

# The Logical Motivation and Practical Path of Faculty-System Reform in Chinese Universities: A Perspective Based on Organizational Change Theory

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**Abstract:** As the trend of interdisciplinary integration intensifies, the traditional two-tier management model at the school and college levels has exposed its limitations, making faculty-system reform a crucial issue. Based on the analysis of organizational change theory, the logical drivers behind the faculty-system reform in Chinese universities encompass the internal needs for university internal management and disciplinary integration development, as well as external impetus from national policy guidance and socio-economic development. However, the reform is still in the exploratory stage and faces challenges in practice, such as resistance from traditional mindsets, imperfect functional positioning, and operational mechanisms. The faculty-system reform in Chinese universities can draw on the three-stage model of organizational change—unfreezing, changing, and refreezing—to explore its practical pathways. This involves unfreezing traditional mindsets, implementing structural and mechanistic changes, and then refreezing with supporting policies and systems, thereby optimizing internal management structures, fostering interdisciplinary integration, and enhancing universities' academic level and innovation capacity.

**Keywords:** Universities; Faculty-system reform; Organizational change theory; Motivation; Path

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## 1. Problem statement

Colleges and universities are important bases for knowledge innovation and personnel training, and their internal governance structure is directly related to their academic competitiveness and sustainable development ability. Although the traditional two-level management mode of colleges and universities has adapted to the development needs of higher education to a certain extent, it has gradually exposed many limitations due to the increasingly obvious trend of interdisciplinary integration. The contradictions between the establishment of colleges and the construction of disciplines, the institutional obstacles of interdisciplinary integration, the

dispersion of educational resources and other problems have become increasingly prominent, urgently needing reform. The reform of the department system is the key link to deepening educational reform, perfecting the internal governance system and establishing the modern university system. The reform of the departmental system is one of the beneficial explorations to strengthen the construction of interdisciplinary integration and provides an important way to perfect the internal governance structure of colleges and universities and realize the modernization of the governance system and governance ability of colleges and universities. However, the reform of the department system is not smooth sailing. In the process of reform, universities are faced with many challenges and difficulties. The exploration of the problems in the reform process and in-depth study can provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the reform of the academic division system in Chinese universities.

## **2. The theoretical basis and logical motivation for the reform of the academic division system in Chinese universities**

### **2.1. Organizational change theory and departmental system**

The theory of organizational change originated in the 1940s and was first proposed by Kurt Lewin, an American social psychologist. He emphasized that when an organization ADAPTS to environmental changes, it must adjust and innovate its management philosophy, working style, organizational structure, staffing, organizational culture, technology, and other elements. As an important concept in management, organizational change pays more attention to the process of how an organization adjusts, improves, and innovates elements in the organization according to the changes of the internal and external environment <sup>[1]</sup>. In Field Theory in the Social Sciences, Lewin <sup>[2]</sup> also proposed a three-stage model of organizational change, including thawing, transforming, and refreezing. Among them, the thawing stage aims to break the existing organizational model, the change stage refers to changing the existing model through the adjustment of organization, technology, personnel, and other aspects, and the refreezing stage to consolidate the results of change and strengthen the new organizational state through a series of measures.

The division system classifies and merges faculties according to subject categories or subject groups and adds a level of academic organization or administrative management structure between the two levels of internal school and department <sup>[3]</sup>. As a first-level academic management organization between colleges and universities, the department can coordinate related teaching and research units to carry out discipline construction, integrate discipline resources, and form comprehensive disciplinary advantages. With the rapid development of higher education and the cross-integration of disciplines, colleges, and universities need to adjust their organizational structure to adapt to the new academic environment. The reform of the department system is to cope with the change in the external environment and to improve the overall academic level and competitiveness of colleges and universities by integrating subject resources. At the same time, some factors need to be changed in universities, such as the redundancy of subject Settings and the dispersion of teaching and research resources. The reform of the department system can effectively improve the efficiency of teaching and research by recombining and optimizing the discipline structure. Therefore, departmental reform can be regarded as a specific application of organizational change theory in the field of higher education.

### **2.2. The logical motivation for the reform of the academic division system**

The reform of the department system in Chinese universities is a complex and far-reaching process, which is rooted in the historical context of the development of higher education, influenced by the educational

environment at home and abroad, and constantly evolving along with the changes in the social demand for talents. Therefore, according to the dual logic thinking of organizational change theory from the inside to the outside, the logical motivation for the reform of the department system in Chinese colleges and universities can be summarized as the following two aspects: one is the internal demand of the integration and development of internal management and disciplines in colleges and universities; the other is the external promotion of national policy guidance and social and economic development.

### **2.2.1. The internal demand for the integrated development of internal management and disciplines**

First, the essence of the reform of the department system in colleges and universities is to reconstruct the administrative power and academic power, promote the benign operation of the department system and ensure the healthy development of the university system. With the expansion of the scale of higher education and the increase of subject categories, the internal management of colleges and universities is facing unprecedented challenges. The traditional college management mode has many shortcomings in resource allocation, discipline coordination, scientific research cooperation, and so on. By building a more flexible and efficient discipline organization system, the faculty system reform can optimize the allocation of discipline resources, enhance the autonomy and vitality of grass-roots academic organizations, and stimulate the enthusiasm and innovation potential of teachers<sup>[4]</sup>.

Second, in the second half of the 20th century, the horizontal connection of academic research has brought about the trend of integration of disciplinary development. Promoting interdisciplinary integration is not only an important way to produce innovative results but also an important way to enhance the ability of scientific research and innovation in universities. The reform of the department system is committed to breaking disciplinary boundaries, promoting the integration and development of different disciplines, and providing new ideas and methods for interdisciplinary research.

### **2.2.2. National policy guidance and external promotion of social and economic development**

First, the orientation of the national macro-political system reform provides development and innovation space for universities to explore the reform of the academic system. At the same time, the government actively promotes the establishment of large departments and flat management, which also provides a good opportunity and reference experience for colleges and universities to implement the reform of the department system<sup>[5]</sup>. With the promulgation of policies such as “double first-class” construction and “innovation-driven development strategy,” the state has put forward higher requirements for the improvement of the quality of higher education, interdisciplinary integration and scientific research and innovation ability. Among them, the reform of the department system is regarded as one of the effective ways to achieve these goals. Optimizing the layout of disciplines and promoting interdisciplinary integration, it provides talent support and intellectual support for the national strategic needs.

Second, the rapid development of society and economy, especially the rise of emerging industries and the acceleration of scientific and technological innovation, poses new challenges to the talent training mode and scientific research innovation ability of higher education. The traditional talent training mode of a single discipline has made it difficult to meet the market demand for compound talent<sup>[6]</sup>. By breaking discipline barriers and promoting interdisciplinary integration, the reform of the department system makes it possible to cultivate compound talents with profound foundation, innovative thinking and interdisciplinary ability.

### **3. The dilemma and challenge of the reform of the academic division system**

The reform of the academic division system is an important exploration in the field of higher education. At present, the reform of the academic division system in Chinese universities is still in the stage of exploration, and it also faces a series of problems and challenges in the course of practice.

#### **3.1. The ideological resistance of the reform of the academic division system**

The reform of the faculty system involves the re-integration and optimization of internal human, financial, material, and other resources in universities, which will inevitably touch the “cheese” of some vested interests. The traditional habitual way of thinking and ideas have formed no small resistance in the process of reform. The primary driving force of universities comes from grassroots organizations. Due to the lack of learning and propaganda in the early stage, many grassroots people do not know much about the drawbacks of the institution setting of colleges and universities, coupled with the widespread existence of lazy thoughts such as being satisfied with the status quo, resulting in personal opinions on the reform of the department system are inconsistent <sup>[7]</sup>. Although some administrators and teachers are aware of some drawbacks of the institutional setup of colleges and universities, they are afraid that the reorganization of institutions will lead to the reduction of jobs, which will affect their interests, so they are wait-and-see or opposed to the reform. At present, most colleges and universities implement the “top-down” reform of the department system. The staff in the grassroots academic organizations have insufficient understanding of the substantive connotation of the department system, and there are misunderstandings in their ideas, which makes it difficult to carry out the department work in colleges and universities and becomes a major problem in the process of the department system reform.

#### **3.2. The function orientation and operation mechanism of the department are not perfect**

The functional orientation of the department directly determines the status and role of the department in the whole internal organization level of the university. If the established department belongs to the administrative organization, the function of the department is generally more powerful, not only has strong academic functions and academic power but also generally has large administrative functions and party and government power. While the established departments belong to academic organizations, the functions of the departments are generally relatively simple, and generally only have academic functions or little administrative power. Therefore, whether the function orientation of the department is accurate is directly related to the effect of the reform of the department system and the realization of the reform objectives <sup>[8]</sup>. At the same time, due to the imperfect operation mechanism, the functions of the department in resource integration, interdisciplinary integration, personnel training and other aspects have not been fully brought into play. It is mainly reflected in the imperfect rules and regulations of the department, and non-standard working rules and procedures. Some colleges and universities pursue formal integration too much in the reform of the department system but ignore substantive promotion.

#### **3.3. It is difficult to achieve interdisciplinary integration**

When some colleges and universities initially set up departments, they only integrated the original several departments and directly upgraded them into departments, and then separated some disciplines into colleges. As a result, each department under department still operates independently in the actual operation process, without touching the level of inter-disciplinary organizational barriers that hinder the integration of disciplines <sup>[9]</sup>. On the one hand, due to the disciplinary classification being too fine, the distribution of the organizational structure,



resulting in interdisciplinary integration is difficult to achieve. On the other hand, due to the constraints of the evaluation mechanism, teachers in the same department have a strong awareness of disciplinary boundaries and a weak drive to participate in cross-disciplinary research<sup>[10,11]</sup>. Therefore, although cross-disciplinary integration results can be produced quickly in the short term, in the long run, cross-disciplinary integration will not have enough momentum to produce greater results, and eventually it will be difficult to meet the needs of society for cross-disciplinary integration and innovation. Therefore, it is more difficult to achieve interdisciplinary integration in the actual operation of the reform of the department system.

## **4. The practice path of the reform of the academic division system**

Based on the three-stage model of organizational change, including thawing, reforming and refreezing, the practical path of China's college system reform requires systematic planning by colleges and universities. From the thawing of ideas to the practical reform of systems and mechanisms to the supporting support of policies and institutions, each stage bears a specific mission and goal.

### **4.1. Thawing: The innovation of ideas**

The reform begins with the thawing of ideas, that is, breaking the thinking set of the traditional education management system and establishing a new educational concept. The closed management model of colleges and universities in China has long been formed, which limits the effective integration of resources and academic cross-integration. Colleges and universities should carry out the reform of the department system with purpose and pertinency. They should have a full cognition of the nature of the reform, and actively reform under the guidance of goals is the basis for optimizing and perfecting the university's internal management mode<sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, the reform needs to start from the top-level design, and the implementation of the task needs to start from the ideological level, encourage the first trial and bold innovation, give the department more autonomy, and guide the teachers, students, and college administrators to fully realize the importance of the reform of the department system for improving the overall competitiveness of the university and promoting the interdisciplinary integration. In addition, through the holding of special lectures, the advanced education management concepts are widely disseminated, the enthusiasm of teachers and students for reform is aroused, and the ideological foundation for the subsequent substantive reform is laid.

### **4.2. Reform: The dual promotion of organizational structure and operational mechanism**

First, accurately define the functions of the department and improve the internal operating mechanism. As a new organizational structure within a university, the department is also a bridge between the university and the college. Its functional positioning should be clear and clear, reflecting not only the macro guidance for discipline development but also the micro-management of academic activities. On a macro level, the division committee should be set up to make overall planning for the layout of disciplines and review major scientific research projects, to ensure that the division plays a leading role in the layout of disciplines, scientific research innovation and personnel training. At the micro level, it establishes and improves the internal management mechanism to ensure scientific and democratic decision-making<sup>[13,14]</sup>. In addition, strengthen the communication and cooperation between the department and the school, establish a regular meeting system, timely exchange of disciplinary developments, coordinate to solve problems in interdisciplinary cooperation, and form a good situation of up-down linkage and left-right coordination.

Second, strengthen the academic organization at the grass-roots level and rationally optimize the allocation of resources. The grass-roots academic organization is the basic unit of the department system reform, and its vitality is directly related to the effect of the reform. First of all, strengthening the grassroots academic organization is the core of the reform. By building interdisciplinary research platforms and teams, teachers and students are encouraged to collaborate across schools and fields, breaking traditional disciplinary barriers and promoting academic innovation and knowledge integration. Grassroots academic organizations are empowered with more autonomy, such as project application, talent introduction, etc., to stimulate their internal vitality and provide solid academic support for the departmental system reform<sup>[15]</sup>.

The rational optimization of resource allocation is the guarantee of the reform. At the department level, a scientific resource allocation mechanism is established to dynamically adjust the allocation of funds, equipment, venues and other resources according to the development trend of disciplines and research needs to ensure that resources can be accurately invested in the most potential research fields and teams.

### **4.3. Refreeze: Policy guidance and institutional guarantee**

The final stage of the reform is the re-freeze, that is, after entering the deepwater zone, through policy guidance and institutional guarantees to consolidate the achievements of the reform and prevent “backsliding.” At the government level, relevant policies should be introduced to encourage and support colleges and universities to carry out the reform of the faculty system and provide necessary financial support and policy preferences. At the school level, all functional departments should first formulate corresponding systems and measures for promoting the reform of the department system. Through policy guidance, resource allocation and organizational promotion, they should give full play to the agglomeration effect of high-quality resources, meet the needs of the reform and development of the department, provide business guidance and provide precise services. Secondly, it is necessary to establish a system of logical diversification and coordination to ensure the effective operation of the department, taking into account the disciplinary logic, problem logic and unit logic models, and adhering to the academic nature of the department based on disciplines, which is conducive to the formation of an academic community. Finally, establish and improve the supervision and feedback mechanism of the reform, summarize the experience and lessons in time, constantly adjust and optimize the reform measures, ensure that the reform results are institutionalized and long-lasting, and lay a solid foundation for the long-term development of colleges and universities.

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## Disclosure statement

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