Maintaining the status quo: Constructing institutional citizenship in U.S. higher education policies

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Abstract

Institutional policies and plans play a significant role in the daily life of a college or university. In this paper, we explore the ways that policy texts discursively contribute to constructions of institutional citizenship. Using an example drawn from a policy discourse analysis, we explore how institutions (re)make subjectivities according to the institution's interests. We describe the differential subjectivities produced by this discourse for historically marginalized and historically centered identities and argue that this difference, perpetuated through official policy and instantiated in different institutional citizen discourses, undermines institutional equity efforts. Ultimately, discourses of institutional citizenship work to maintain inequitable status quos, pointing to the potentially conservative nature of both policy and citizenship.

Keywords: discourse analysis; free speech; institutional citizenship; higher education; policy

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Inequitable structures and systems in higher education persist despite the steady efforts of activists to not only widen access to higher education, but also to improve both the experience and outcomes of higher education for historically marginalized students, faculty, and workers (Ferguson, 2012, 2017). The persistence of inequity speaks both to the enduring nature of racism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, and classism—among other exclusionary discourses—in the larger cultural context within which higher education sits and to the halting measures institutions take to rectify these issues on their campuses. It is important to note that activists *and* institutions both often turn to policy to produce change, despite evidence that there are limits to policy's transformative efficacy (Ahmed, 2012;

Allan, 2008; Iverson, 2008, 2012). All of these influences—from activism, institutional policies, and broader discourses on equity and justice—are involved in the discursive creation of institutional citizens.

While institutions of higher education and the people therein are part of regional, national, and global academic communities, institutions are also individual communities with their own policies, practices, and taken-for-granted ways of being and doing. Students, staff, and faculty are citizens in these institutional and academic communities; it is this form of citizenship that we engage with in this paper. Specifically, we explore the role that institutional policy plays in discursively creating the ideal institutional citizen—a discursive formation that is both particular to and also transcends the institution to be recognizable to other academic communities. Using an example drawn from a policy discourse analysis of institutional policies at a public research institution, Northeastern Flagship University (NFU; pseudonym), we explore the ways that institutions (re)make subjectivities according to the institution's interests. We focus on institutional policy as official, sanctioned instantiations of institutional discourse; while there are competing discourses in circulation in any institution, official texts such as policies and plans outline the ways that a university understands and communicates institutional citizenship. We describe the differential subjectivities produced by this discourse for people with historically marginalized and/or historically centered identities and argue that this difference, perpetuated through official policy and instantiated in different institutional citizen discourses, ultimately undermines institutional equity efforts.

Discourses of institutional citizenship

Policy discourse analysis (PDA) seeks to understand the contexts and unexamined assumptions that go into policy-making by taking policies as discursive bodies of texts (Allan, 2008). PDA is a hybrid methodology developed by social scientists interested in poststructuralism, critical theory, feminist theory, and policy studies. Understanding policies as discursive bodies of texts that both reflect and produce culture 'serves to disrupt and displace traditional approaches to policy analysis by highlighting how policy actively produces subjects, knowledge, and perceived truths' (Allan, 2010, p. 26). PDA uses an iterative, deconstructive analytical process to identify discourses and subsequent subjectivities produced within policy texts and the discursive field they create within an institution (Allan, 2008). Allan (2008) suggested the following patterns to focus on when reviewing texts for a PDA study:

questions about problems and solutions; questions about predominant images; questions about the discourses used to shape problems, solutions, and images; and questions about the subject positions re/produced through discourse. Through inductive and deductive coding, analysts code texts for problems, solutions, images, and the discourses that informed them to 'make connections among them…develop constellations of meaning…and identify subject positions discursively constituted by the reports' (Allan, 2008, p. 63).

We identified several discourses pertaining to institutional citizenship in circulation within NFU's policy texts. In other words, these texts lay out the actions and subjectivities available to 'good' institutional citizens. What is striking about these discourses is that they create different versions of 'good' institutional citizenship for different people. These discourses lay out different expectations for individuals with historically marginalized identities than for those with historically centered identities. Furthermore, these texts assist the institution in exerting control over its citizens by normalizing certain ways of being citizens and doing citizenship. These institutional discourses are conveyed and upheld by policy texts, thus ultimately undermining equity efforts by reinforcing separate, unequal, and inequitable standards.

Institutional citizens as civil and tolerant

A number of the policies that govern life at NFU, ranging from the very broad to the narrow, involve strictures about the ways that institutional citizens should comport themselves. However, the emphasis on the importance of civil behavior and tolerance in action and speech—rather than on just, critical, or inclusive content of that action and speech—highlight the way these policies construct different rules of engagement for different people.

Broad policies at NFU construct institutional citizens as being tolerant and respectful of difference. The Intolerance Policy and the Resolution in Support of Pluralism work together to shape inclusivity language and discourse. The Intolerance Policy 'denounces intolerance which interferes with those rights guaranteed by law or policy, and insists that such conduct has no place in a community of learning.' The Resolution 'affirms its commitment to maintaining an academic environment in which all individuals benefit from each other's experiences through pluralism, mutual respect, appreciation of divergent views, and awareness of the importance of individual rights.' Similarly, NFU's Diversity Values state that the institution is 'committed to ensuring freedom of expression and dialogue among diverse groups in a community defined by mutual respect.' These statements emphasize the importance of civility, respect, and

acknowledgment of difference. However, they do not acknowledge the material realities that differences in race, gender, class, and other categories can create in the institutional environment.

More narrowly focused policies define institutional citizens as civil and respectful, especially concerning diversity and inclusion. The Principles of Employee Conduct state that employees are 'expected to be characterized by integrity and dignity, and they should expect and encourage such conduct by others' and 'expected to conduct themselves in ways that foster forthright expression of opinion and tolerance for the view of others.' The Student Code of Conduct set forth similar expectations. Emphasizing 'honesty, integrity and civility,' it states that students are 'expected to demonstrate their respect for all members of our richly diverse community.' In these policy texts, civility is the primary attribute for institutional citizenship and works as a requirement for being heard, meaning that uncivil voices—including those of historically marginalized individuals—are constructed as unacceptable and thus unhearable.

Institutional citizens are also constructed as tolerant in classrooms, residence halls, and other campus locations. The Guidelines for Classroom Civility & Respect prescribe behavior expected from both students and instructors, stating that the institution

> strives to create an environment of academic freedom that fosters the personal and intellectual development of all community members. In order to do this, the University protects the rights of all students, faculty and staff to explore new ideas and to express their views.

To achieve a tolerant classroom, everyone involved needs to accept 'the spirit of inquiry and a respect for diverse ideas and viewpoints.' This framing presents the idea of open inquiry in a neutral way: in so doing, it fails to differentiate between attack, spirited objection, or defense—ignoring the inherent power differentials that can exist in communicative exchanges. The Office of Residential Life Community Standards counsel students that 'connecting with people with different cultures, beliefs, and values is an integral part of the educational experience' and that 'standing up against bias is an act of personal and community integrity.' They also remind students that 'civility does not mean that we must always agree, but it does require tolerance and courteous communication.' NFU also defines what is and what is not disruptive:

> 1. Rude or disrespectful behavior.

2. Unwarranted interruptions.
3. Failure to adhere to instructor's directions.
4. Vulgar of obscene language, slurs or other forms of intimidation.
5. Physically or verbally abusive behavior.

The net effect of this policy is to cast many different types of interactions as disruptive *but only if labeled as such by the institution*.

Institutional citizens as free speakers

While many of the policies at NFU emphasize civility and tolerance in interpersonal exchanges, these same policies also construct the institutional citizen as someone who can speak freely. This discursive construction also emphasizes that certain types of expression—particularly those that do not threaten others' right to free speech—are officially sanctioned by the institution. This discourse also inadvertently provides protection for hate speech, due to the discursive emphasis on tone rather than content.

The free speech discourse exists close to, though in tension with, assertions of the value of diverse backgrounds and importance of tolerance. Both the Intolerance Policy and the Resolution in Support of Pluralism emphasized these values but then invoked the importance of free speech. The Intolerance Policy states that

> …we also recognize the obligation of the University to protect the rights of free inquiry and expression, and nothing in the Resolution in Support of Pluralism or Policy Against Intolerance shall be construed or applied as to abridge the exercise of rights under the Constitution of the United States and other Federal and State laws.

Even in documents meant to build the foundations of an inclusive environment, free speech concerns take precedent over both civility and any more radical expressions of respect and inclusion for historically marginalized groups.

The Guidelines for Classroom Civility & Respect show this same tension between dictating appropriate behavior, supporting inclusion, and respecting freedom of expression. Here, however, free speech is subordinated to the maintenance of an undisturbed classroom environment:

> While the principle of academic freedom protects the expression and exploration of new ideas, it does not protect conduct that is unlawful and

> disruptive…Disruptions of any kind affect the atmosphere of civility that is expected and interfere with the opportunity for learning and growth to which both faculty and students are entitled.

The assumption within this statement is that respect and civility are sufficient conditions for learning, even though respect and civility may protect hate speech just as often as they may protect from intolerance. These three documents work together to not only defend free speech but also constrain the expression of people from majoritarian backgrounds, as well as those from historically marginalized backgrounds.

The way 'disruptions' have been discursively constructed characterizes both instances in which an individual can disrespect or discriminate against people from historically marginalized backgrounds and those in which the same people can mount a defense *against* disrespect or discrimination. The guidelines state specifically that 'differences of opinions or concerns related to the class should be welcomed if presented in a mutually respectful manner.' Policies like these can protect speech that is prejudiced or discriminatory if it is expressed in an appropriate way. This tension is especially problematic considering the possibility that the targets of hate speech may respond in inflammatory, defensive, or otherwise disruptive manners. This discourse can thus displace the problem onto those being discriminated against, rather than on actual discriminatory or hateful speech and its speaker(s).

Institutions, discourse, and policy: Remaking individuals and identities

The analysis above is drawn from the policies of a single public research institution in the northeast United States. That specific environment works in concert with policies to construct specific institutional citizens; however, these constructions are likely familiar to academic citizens at other colleges and universities due to the nature of institutions. Institutions are typically conceived as social constructions that persist across time, survive through both adaptation and isomorphism, and subject their inhabitants to subconscious replication, restriction, and enactment of rule-like behaviors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). These patterns of behavior thus constitute the institutions themselves. Such is the process of institutionalization, wherein mere organizations transcend the banal state of managerial hierarchies and goal-setting to become something much more enduring. Yet for this process to continue, as the analysis of NFU's tolerant, speech-respecting citizens shows,

institutions must successfully create institutional citizens—finding and molding the people enmeshed within the institution into particular kinds of people who do particular kinds of things (Gee, 2001).

Institutional theorists have posited that the creation of institutional citizens is core to the process of institutionalization. Barley and Tolbert (1997), for instance, argued that patterns of interaction and social behaviors are simultaneously constrained by and constitutive of institutions over time. In short, individuals act together in institutionally legitimated ways and continue to co-create the institution itself, even if they dissent from time to time. However, the path from institution to action through the individual can be somewhat nebulous—the individual's internal processes of interpretation are absent from frameworks such as Barley and Tolbert's (1997). Our analysis shows that part of the creation of institutional citizens occurs through policy texts; to understand why requires an exploration of discourse (Foucault, 1976/1990, 1982; Gee, 2001).

Foucault (1975/1995, 1976/1990) argued that subjectivity is constituted through discourse; in other words, power and knowledge work through and in the body and its social locations to construct ways of knowing oneself and being known. Similarly, Gee (2001) discussed the notion of identity as a function of discourse: 'tied to the workings of historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces' (p. 100). Power works at multiple levels and in multiple directions to create subjectivities; in the institutional context, those subjectivities include the markers of an ideal or preferred institutional citizen (as well as its foil, the 'bad' institutional citizen). Higher education institutions such as NFU work through 'laws, rules, traditions, or principles of various sorts' (Gee, 2001, p. 102). There is a reciprocal relationship between institutional and discursive identities: while individuals can create and sustain discursive identities without the sanctioning authority of the institution, institutional identities rely, in part, on the discursive community created within the bounds of the institution itself (Foucault, 1975/1995). Discourse makes certain ways of identifying possible, an important first step when new inhabitants of an institution begin to understand the various logics of appropriateness within their surroundings (Gee, 2001).

One of the ways that identities get created is through texts, which refer to any accessible and material form of symbolic expression (Allan, 2008), as they communicate the requisite norms and expectations that precede legitimate action. While we focused on policy texts, there are multiple other avenues that institutions use in constructing institutional citizens. Additionally, these messages are not passively received; rather, texts are discussed, debated, and distributed further. New texts emerge, supporting or dissenting, as the context of time and space shifts. Thus,

institutional insiders are often navigating multiple, potentially conflicting potentialities as citizens—in other words, there may be many different ways to be an institutional citizen and these may also be dependent on institutional micro-climates. Furthermore, other constructions of institutional citizenship emerge in policy texts in opposition to the positive constructions described above: the uncivil citizen, the intolerant citizen, and the citizen who seeks to constrain free speech. Discourse and the processes of institutionalization happen to everyone within the institution, regardless of whether their identity is sanctioned or preferred by the institution or not.

In this paper, we focused narrowly on the constructions of institutional citizenship, but note that these constructions may be more articulations of norms and values, as they do not show the full construction process. However, institutional policy and its discursive constructions are important to critically analyze as policy is a vehicle through which change is often called for, initiated, or at least given lip service (Ahmed, 2012). In addition to being potential solutions, policy texts provide the vocabulary—what one can and cannot say on a given topic—for how complex ideas get expressed in official communications. In other words, policy provides structure for how issues are discussed and solutions are developed, at least on official levels. Policy also changes often as a response to or in opposition to activism and attempts to reform higher education (Wheatle & Commodore, 2019). Thus, even as policy is a reified form of text, it also shows how change is institutionalized and often co-opted by institutions (Ferguson, 2012). Ultimately, these discursive texts construct various ways of being institutional citizens and deploy them through the discursive fabric of an institution.

Conclusion

Policies and practices contribute to the construction of institutional discourses—ways of being and doing within unique institutional contexts that are often taken for granted (Allan, 2008; Gee, 2001). Due to institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), many institutions have similar policies and practices, but different contexts do produce different institutional discourses. In turn, institutional discourses inform the construction of different forms of institutional citizenship, or subjectivities that students, faculty, and staff can occupy as members of the institution. However, there is not a single form of institutional citizenship; rather, there are multiple, potentially competing citizenships that individuals inhabit within institutional discourse. As this brief analysis shows, policy documents at one

university constructed different versions of 'good' institutional citizenship that vary depending on who is speaking.

NFU's policy texts construct its ideal(ized) institutional citizens as predominantly civil, tolerant, and respectful of others' (and their own) free speech. However, the power to decide what is civil, tolerant, and respectful ultimately lies with the institution, as well as what is considered disruptive. We contend that there are different standards for citizenship at NFU, which vary according to social identities and background. In other words, different people must behave differently to be considered institutional citizens. The focus on tone, in particular, creates forms of institutional citizenship that emphasize demeanor rather than content, thus potentially allowing discriminatory or prejudicial speech to flourish, while defensive speech may be targeted for discipline. As scholars such as Ferguson (2012, 2017), Ahmed (2012), and Wheatle and Commodore (2019) have shown, institutional citizens—particularly students, passionate about equity and justice—may not express themselves in institutionally sanctioned ways. When they stray from the institutionally constructed path, they put themselves outside the pale—essentially negating their own status as institutional citizens and potentially damaging their own quests for equitable change and educational justice. Therefore, we conclude that discourses constructing institutional citizenship are conservative at their core—not in the political sense, but rather that they function to preserve the institution's inequitable status quo.

Author biographies

Rachel E. Friedensen is an Associate Professor of higher education administration at St. Cloud State University. Her research explores multiple facets of equity issues in U.S. higher education, including the experiences of disabled students, LGBTQIA+ students, students of color in STEM fields, mentoring and advising practices in doctoral education, and discursive constructions of diversity in higher education policy texts. She received her Ph.D. in educational leadership & policy studies from University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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