

Politics in Academia: How the Diffusion of Innovation Relates to Professional Capital

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Abstract : The purpose of this study is to extend discussions about innovations and career politics. Research questions that grounded this effort were: How does an academic learn the unspoken rules of the academy? What happens politically to an academic's career when their research speaks against the grain of society? Do professors perceive signals that it is time to move on to another institution or even to another career? Epistemology and Methods: This qualitative investigation was focused on examining perceptions of academics. Therefore an open-ended field study, based on Grounded Theory, was used. This naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba,1985) was selected because it tends to understand information in terms of whole, of patterns, and in relations to the context of the environment. The technique for gathering data was the process of semi-structured, in-depth interviewing. Twenty five academics across the United States were interviewed relative to their career trajectories and the politics and opportunities they have encountered in relation to their research efforts. Findings: The analysis of interviews revealed four themes: Academics are beholden to 2 specific networks of power that influence their sense of job security; the local network based on their employing university and the national network of scholars who share the same field of research. The fights over what counts as research can and does drift from the intellectual to the political, and personal. Academic were able to identify specific instances of shunning and or punishment from their colleagues related directly to the dissemination of research that spoke against the grain of the local or national networks. Academics identified specific signals from both of these networks indicating that their career was flourishing or withering. Implications: This research examined insights from those who persevered when the fights over what and who counts drifted from the intellectual to the political, and the personal. Considerations of why such drifts happen were offered in the form of a socio-political construct called Fit, which included thoughts on hegemony, discourse, and identity. This effort reveals the importance of understanding what professional capital is relative to job security. It also reveals that fear is an enmeshed and often unspoken part of the culture of Academia. Further research to triangulate these findings would be helpful within international contexts.

Keywords : politics, academia, job security, context

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