

# Logic of University Resilient Governance and Risk Deconstruction Strategies from the Perspective of Field Theory

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of a global risk society, universities stand as core fields of knowledge production and social reproduction, confronted with unprecedented governance challenges. Intertwined multiple risks, including frequent policy adjustments, fiscal austerity, technological iteration, rising public expectations, and sudden public emergencies, expose the systemic vulnerability of traditional university governance models centered on stability and efficiency. As an analytical framework highlighting organizations' capacity to maintain functions, adapt to changes and realize transformation amid disturbances, resilient governance has become a vital orientation for the modernization of university governance. This paper introduces Bourdieu's Field Theory, regards universities as structured spaces interwoven by academic, administrative, market and political subfields, and constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of "Field – Capital – Habitus" to systematically interpret the internal logic and risk deconstruction strategies of university governance. The study finds that university governance resilience is not a linear outcome brought by external institutional input, but a dynamic product of power games, capital conversion and habitus adaptation within fields. The degree of autonomy and capital exchange mechanisms of different subfields determine universities' structural plasticity, resource redundancy and cognitive flexibility under risky circumstances. Through the generation and reproduction of institutional habitus, universities can build elastic buffers between institutional pressure and academic freedom to achieve self-maintenance and self-transcendence of institutional resilience. This research offers a new theoretical lens for understanding university governance in complex environments, and provides strategic references for the construction of China's Double First-Class Initiative and the modernization of higher education governance systems.

**Keywords:** Field theory; University governance; Risk deconstruction; Institutional resilience; Capital conversion

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the global higher education system has entered a period of profound transformation. Universities are no longer merely ivory towers for knowledge transmission and scientific research innovation, but key nodes embedded within national governance systems and global competition landscapes. On the

policy front, intensive institutional tools such as performance-oriented management, project-based governance, discipline evaluation and inspection supervision have been rolled out, pushing university governance toward refinement, data-driven operation and accountability. From a social perspective, public expectations for universities have expanded from talent cultivation to multiple functions including social service, cultural inheritance and international competition. Technologically, the rise of artificial intelligence, big data and platform economies has reshaped the logic of knowledge production and educational forms. Environmentally, systemic risks such as fiscal contraction and climate crises frequently disrupt university operations.

Against this backdrop, traditional university governance models centered on “stability-control” exhibit prominent vulnerabilities: first, excessive institutional rigidity lacks adaptive adjustment mechanisms for unexpected incidents; second, administrative logic dominates while academic logic is marginalized, dampening innovative motivation among faculty and departments at the grassroots level; third, risk response adopts an emergency-response mode without forward-looking prediction and systematic reconstruction capacity. Resilience, as a framework emphasizing organizations’ ability to sustain core functions, adapt to environmental shifts and realize structural transformation amid disruptions, has gradually been introduced into the field of educational governance <sup>[1]</sup>. Nevertheless, existing research mostly treats resilience as an abstract organizational quality, ignoring its essence deeply embedded within specific social structures and power relations, and lacks theoretical elaboration on the generative mechanism of university governance resilience <sup>[2]</sup>.

Bourdieu’s Field Theory serves as a powerful analytical tool to address the above predicaments. A field refers to a network of objective relations among positions, stressing the spatial and relational nature of social actions and uncovering power logics and cognitive structures behind institutional operations. Treating universities as structured spaces composed of multiple interwoven subfields transcends the dualistic “state-university” opposition and enables in-depth analysis of how governance resilience emerges amid institutional games, resource flows and cognitive evolution <sup>[3]</sup>. This paper addresses the following core research questions <sup>[4]</sup>: How is university governance resilience generated within field structures under a risk society? What are its internal logic and operational mechanisms? How can risks be deconstructed at the field level through institutional design?

## **2. The compatibility between field theory and resilient governance**

### **2.1. Field: Spatial and relational attributes of governance**

Bourdieu holds that a field is a structured space where social actions take place, whose operation relies on specific “entry fees” and “rules of the game” <sup>[5]</sup>. A university is not a homogeneous whole, but a multi-centric structure interlaced by academic, administrative, market and political subfields. Each subfield operates with relatively independent logics: Academic field takes peer recognition as core capital, prioritizing cognitive innovation and academic freedom; Administrative field is governed by hierarchical authority, pursuing efficiency, order and regulatory compliance; Market field targets resource acquisition, emphasizing competition, performance and institutional brand; Political field centers on the production of institutional legitimacy, highlighting ideological security and alignment with national strategies <sup>[6]</sup>.

Disparities exist in the exchange rates between different fields, i.e., whether and under what circumstances one form of capital can be converted into another. For instance, administrative capital represented by policy inclination can be transformed into economic capital via project funding, further reshaping the allocation of academic resources; academic capital such as high-quality papers can be converted into symbolic capital

through ranking mechanisms, elevating a university's political standing. Field boundaries are not fixed but constantly reconstructed amid power games <sup>[7]</sup>. Risk events, including sudden policy shifts and fiscal contractions, often break original capital exchange balances and trigger restructuring within fields, creating opportunities for the generation of resilience.

## **2.2. Capital: Diverse forms and conversion mechanisms of resources**

Bourdieu categorizes capital into economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, and underscores their convertibility and reproducibility. Within university governance, capital represents not only resource possession but also a medium for exercising power. The core of resilient governance lies in the rapid restructuring and cross-field flow of capital under risky scenarios. For example, amid sudden public emergencies, administrative capital in the form of government directives can be swiftly converted into economic capital such as emergency appropriations to purchase technical capital including online teaching platforms; cultural capital reflected in teachers' digital literacy can spread through community networks to form social capital in the shape of teaching mutual-aid communities, lifting overall organizational adaptability.

Capital conversion does not occur automatically, but hinges on the openness of field structures and actors' strategic capabilities. If the administrative field is overly closed, academic capital can hardly be translated into policy discourse, leaving universities trapped in a paradox of "abundant resources without corresponding power" amid risks. Conversely, excessive autonomy of the academic field that blocks penetration by political capital may lead to governance failure marked by "power without responsiveness". Therefore, the core of university resilient governance lies in building bridging mechanisms for diverse capital to realize resource redundancy and functional substitution.

## **2.3. Habitus: Cognitive schemes and behavioral tendencies**

Habitus refers to structured yet structuring dispositions, manifested as actors' pre-reflexive responsive strategies toward external stimuli. University governance is not entirely rationally designed; instead, long-term practice precipitates institutional habitus such as inspection-oriented work culture, project-centric thinking and form-based administration. Such habitus may heighten organizations' sensitivity to risks, yet also give rise to path dependence and cognitive lock-in <sup>[8]</sup>.

Resilient governance demands the cultivation of self-reflexive habitus, enabling organizational members to retain cognitive elasticity under institutional pressure and transform external constraints into internal innovative drivers. For example, one university converted rectification checklists generated by discipline evaluation into teaching reform workshops, guiding teachers to shift from passive rectification to active reflection and forming a cognitive cycle of inquiry and co-creation around practical problems <sup>[9]</sup>. The formation of such habitus relies on intra-field cognitive embedding mechanisms, which internalize resilience as organizational second nature via institutional dialogue, ritual practice and symbolic incentives <sup>[10]</sup>.

## **3. Analytical framework: The three-dimensional coupling model of field – capital – habitus**

This paper constructs a three-dimensional coupling model of Field – Capital – Habitus to interpret the generative logic of university resilient governance. The field dimension covers the spatial distribution and power relations of governance structures; the capital dimension focuses on resource transformation and

reproducibility; the habitus dimension centers on the formation and evolution of cognitive schemas <sup>[11]</sup>. The interaction of the three dimensions generates three layers of resilience: structural plasticity, resource redundancy and cognitive flexibility, which ultimately precipitate institutional resilience — a governance state of self-preservation and self-transcendence via rule reproduction. When the three dimensions form positive coupling, universities can complete a resilience cycle of disturbance, absorption, adaptation and transformation amid risks; decoupling may lead to a downward spiral of structural rigidity, resource depletion and cognitive stagnation.

## **4. Research design: Embedded multiple-case comparative study**

To verify the above framework, this paper adopts an embedded multiple-case research design, selecting three Double First-Class universities in East China labeled Alpha, Beta, and Gamma, respectively, covering comprehensive, science & engineering, and normal university types with disciplinary heterogeneity taken into account. Data sources include:

- (1) Policy documents: emergency response plans, risk assessment reports, inspection and rectification ledgers issued by the three universities from 2018 to 2024;
- (2) Interview materials: semi-structured interviews with 96 participants including university leaders, functional department staff, college administrators and young teachers <sup>[2]</sup>;
- (3) Participant observation: on-site observation of inspection preparation, emergency drills and public opinion disposal <sup>[13]</sup>;
- (4) Secondary data: Ministry of Education discipline evaluation results, fiscal appropriation records, media coverage and social media public sentiment.

Data analysis adopts grounded theory coding and process tracing. Risk events are divided into four stages: trigger, perception, response and reconstruction, corresponding to the interactive process of fields, capital and habitus, so as to identify causal mechanisms behind resilience generation <sup>[14]</sup>.

## **5. Case analysis and mechanism interpretation**

### **5.1. University alpha: Structural restructuring amid policy shocks**

In 2020, the Ministry of Education abruptly canceled the evaluation of a key discipline, exposing relevant faculties of Alpha University to risks of imbalance between input and output. The university quickly launched an interdisciplinary integration initiative, integrating faculty of the original discipline into the newly established intelligent social governance cross-disciplinary platform. Drawing on the new liberal arts policy discourse within the political field, it secured special funding and staffing quotas <sup>[15]</sup>. This process embodies the conversion of administrative capital into academic capital and the reinterpretation of policy signals by the academic field. Structural restructuring constitutes a passive response; instead, institutional entrepreneurs within the field conduct institutional arbitrage to enhance the university's structural plasticity.

### **5.2. University beta: Capital bridging under fiscal austerity**

In 2022, local fiscal allocations were cut by 15%, freezing laboratory construction funds at Beta University. Leveraging social capital represented by alumni foundations, the university launched a cloud laboratory crowdfunding program, converting corporate sponsorship (economic capital) into virtual simulation

experimental resources (technical capital), and obtained policy feedback through applications for national first-class virtual simulation courses. This case demonstrates that bridging mechanisms for diversified capital can build functional redundancy amid resource shortages and prevent the collapse of core institutional capabilities.

### **5.3. University gamma: Habitus reconstruction during public opinion crises**

In 2021, a postgraduate dormitory relocation incident triggered a public opinion storm at Gamma University. Instead of adopting the traditional model of post-deletion and public apology, the university launched a student participatory governance pilot, inviting student representatives to co-design relocation plans and institutionalized consultation mechanisms such as the President's Lunch Meeting. Crisis response was transformed into habitus renewal, shifting administrators' mindset from control to co-governance and lifting organizational cognitive flexibility. Follow-up surveys revealed rising student trust in the university, generating resilience dividends.

## **6. Fieldization of risk: A new risk governance paradigm**

Traditional risk governance adopts a linear logic of prediction-control-elimination, regarding risks as external objective threats. This paper puts forward the concept of risk fieldization, arguing that risks are social constructs whose perception, definition and response are deeply shaped by field structures, capital distribution and habitus tendencies. For instance, the risk of discipline evaluation is framed as a ranking decline within the administrative field, yet interpreted as evaluative hegemony in the academic field; the same risk triggers distinct emotional reactions and strategic choices across different subfields.

Accordingly, this paper proposes a three-dimensional risk deconstruction strategy centered on field perception, capital restructuring and habitus reconstruction: Field perception: Institutional dialogue mechanisms such as policy interpretation salons shall be established to promote joint risk definition across subfields and avoid fragmented risk cognition; Capital restructuring: Resilience funds and cross-field platforms shall be set up to provide institutional channels for capital conversion and boost resource redundancy; Habitus reconstruction: Risk response shall be incorporated into teacher development and cadre assessment systems to shift emergency-driven habitus toward self-reflexive habitus.

Based on Field Theory, this paper systematically elaborates the generative logic and risk deconstruction strategies of university resilient governance. University governance resilience is not a linear outcome imported via external institutions, but a dynamic product of intra-field power games, capital conversion and habitus adaptation. The autonomy of each subfield and capital exchange rates determine universities' structural plasticity, resource redundancy and cognitive flexibility amid risks.

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