions that run counter to expectations and reaffirming the status quo. Our findings, however, suggest that such efforts can indeed fail. Even though institutional inhabitants began to develop alternative possibilities after their initial attempts to uphold the status quo failed, they simultaneously continued to engage in sensemaking, focusing instead on interpreting the extent to which change efforts should be undertaken and the locus of these efforts. For example, attributing the reality breakdown to anomalous conditions served as a sensemaking mechanism to determine how much change was necessary, while designating change as formidable served as a sensemaking mechanism about the perceived plausibility of change efforts. These sensemaking efforts shifted attention away from a change effort aimed at addressing the source of the reality breakdown and toward internal dynamics unrelated to the disruption.

A substantial benefit of studying reality breakdowns is that it focuses precisely on the unraveling of taken-for-grantedness and the development of institutional awareness, thereby capturing complex processes as they occur. We could imagine a plethora of similar situations in which a disruption surfaces an opportunity for change that is squandered by inhabitants who talk themselves out of it, which outsiders may (incorrectly) perceive as institutional harmony. Nevertheless, radical

transformations are undertaken in many cases. Plausible reasons may be predicated on the types of efforts deployed to reaffirm the status quo, environmental or historical conditions at the time of the event, and the substantive nature of the breakdown. For example, both Kuhn (1962) and Steele (2021) argued that anomalies become ingrained in collective memory and these anomalies may accumulate over time. Perhaps one crisis of collegial governance is acceptable as anomalous, but subsequent events may initiate a sensemaking process that motivates more extensive change.

We advocate devoting attention to reality breakdowns as a way to foreground institutional awareness as a concept in explaining change and as a way to engage counterfactual thinking about unexplored possibilities. Fundamentally, the phenomenon speaks to the long-standing debate on embedded agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The approach to studying reality breakdowns is event-centric and suggests that agency is omnipresent, but the locus of agency can be temporarily redirected toward various components of the social world. Exploring institutional inhabitants' consequential sensemaking during unsettled periods can reveal the motivations and precipitating factors that facilitate modifying these worlds or deciding not to do so. The institutional entrepreneurship literature has followed extensive transformations in many contexts, from Grappa production (Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016) to child labor in soccer ball manufacturing (Khan et al., 2007). Likewise, the work of social movements scholars has yielded insights about institutional transformation in contexts as diverse as yoga (Munir et al., 2021) and mobilization against the mafia (Lee et al., 2018).

But why does it “make sense” to change, and why now instead of 50 years ago or 50 years from now? Why might a significant event that appears to be a prime moment for a social movement be negotiated away? When addressing these questions, focusing on reality breakdowns can illuminate the microprocesses that determine the resulting course of action. Focusing on how sensemaking of these events shapes motivations for change may foster a better understanding of the ostensible stability of social worlds. Seemingly trivial sensemaking can be the difference between galvanizing a transformation and upholding the status quo.

The Influence of Formalized Rules in Unsettled Periods

Another contribution is our finding that codified, formalized rules seemed to play a fundamental role in the reality breakdown and its aftermath. Formalized rules shaped some actors' understanding of collegial governance, which had consequential implications for the social construction of the severity of reality breakdown. Some actors scoured these formalized rules to look for loopholes to reverse the board's decision or to justify the breakdown. Finally, even as alternative proposals were being formulated, these rules helped constrain action and diminish the change efforts of institutional inhabitants.

The regulatory pillar of organizational institutionalism is chronically underexplored. While not often a central focus of contemporary institutional theory, it seems that during unsettled periods, formal rules may serve an enhanced role. Codified rules can fade into obscurity when they are not invoked, but may

resurface from their dormant state when reality breakdowns occur. Institutional inhabitants defer to these rules for myriad reasons. We found that the “official” rules of the game helped facilitate multivocality because some actors used them to interpret meaning. Even when actors disagreed with the rules, they constrained change efforts and inhibited further action. One reason for this may be that formal rules are perceived as more concrete and objective aspects of reality than amorphous norms.

Scholars have rightly asserted that regulatory frameworks contribute an institutional story only insofar as they “embody taken-for-granted societal norms and values” (Greenwood et al., 2008, p. 12). However, a central component of reality breakdowns is the unraveling of this taken-for-grantedness (Harmon, 2019; Steele, 2021). Gehman (2021) suggested that taken-for-grantedness facilitates less intentionality with regard to the “aims” of the social world, whereas questioning enables a more precise articulation of purpose. In contexts involving reality breakdowns, this means that, at least for a moment in time, institutional inhabitants engage in reflexivity and develop awareness about the norms and values that these rules embody.

The fact that institutional inhabitants deferred to formalized rules for an array of reasons suggests the fundamental role that codification may play in shaping the capacity for change during unsettled periods. As a contemporary example of such ideas, the confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court followed similar dynamics in which the rapid appointment process violated an informal norm, but “technically” did not break the rules. Although they may be initially developed to codify cultural norms and general aims, laws and formal rules may subsequently become taken-for-granted and their explicit purpose forgotten. These laws become artifacts that are inherited by new generations of inhabitants (Gehman, 2021) and shape how future actors understand the social world, as well as their ability and motivation to change it. Enshrining social reality into formal codified rules may create a kind of persistence that facilitates uncanny endurance long after norms cease to be shared. Our case was peculiar in the sense that the rules were established by the government. It may be that reality breakdowns are better able to overcome rules when codified at the organization level rather than enforced by an external entity. Scholars should investigate this effect in greater detail in future work.

Multivocality and the Erosion of Collegial Governance

Finally, our research has important implications for research on collegiality. Although the concept of collegiality has been explored by organizational theorists in a variety of professional contexts (Greenwood et al., 1990; Lazega, 2001), it has heightened significance in academic settings (Baldridge, 1971; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016; Waters, 1989). By demonstrating the ambiguity and multivocality of collegiality, our evidence confirms that it is “far from a theoretically specified concept” (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023, Vol. 86). Moreover, there might be a tendency to view such varieties of collegiality (Cloete et al., 2023, Vol. 87) as being a product of different manifestations of collegiality across distinct contexts. Our findings take this a step further by demonstrating the multiplicity

of interpretations within the same setting. We observed remarkable variation in the understanding of collegial governance among members of the same academic senate. Our story is particularly interesting because it reveals important tensions between different aspects of collegiality. While it may be true that collegiality can be both a horizontal cross-university phenomenon and a system of authority relationships between faculty and others, either type of collegiality in isolation may be unstable. In our case, an over-reliance on norms as a mode of governance came with consequences.

As an additional contribution, our research speaks to the erosion of collegiality and faculty authority observed in recent years. The model that was initially approved by the academic senate before being modified by the board would have saved equivalent amounts of money through shared services without eroding faculty authority through the creation of another layer of administration in the form of executive deans. Thus, the consequence of this board decision was both a perceived violation of collegiality and a decided shift in the direction of managerialism. Furthermore, while our case shares an affinity with others regarding the prominent role of the state (Harroche & Musselin, 2023, Vol. 87; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2023, Vol. 86), responsibility for the reality breakdown cannot be attributed solely to austerity measures, since both models would have addressed the financial shortfall. In other words, the university could have upheld the collegial decision-making process, and its failure to do so had compounding ramifications on collegiality and the extent of faculty authority at the university going forward.

While scholars around the world have observed a decline in collegial governance as many universities shift toward managerialism, important questions remain at the university level about how such a decline unfolds. Faculty representatives in academic senates or other such governing bodies may be in a position to resist against the erosion of collegial governance; however, little is known about the processes whereby institutional inhabitants protect collegial governance and thwart its erosion, or fail to do so. Our study provides insights from the frontline of a blatant attack on collegial governance that ultimately led to a more managerial mode of governance. One insight is that the crisis in which the university found itself was highly consequential in this process. For example, conditions perceived as anomalous, such as the pandemic and a substantial decrease in funding, were salient factors in shaping the response, and many participants were already worn out before the reality breakdown occurred. This is reminiscent of a “shock doctrine” (Klein, 2007) or a policy implemented during a crisis while constituents are emotionally drained and otherwise distracted. The type of “disaster managerialism” we witnessed may be one particularly effective way that collegiality is eroded despite resistance, considering the common criticism of collegial governance as “slow” (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Sahlin, 2023, Vol. 87; Östh Gustafsson, 2023, Vol. 86). The outcomes of such micro-level processes at the university can be the difference between the preservation and reinforcement of collegial governance or the further decline of this fundamental component of the academy.

In conclusion, findings from this study substantially advance our understanding of the extremely generative phenomenon of reality breakdowns, providing much-needed insight into the origins of institutional awareness that can spark

the process of imagining new possibilities and ultimately lead to institutional change. By following the events of a significant reality breakdown in the collegial governance system at a large North American university, we were able to both unpack the consequential process of severity construction and demonstrate the importance of sensemaking in shaping institutional inhabitants' responses. Reality breakdowns remain a fruitful line of inquiry for scholars interested in the stability of social worlds and counterfactual roads not taken, as well as drivers and motivations of institutional change. Moreover, our findings show how such microprocesses can be highly consequential for the protection of cherished institutions such as collegial governance which are threatened by increasing managerialism.

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