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Traditions as Institutionalized Practice: Implications for Deinstitutionalization

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Institutional theory provides a powerful lens for explaining individual and collective action. Recently, increased efforts towards understanding how institutions are created have led to a systematic development of ideas on institutional entrepreneurship and attention to processes and mechanisms of institutional construction. Despite this growing rise of interest in how institutions are created, we still know relatively little about the process of deinstitutionalization. Many questions remain concerning how institutions wax and wane or diminish in potency over time and the processes that shape the erosion and extinction of institutionalized practices.

While a few studies examine institutional decline within the framework or boundaries of studying institutional change (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002), efforts to unpack the strategies and dynamics associated with extinction are lacking. Scott defines deinstitutionalization as the 'process by which institutions weaken and disappear' (2001: 182). Important theorizing on deinstitutionalization was put forth by Oliver (1992). Oliver's framework was the first to pay explicit attention to the erosion and extinction of institutionalized practices.

The framework proposed that the dissipation or rejection of an institutionalized practice was a result of a set of political, functional, and social pressures. The dissipation or rejection then leads to deinstitutionalization, which, in turn, leads to erosion and/or extinction. For Oliver, deinstitutionalization is 'the process by which the legitimacy of an established or institutionalized organizational practice erodes or discontinues' (1992: 564).

A number of studies examine processes of decline and erosion, including erosion via replacement as in the case of classic French cuisine (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003); strategy abandonment in radio formats (Greve, 1995), ideological and political obsolescence of CEOs with finance backgrounds (Ocasio & Kim, 1999), impact of downsizing in deinstitutionalizing permanent employment practices in Japan (Ahmadjian & Robinson, 2001), and the shedding and shunning of the conglomerate form (Davis, Diekmann, & Tinsley, 1994). An interesting observation from these studies, however, is that institutionalized practices are rarely ever completely extinguished. The practice continues albeit weaker in scope (extent of diffusion) or potency. These studies also suggest that various features or elements of institutionalized

behaviors continue and serve as either a reminder of prior strategies and/or as raw material for the construction of new ones. We take these findings as a starting point for our chapter to understand the nature of traditions and how traditions erode and become extinguished. As we discuss below, we focus on traditions because, while they share commonalities with institutionalized practice, they also have some unique qualities that make them relevant for understanding deinstitutionalization.

In order to understand the process by which traditions erode, we summarize a recent illustration of a single tradition in an organizational setting and its evolution over time. We consider traditions to be institutionalized practices or collections of such practices and subsequently focus on developing implications for understanding the process of deinstitutionalization. We do this through an application and extension of Oliver's framework of deinstitutionalization in the context of examining the life history of a single tradition over time. Before presenting our case study, we want to clarify what we mean by traditions and how they erode. Towards the end of our chapter, we demonstrate how our story reveals important insights for understanding the erosion and extinction of institutionalized practices.

The tradition we examine in this chapter is Texas A&M University's 'Aggie Bonfire,' a tradition that existed for a period of 90 years. As we later explain, we chose this tradition because it is a rich tradition that underwent a process of deinstitutionalization and fits well within the context of Oliver's (1992) deinstitutionalization framework. The case of the Aggie Bonfire is especially rich in helping us to unpack the nature of organizational traditions and implications for the study of change in institutionalized practices. It has been studied by scholars in management (Beyer & Nino, 2000) as well as cultural geography (Smith, 2004) and described in rich detail by journalist Irwin Tang (2000).

The insights we gain from our understanding of the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire will also allow us to offer several contributions towards a fuller and richer understanding of deinstitutionalization. First, in order to understand the processes that contributed to the decline of tradition and institutionalized practices of Bonfire, we bring together literature from work on culture, social movements, and institutions.

Second, we are able to extend Oliver's (1992) framework in important ways by highlighting the roles played by custodians (Soares, 1997), collective memory (Hawlbachs, 1950; Zerubavel, 1997), collective identity and ritual in preserving institutionalized practices as well as distinguish between core and ancillary institutional dimensions and the role they play in the erosion of an institutionalized practice. We further suggest that this erosion leaves behind an institutional 'remnant'[1] which forms the raw material for the emergence of new institutional practices or re-emergence of old institutional practices. As long as there exist remnants, an institutionalized practice is never extinguished or completely deinstitutionalized. Finally, we suggest several directions for future work in this area with a particular focus on the strategic management of traditions.

We begin by summarizing existing views on the nature of traditions and relate these views to institutionalized practices. Following this, we briefly review Oliver's (1992) framework for deinstitutionalization and then apply this framework in the historically rich case of the Aggie Bonfire, a case that demonstrates the evolution and erosion of a single tradition over time. We then illustrate how the understanding we gain through this case study allows us to offer both an application and extension of Oliver's (1992) framework of deinstitutionalization.

THE NATURE OF TRADITIONS

Traditions are important across many contexts. Think of military and religious traditions or the tradition of Christmas and

Thanksgiving. There are scientific traditions (see Kuhn, 1962, for example) and oral traditions as well as industry orthodoxies or traditional ways of doing business. Traditions have been widely studied in sociology, anthropology, cultural geography, political science and marketing.

A brief summary of more recent work on traditions can be found in Soares (1997). For Soares, there exist several themes or views that define much of the work on the nature of traditions. Drawing on ideas by Freud and Marx, traditions are conceived as restraints or the constraining hand from the past that defines and limits current action. A second view of tradition is tradition as taken for granted or unreflective habit as found in the writings of Weber. However, Soares (1997: 10) notes that Weber's position on tradition has a tendency to equate tradition and customs. Soares views the two constructs as quite distinct in that while customs involve unreflective habit, traditions, on the other hand, possess a collective memory and a set of custodians aware of the past.

A third view is provided by Shils (1981) who has written the most extensive treatment on the subject of understanding tradition. For Shils, the study of tradition was largely ignored by mainstream sociology. Shils's view of traditions is to think of them as a source of continuity with the past or as cultural 'inheritance.' The notion is quite broad and could mean anything that is passed down or inherited to the present. For Shils, traditions incorporate a variety of beliefs, objects, memories, imagery, practices and institutions (1981: 12). Shils introduces tradition as something that has exemplars or custodians, not so much because of its prior existence but possibly also because it has a 'quality of pastness' that appeals to current practitioners (1981: 13). Therefore, in order for traditions to be successfully transmitted and repeated, it is likely necessary that they also need to be authentic or genuine (Sapir, 1949)[2] in order to be accepted or taken for granted as appropriate and legitimate. While Shils (1981) acknowledges the introduction

of variation in traditions over time, he also regards traditions as having an invariant core and as being intergenerational. He also suggests that a practice has to survive at least three generations in order for it to be considered a tradition. In Shils's view, as traditions evolve the accumulation or removal of new elements leave other aspects relatively unchanged. Take, for example, the tradition of convocation. Convocation is a tradition with multiple elements, some core and some ancillary. Convocation involves a number of elements such as having one's name called out, receiving a diploma as well as the procession, granting of an honorary doctorate, and various material and symbolic elements such as the adornment of a convocation gown and the various colors observed in convocation hoods and caps. Some of these elements take on greater or lesser meaning (potency) and evolve into core elements in a particular context based on region, profession, or past practice. However, there are also some elements widely shared or core across all convocations (scope).

Elements of a given tradition are passed down to successive generations. The invariant core of a tradition provides impetus and resources for future generations to accept and enact a tradition. The transmitted material can take the form of a combination of core and ancillary elements in the form of 'remnants' – a limited amount of raw material that can form the basis for reinventing existing traditions or constructing new ones.[3] This core or essence can take the form of a number of elements, including but not limited to a name, an identity, location, activity or imagery. A sense of identity with the past evolves and a sense of community or collective identity with the present emerges (Shils, 1981: 14). There are important normative implications of traditions as they provide not only continuity between the past and present but define what is deemed appropriate in the present. An irony of traditions, as studied from Shils's view, is that while traditions place limits or constraints on what can be changed or how things change, traditions

themselves are continuously evolving and changing.

Hobsbawm (1983) provides a fourth view of understanding tradition by regarding them as invented. Hobsbawm builds on the idea of continuity but provides a different rationale for the construction of traditions in that they are created by elites that construct them to assert and reify their power. Hobsbawm also examines the process of how traditions are 'invented' as well as how they change. Innovations and redesign of traditions come about as a result of a change in practices fueled by the interests of those in power. For Hobsbawm, traditions are an invariant, repetitive set of symbolic activities rooted in the past:

> a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (Hobsbawm, 1984: 1)

Soares raises an important critique regarding Hobsbawm's work, in that his definition makes it difficult to distinguish the notion of tradition from ritual. According to Soares, Hobsbawm's contribution was to allow for a clearer delineation between traditions and customs in that traditions are more stable structures, whereas customs evolve to fulfill more pragmatic needs (Soares, 1997: 11).

Soares (1997) builds on this earlier work and provides a valuable extension for understanding the nature of tradition more broadly. Soares provides the following definition:

> a living social tradition requires a distinct social group with a common identity derived from an interpretation of its past, whose collective memories have some objective expression in the material environment, and whose activities are guided by a spirit of continuity. (1997: 16)

Especially relevant for our discussion is that both Shils (1981) and Soares (1997) give explicit attention to the role of custodians in preserving and enhancing traditions.[4] Custodians are exemplars or practitioners of a given tradition linked by collective memories. Custodians value their inheritance and 'feel a sense of custodianship for the tradition's present and future prospects' (Soares, 1997: 14). Soares views traditions as 'a resource warehouse for the living' (1997: 15) and is the most dynamic approach to understanding the nature of traditions. In his view, the past provides values and solutions that can be mobilized to deal with today's problems.

TRADITIONS AS INSTITUTIONALIZED PRACTICES

We conceive of traditions as a construct residing at the intersection of institutional theory, as well as scholarly work on culture and social movements, in that they draw upon values, the normative implications and mobilization of such values and value-laden structures, and are oftentimes much more stable and enduring than customs or conventions. In this chapter, our focus is more on, as Soares put it, 'living social' traditions and traditions that are organizational in nature.

It is relatively easy from a review of the more extensive treatments of tradition in the literature (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1984; Shils, 1981) to identify a number of characteristics that define organizational traditions. They are infused with value and meaning and are oftentimes associated with myths or narratives about their creation or continued existence. They are repositories of collective memories and identities, building social cohesion via symbols and/or ritual as well as shared experiences or imagined communities (Andersen, 1991). They involve resource mobilization and utilization and are protected and enhanced by custodians. Traditions imply continuity and thus are quite stable, enduring, and repetitive. Traditions can be broad or narrow in scope (global versus more local or regional traditions) in terms of their diffusion and consumption, as well as vary in potency over

time and place. Finally, traditions also have a temporal dimension (Zerubavel, 1997).

Given this broad range of dimensions, characteristics and components, we believe it is useful to think of traditions and consider their evolution in three important ways. First, we regard traditions as institutionalized organizational behaviors or practices. According to Oliver (1992), 'institutionalized organizational behaviors' are 'stable, repetitive and enduring activities' … 'infused with value,' repetitive and resistant to change.[5] However, we relax the assumption that institutionalized practices are 'taken-for-granted' as this makes traditions more akin to customs or conventions. Given our earlier summary of work on traditions, we concur that traditions are much more than unreflective habit and in fact are created and managed by mindful custodians.

Second, we agree that traditions change frequently in that they adapt to suit the needs of 'the living' or the needs of the present (Hobsbawm, 1984; Shils, 1981; Soares, 1997). Consequently, we also relax the assumption that institutionalized practices are highly resistant to change. We address the issue of institutional stability and endurance by distinguishing between core and ancillary elements of traditions. At the field level, DiMaggio (1988) notes the presence of core and subsidiary institutions. Following Shils (1981), we think of traditions as *collections* and/or *containers* of core and ancillary micro-institutions and cultural elements that may include symbols, material objects, myths, custodians, rituals, temporal qualities as well as collective identities and memories.

By making the distinction between core and ancillary elements we are able to theorize about core and enduring qualities of traditions versus those that are more malleable yet in some ways relatively ancillary. This distinction allows us to consider both erosion and persistence of institutionalized practices as well as consider changes in scope and potency of institutionalized practices over time. For us, the core elements of traditions

consist of an interconnected pattern of meanings, custodians, collective memories, and some but not all ritualized activities.

In this chapter we are interested in expanding our understanding of how institutionalized practices erode and extinguish. We believe that understanding the evolution of traditions will further our understanding of institutional change and deinstitutionalization. We next examine how traditions become extinguished.

ENHANCING, ERODING AND EXTINGUISHING TRADITIONS: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In this chapter we pay special attention to processes associated with change and its outcome on the evolution of traditions as institutionalized practices. We contend that adaptation or change in institutionalized practices may result in either erosion *or* enhancement. As we demonstrate in our case study below, the tradition of the Aggie Bonfire changed frequently but those changes served many purposes, including both the erosion and enhancement of its potency over time.

One theoretical starting point for examining outcomes that result from changes in traditions is deinstitutionalization, or 'the process by which institutions weaken and disappear' (Scott, 2001: 1982). Oliver (1992) applied deinstitutionalization to specific activities or practices that appear institutionalized in organizations. Her framework for the deinstitutionalization of institutionalized practices suggests that dissipation or rejection of institutionalized practices is driven by political, functional, and/or social pressures that lead to deinstitutionalization (Figure 12.1). If these pressures lead to a gradual deterioration in the acceptance and use of an institutionalized practice, Oliver terms this process to be dissipation. The decline in freemasonry or volunteerism would be an example of dissipation of an institutionalized practice (Putnam, 2000).
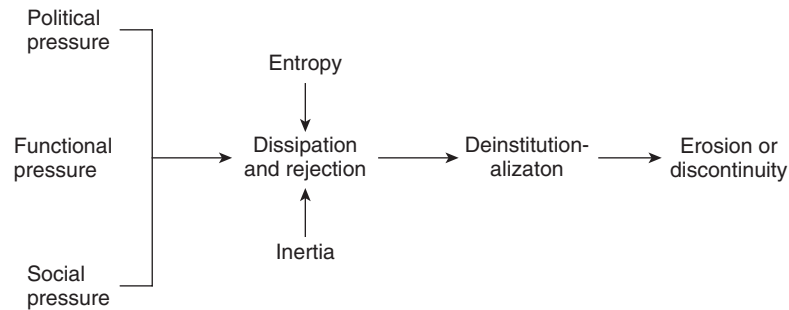
Figure 12.1   A deinstitutionalization framework – Oliver (1992)

Both entropy pressures and inertial pressures moderate the rate of dissipation. Entropy consists of pressures that accelerate the process of deinstitutionalization while inertia consists of pressures that impede it. On the other hand, if the validity of the institutionalized practice is directly challenged we could have rejection rather than dissipation of the practice. As a result of dissipation or rejection the practice could become deinstitutionalized, which then leads to its erosion or discontinuity.

With respect to the three antecedents, Oliver (1992) suggests that political pressures occur as a result of the utility or legitimacy of the practice being called into question. This tends to occur under conditions of mounting performance crises, the growth in the criticality or representation of organizational members whose interest or beliefs conflict with the status quo, increased pressures on the organization to adopt innovative practices, and/or the reduction in the dependence on the institutional constituents that have encouraged or enforced continuing procedural conformity with their expectations.

The second antecedent, functional pressure, exists when changes to the perceived utility or technical instrumentality of a practice occur, or when there is redistribution in organizational power. Oliver (1992) identifies this antecedent as having an effect under a variety of conditions, including when institutional constituents in the environment withdraw the rewards associated with sustaining an institutionalized organizational activity, when social and economic criteria of organizational success begin to conflict significantly with one another, and/or when the organization experiences an increase in its technical specificity or goal clarity.

The third antecedent, social pressures, represents a condition under which an organization is neither a proactive agent of deinstitutionalization nor centrally intent on abandoning or rejecting particular institutional traditions. According to Oliver (1992), social pressures include increasing normative fragmentation within an organization as a byproduct of other organizational changes, disruptions to the organization's historical continuity, changes in state laws for societal expectations that prohibit or discourage the perpetuation of an institutional practice, and/or lower structural changes to the organization or the environment within which the organization resides that disaggregate collective norms and values.

In addition to the work in the deinstitutionalization literature, the literature on traditions provides additional insights into various responses to these pressures that may occur. For example, as Oliver (1992) notes, institutional practices can *cease to have value* or *utility* for either their custodians or practitioners, as a result of political, functional or social pressures. When this occurs in the context of a tradition, Shils (1981) suggests that

custodians and practitioners may react by loosening their acceptance of or adherence to the tradition.

> Traditions can deteriorate in the sense of losing their adherents because their possessors cease to present them or because those who once received and reenacted and extended them now prefer other lines of conduct or because new generations to which they were presented find other traditions of belief or some relatively new beliefs more acceptable. (1981: 15)

The literature on traditions suggests that a second type of response to political, functional and social pressures may be one of *overcorrection* as custodians and practitioners attempt to reframe or revise elements that have become problematic or inconsistent over time (Shils, 1981). Changes in traditions, however, could also lead to increasing complexity, making transmission of the tradition increasingly difficult and imperfect. Another type of reaction to changes in regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions of the tradition is one of significant *decoupling* between the symbol and substance and/or performance of traditions. In the context of strategic responses to institutional pressure, Oliver (1991) describes this response as avoidance. Finally, reactions to these pressures may also lead to the emergence of countervailing social movements to *mobilize* resources and momentum either against or for the tradition. An interesting and more recent example of this would be efforts mobilizing worldwide support and advocacy for the promotion of slow food (Rao & Giorgi, 2006) or the decline of fois gras (DeSoucey, 2006). The popular press in Marketing is rife with attention on the rise of 'counter-culture' movements against tradition. Integrating the tradition's literature into our understanding of the enhancement, erosion and extinction of institutionalized practices allows us to extend Oliver's (1992) framework to include some additional insight as to the various responses that may occur as a result of political, functional and social pressures. We also believe that insights on traditions help us to unpack the

process of dissipation. In particular, there exist several mechanisms through which dissipation can occur. These mechanisms include assimilation, dilution, disembedding, competition and erasure.

Assimilation involves being absorbed into a new tradition. Shils (1981) describes how Roman religion ceases to exist yet some of its elements have been synthesized or incorporated into modern Christianity (p. 25). *Dilution* involves adding or importing new elements into a given tradition or expansion of the core elements till it is difficult, complex, or involves changes in value for custodians or practitioners (declining for some while increasing for others) of the tradition. Cherlin (2004) describes the weakening of social norms defining the idea and practice of marriage. Recent debates over the definition of marriage in North America point to the potential dilution of the meaning of the practice but also shed light on the changing value of this practice for various custodians or practitioners of the tradition.

Disembedding involves disconnecting or dismantling core elements from each other insomuch as there is no longer a definable or 'interconnected' pattern of tradition or institutionalized practice (Jepperson, 1991). *Competition* involves the presence of other traditions that vie for the attention and support of key constituents. These competing alternatives present conflicting claims and are referred to by Shils (1981) as 'alien' in nature. The potential for institutional collisions as a result of competing traditions is exacerbated when the potency of custodianship is weak, collective memory is scarce, and multiple identities prevent solidarity of practice. *Erasure*, while rare, involves removal or replacement of core elements such as core rituals or collective memories. Examples would include attempts by media or historians to revise history.

By integrating several approaches and theories about institutionalized practices and traditions, we are able to extend Oliver's (1992) framework in several ways. This allows us to clarify different responses to the

various antecedent pressures for deinstitutionalization. From a strategic perspective, doing this also provides some insights for examining how these different responses, in turn, affect dissipation or rejection. Our extension also allows us to unpack the notion of dissipation, thus providing some insight as to the various underlying mechanisms through which dissipation of traditions and other institutionalized practices occur. Finally, the integration allows us to introduce the notion of an 'institutional remnant' that suggests that, even after a tradition or institutionalized practice appears to have eroded, there may be sufficient remnants of the original tradition to lead to a new tradition, or a re-invention or even re-emergence of the original tradition or institutionalized practice.

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY

Texas A&M University is a public institution founded in 1876 in College Station, Texas. In the early days, the University had an undefined mission and was 'all-male and all-military' (Jacobs, 2002: 13). It wasn't until after 1891 that the University President declared military training as part of its central mission (Jacobs, 2002). The students, known as Aggies, are known for their spirit and camaraderie.

It is currently one of the largest academic institutions in the United States with a current enrollment of over 46,000 students and an endowment valued at over 4 billion US dollars (www.tamu.edu). As a consequence of early state politics and fights over funding and mandate (Jacobs, 2002; Smith, 2004; Tang, 2000), the University developed a culture that distrusted outsiders. Due to state politics and football, Texas A&M has developed a fierce rivalry with the University of Texas at Austin over time. While the University of Texas at Austin had a broader mandate that included a broad, arts- and science-based curriculum, Texas A&M, in contrast, had an agricultural and a mechanical engineering focus.

Traditions play a central role at the University. In fact, Tang (2000: 7) notes that 'Traditions, and the value of Tradition, dictate Texas A&M culture.'[6] The University has several traditions based around remembrance, symbols, team spirit, and building community, Corps of Cadets, and various class councils (http://aggietraditions.tamu.edu/). Some of these traditions are relatively more recent while others have been in existence for over 100 years. For example, Big Event, a large student service project, was started in 1982 while Muster, a remembrance to those who have passed, began in 1883.

From its inception, Texas A&M sought to establish itself as a distinctive institution by priding itself that it offered its students what came to be known as the 'other' education. As a result of its military heritage or the need to establish its distinctiveness from the University of Texas at Austin, A&M prided itself on its ability to provide opportunities for its students to build character and acquire leadership skills. One of these opportunities was the Aggie Bonfire, regarded by many as the largest student organized project in the United States.

THE TRADITION OF AGGIE BONFIRE

The case of the Aggie Bonfire is especially rich in helping us to unpack the nature of organizational traditions and implications for the study of change in institutionalized practices. The evolution of the Bonfire tradition is a story occurring over a period of 90 years from its emergence in 1909 to its significant deinstitutionalization in 2002. Our historical description and analyses are based on an extensive review of public documents and archival news sources[7]. We synthesized historical data and key insights into an extensive set of notes, timelines and tables in order to make sense of and validate the information collected.

Many university campuses light bonfires but the Aggie Bonfire is distinctive because it was the largest and most complex student-run project in the United States (Tang, 2000). It is said that the construction of the Bonfire structure involves more than 125,000 hours of student time with about 70,000 individuals turning out to observe the final ritual of Burn (Jacobs, 2002).

Bonfire can be regarded as a ritualized tradition (Smith, 2004) consisting of myth and meaning systems, custodians, central and peripheral rituals, as well as collective memories shared among custodians and key constituents. At Texas A&M University, a tradition of Bonfire is inextricably linked to football. The Aggie Bonfire grew to be more than a mere fire. Of all the traditions at Texas A&M University, the Bonfire was regarded as the most central and important (Tang, 2000). Bonfire's purpose was to maintain and instill loyalty as well as provide a symbol representative of the rivalry with the University of Texas at Austin. Bonfire was regarded as being representative of the 'Aggie Spirit' and for the first 50 or so years went largely unquestioned.

Bonfire fulfilled numerous needs of the student body. It allowed students to forge friendships, vent aggression, and demonstrate courage. In other words, it provided a good training ground for the other education that A&M deemed shaped its unique character. While numbers vary, it is estimated that more than 6000–8000 trees are cut each year to build Bonfire (Jacobs, 2002). Thousands of spectators (students, former students and members of the local community) turn out to watch the fire burn. There was no written construction plan or blueprint nor was there any professional supervision. There was, however, an elaborate, hierarchical organization that guided the practice of the Bonfire tradition each year. This structure was largely patriarchal (consisting of men in leadership roles) and intergenerational. At the top of the Bonfire hierarchy were a group of senior students known as Red Pots. These Red Pots would pass along knowledge to other members of the Bonfire hierarchy. A freshman entering the university would grab the attention of someone more senior in the Bonfire organization by doing something risky or brazen during the rituals associated with Cut or Stack. Once noticed, this student would be selected to take on increasing responsibility in future years.

Over the years, three rituals had become central to Bonfire – Cut, Stack, and Burn. Each of these rituals contained its own set of activities, thus each served as a meta-ritual. Cut involved gathering the necessary logs starting in early October. The ritual known as Stack involved assembling the logs into what will become the Bonfire. Push was part of Stack and occurred for the two weeks prior to Burn. The push is to finish with students working round the clock in shifts to ensure the Bonfire is built on time. The ritual of Burn occurs on the night preceding the annual football game with the University of Texas.

As mentioned, within each of the core rituals of Cut, Stack, and Burn, there were several activities or ancillary elements associated with the tradition. For example, 'groding' involved being thrown in mud at the construction site with food and/or feces while others went unshaven or unwashed for weeks as a means of demonstrating one's loyalty or devotion to the tradition and to the Aggie spirit (Smith, 2004: 42). On the night of Burn, the Aggie Band, Yell Leaders, and Red Pots paraded around the Bonfire, in turn. The Red Pots, the last to circle Bonfire, would carry the torches that would set fire to the structure. The fire, helped along by 700 gallons of diesel fuel soaked into the logs was visible for quite a distance.

In the remainder of this case study, we break down our examination of the evolution of the Aggie Bonfire over four distinct periods. By doing so, we are able to track the evolution of this tradition on a variety of important dimensions and relate our insights directly to Oliver's (1992) framework for deinstitutionalization. We pay particular attention to the essence, custodians, rituals,

myths/stories, symbols and physical artifacts, as well as changes in place and temporality. We also provide insight into the changing nature of the organization in which the tradition was embedded by summarizing the character of the organization, its key constituents, key success factors, and strategic arenas. With respect to Oliver's framework, we will demonstrate how these dimensions relate to the antecedent pressures, entropy and inertia that comprise the framework.

Period 1: the tradition emerges (1909–1942)

According to several sources (Dethloff, 1976; Jacobs, 2002; and especially Tang, 2000) the Aggie Bonfire began in 1909 as a prank to arouse interest and excitement in an upcoming Texas A&M – University of Texas at Austin football game. The tradition arose out of humble beginnings. The first Bonfire comprised a pile of scrap wood and trash boxes gathered from all over campus, and deposited in a central gathering place. At this time, A&M was a military college, so the parade ground served as a symbolic centerpiece for events.

The participants were primarily students and events around Bonfire were primarily a pep rally. In these early years, the bonfire was relatively small in nature (about 10–12 feet high) and bore resemblance to a pile of trash. In 1915, the Aggies beat UT-Austin in a legendary game and a bonfire of trash and dry good boxes was spontaneously constructed and burned after the game but this time in the streets of Bryan, a nearby town. The intensity of the fire exploded the pavement beneath the bonfire, but the community felt that it was really nothing and could easily be remedied. This was the first time the community had any involvement in Bonfire. This was also the only time Bonfire was built after the game and not held on the A&M campus.

For the next 25 or so Bonfires, students and community members were asked to supply boards and boxes. By the 1930s this appeal for burning material expanded to involve the state and the railroad companies who helped to bring in wood and boxes from all over the state.

In 1933, following a complaint from a farmer that students had dismantled and carried off his log barn, an order was issued in 1936 that 'no one would be allowed to collect Bonfire materials or place them on Bonfire other than authorized personnel' and that the building of Bonfire would be under the direction of the Commandant. It was also in this year that A&M received permission to remove dead trees from a nearby field in which an airport had been built. For the next six years Bonfire continued to take on many forms under the direction of the Commandant, but it remained primarily a 'trash pile.'

In these early years, the Bonfire tradition was tightly coupled with the university's goals and identity. In these early years, the University's focus of attention was largely directed inward towards the preservation of its distinctive character and goals. Bonfire epitomized this distinctiveness and grew in importance within the University. The traditions at Texas A&M, and the tradition of Bonfire in particular, produced important outcomes. Bonfire provided an important vehicle for the early custodians, the Corps of Cadets, to establish their power and legitimacy on the campus and in the community. As keepers of the tradition, the Corps could be regarded as the key custodians of this important tradition. These custodians worked to promote and preserve the role of traditions at the University. As noted by Jacobs's recent history of the Corps at Texas A&M:

> The Cadets began to bond and, in turn, to foster traditions – some born out of boredom and bulls sessions, but most derived from respect, loyalty, and values that came with a conservative, military lifestyle. (Jacobs, 2002: 14)

The power of the Corps of Cadets at the University is critical in understanding the evolution of Bonfire as well as other traditions that define the campus and serve to distinguish it from other organizations. In fact,

as recently as 1993 and according to the Blue Ribbon Committee on the Corps, they had a prominent and central role on the University campus:

> The Corps of Cadets remains a vital and relevant part of the overall University community today, both as the 'keeper' of many of the University's cherished traditions and as a repository and champion of values that make Aggies and Texas A&M truly unique. (Adams, 2001: 264)

During this period, except for minor incidents, Bonfire faced few if any pressures. In fact, the community was willing to accept the minor incidents and contributed by helping in the gathering of items for Bonfire. During this period, the activities around Bonfire continued to evolve, the core elements began to take shape and the ancillary elements were focused on establishing the core elements. The reactions to the various incidents all served to further entrench the Corps and its Commandant as the custodians of Bonfire with the community and, by the end of the period, the State, reinforcing and legitimizing this role. In essence, any pressures including entropy were quickly countered through the Commandant's garnering more control over Bonfire and thus establishing a point of responsibility so that it was no longer just a 'prank' by students, but became a legitimized organized practice that had become institutionalized.

While recent ideas on institutional entrepreneurship have tended to focus on the presence of purposeful action in constructing institutions we observe that they can also emerge from humble beginnings or out of serendipity.

Period 2: entrenchment (1942–1963)

By 1942 it was clear that Bonfire had undergone a distinct transformation to a very military-like activity which began a long history of building bigger and better Bonfires. The addition of a center pole (a log stuck into the ground supporting other logs stacked against it) allowed the height to reach 50 feet by 1946. Local filling stations donated hundreds of gallons of oil to saturate the logs and assist in their lighting. As the Commandant was now securely in charge, flow charts and instructions as to who was in charge and the chain of command became the norm. To prevent early lighting or vandalism by University of Texas students the Commandant ordered eighteen 24-hour guards posted, organized in several rings with orders that no one be allowed into the innermost rings without clearance. By 1954 the Bonfire reached 73 feet tall.

In 1955 the first Bonfire-associated death occurred when a Cadet at a guard post pushed another student out of the way of an oncoming truck, was hit himself and later died of his injuries. By this time, the number of individuals involved in Bonfire was quite large and the military traditions around Bonfire were evolving, including the posting of guards as well as the first 'war hero' who 'died in action.'

Soggy ground in 1956, as a result of steady rain, saw the Bonfire stack collapse after the center pole started leaning. But with military precision Bonfire was rebuilt with students hauling logs by hand for as much as half a mile since trucks could not get through the mud.

As the entrenchment of the tradition grew, it was not unusual to allow Cadets to be excused from a day of class in order to work on Bonfire. By 1958, time being taken away from academic work due to Bonfire was becoming an issue. To counter this issue, in 1958 the university decreed that Bonfire had to be built in three days (instead of the usual ten days) and students worked all day and night non-stop, having food brought to them at the work site. Over time this three-day time limit was relaxed to the point where it became two months in recent years.

To summarize, this was a critical period in Bonfire's evolution. Given the all-male nature of the University during this period, Bonfire took on 'additional meaning as symbol and proof of Aggie masculinity' (Smith, 2004). During this period, the Corps

also entrenched themselves as the keepers of this tradition and the Bonfire was a symbolic triumph of the University's core values and source of distinctiveness. Traditions at A&M and their primary custodians, the Corps of Cadets, provided enormous strategic benefits for the University. The 'spirit of Aggieland' was its 'longtime intangible' (Jacobs, 2002: 14). As this spirit grew the University was able to make unique claims about the experiences it offered to its student community, while at the same time benefiting enormously from the cohesion and collective identity its traditions conveyed for other powerful constituents such as the Former Students and local community.

Throughout this period, the Corps of Cadets were the central custodians of the Bonfire and through this and other traditions the Corps worked hard to find ways to preserve and enhance their power and position on campus. They did so by making claims that they provided much-needed links to the past as well as the provision of character and leadership development. While the Corps saw declining numbers during World War II, they saw a return to dominance on the campus by the 1950s. The Corps and the University began to gain increasing notoriety for their prowess in building bigger Bonfires. In fact, by the mid-1960s, Bonfire was regarded as a key distinctive feature of the University (Smith, 2004). The University endorsed these traditions and student recruiting films and campus orientation films often gave prominence to traditions, especially to Bonfire.

Even in the midst of safety concerns raised by the Assistant to the Commandant, the 1960 Bonfire stood over 100 feet tall. In 1963, the death of John F. Kennedy resulted in the first cancelled Bonfire.[8]

Continuing from the first period, it was clear that this period was the one in which the Corps were firmly entrenched as the custodians of Bonfire. Integrating Bonfire with military myths and traditions only served to reinforce this and the University continued to legitimize the tradition to the point where they proudly displayed this as a distinguishing

feature of the University. In other words, the tradition was now being used as part of the University's identity. The community increased its participation, but only at the periphery, and the Bonfire (i.e., the identity of the University) became sacred ground for the Corps to defend as they would do in battle. Through the protection of sacred ground, the core elements for Bonfire began to become more and more entrenched. As the identity of the University began to also include Bonfire in its definitions, the elements associated with Bonfire were also becoming part of the University's identity.

As in the previous period, there were very few pressures brought against Bonfire, but when any arose, such as safety concerns, the custodians of Bonfire took it on themselves to take care of the issues. When issues arose about how Bonfire might be affecting academic standards, the reaction by the University was not to question the utility of Bonfire, but simply to shorten the timeframe during which Bonfire was to be built. While there might have been a very slight emergent concern about the quality of academics in this period, the reaction offered by the University suggests that traditions were still very important, as the solution (shortening the build by a week) probably did nothing to enhance academics, but it was a way to acknowledge the concern about missing classes by allowing students the time to attend classes. This provided further legitimacy to Bonfire as it demonstrated that the University, although not the custodian of Bonfire, wanted it to continue to exist and while the ancillary elements had to change to accommodate the change in timeframe, these changes only reinforced the importance of the core elements. This is also seen when the students hauled the logs by hand – that is, the ancillary rituals changed but they were changed so that the core rituals of the Cut, Stack and Burn could be maintained.

As all this was happening, it was clear that the myths and rituals of Bonfire were becoming more and more entrenched, not only with the Bonfire tradition, but also at the level of

the University's identity. If there was any question whatsoever in the previous period, it was now absolutely clear in this period that Bonfire had become an institutionalized practice. Interestingly, while Bonfire started out as closely coupled to football games, during this period one could see a decoupling from football games and a stronger coupling of the traditions and the University; in essence, it was becoming a stand-alone tradition that really did not need the football game but did become part of the University's identity.[9]

Period 3: changes, challenges and inertia (1963–1999)

The 1960s brought a lot of changes to the University. Mandatory participation in the Corps of Cadets was eliminated in 1965. Around that time, women and minorities were also permitted to enroll in the University. The size of the student body and faculty also increased dramatically. While the Corps of Cadets continued to be the custodians of the traditions, many students enrolled in the University were now able to participate in the traditions while others rejected the importance and practices associated with traditions.

In 1967, the center pole was extended to 105 feet and cranes were brought in to help with the stacking. 1968 saw one civilian allowed to serve in a leadership role in the Bonfire organization but the civilian had to wear a red helmet to distinguish him from the other Cadets. In addition, there were some organizational structure changes that saw a 'Head Stack' assume the top position, and eight juniors were assigned to do most of the planning and logistical work. The move to shared custodianship was an important concession by the Corps as enrollment in the Corps program was no longer mandatory, and interest and support for Bonfire was becoming increasingly divided.

In 1969, the largest Bonfire ever (109 feet tall) was built (Jacobs, 2002) and it was the first year in which all Aggies were involved. Non-military Aggies were organized by a non-military student. Female students were also encouraged to help by serving in the first-aid tent. In 1970, a professor raised a proposal to Student Senate to abolish Bonfire on environmental grounds. The battle between pro-Bonfire and anti-Bonfire groups continued for several years. Through this time, it was clear that the majority of students favored Bonfire and thanks to a media blitz related to the environment and supported by the administration, the students eventually won out as the call for abolishment eventually was overwhelmed. In 1973, women were banned from working on Bonfire and in 1974 the height was limited to 74 feet.

In 1976, women were back working on Bonfire, some serving on guard duty alongside the males. The first female coordinator of Bonfire appeared in 1979. Her role was to be in charge of the women making lunches for the men working on Bonfire as well as those working at the Bonfire concession stands. Although some female Cadets attended tree-cutting classes that year, they were not issued necessary credentials to take part in the cutting. After a female filed a discrimination lawsuit, an open debate occurred and policy was changed. The most vehement opponents to allowing women to participate were the senior male Cadets involved in the organization of Bonfire. Following the policy change, women were allowed to participate in the Cut but they were set up in a separate area and were under constant supervision.

In 1981, faced with a shortage of volunteers (only Cadets could be forced to work on Bonfire), a female member of 'Off-Campus Aggies' and former Cadet was put in charge of recruiting civilian women to work on Bonfire, including the Cut (this brought about much derision from senior Corps members). Also in this year, the second Bonfire death occurred when a student was thrown from sitting on the fender of a tractor and was crushed by the tractor, leading to a change in policy regarding riding on tractors and flatbed trucks.

By 1983 Bonfire decreased to only 54 feet tall. 1998 again saw some male–female problems as a female was dragged from being too near the stack to outside the perimeter. Although there was no policy against females working the stack, the Cadets enforced their own policy. Although a lawsuit ensued and the Cadets pleaded guilty, the judge did not find them guilty and took the offenses off their records. There were more male–female incidents in 1987 with a lively exchange on the issue in the school newspaper, *The Battalion* (Tang, 2000: 142). In 1988, after a visit from the President's Office's Sexual Harassment Committee, women were let on the stack. There were also several other issues that began to emerge. In 1987 police started patrolling the stack on the eve of Bonfire for alcohol and issued many citations and arrested six individuals. In 1988 the number of citations increased and there were nine arrests.

In 1988, an anti-Bonfire organization, 'Aggies Against Bonfire' was founded by a student and at the same time Faculty Senate formed a committee to explore alternatives to Bonfire. The debate between those who pushed for alternatives and those who wanted to keep the tradition centered around alcohol use and, over several years, the debate continued as well as media campaigns to reduce the association of alcohol and Bonfire. Environmental issues also continued to be a focus and lawsuits were brought against Bonfire on this ground.

In response to criticism, 'replant' was initiated in 1991. Replant saw hundreds of Aggies planting 10,000 seedlings on land that was previously cleared. Others participating in this initiative included the Texas Environmental Action Coalition and the A&M Forestry Club. The Environmental Issues Chair stated that the replant, not Bonfire, has 'come to represent our burning desire to beat the hell out of TU.' These responses were an important way of diverting attention away from a focus on Bonfire while at the same time serving to co-opt Bonfire

critics as they could not be against the idea of replant (Tang, 2002).

There were very few major safety incidents that happened during the remaining years of this period. The most notable was the leaning of the stack in 1994, again because of excessive rain. There was another death when students were thrown from the back of a flatbed truck that lost control at highway speed and there were still sexist and racial incidents related to Bonfire organizers and workers.

It was clear that, towards the end of this period, there were many political, functional and social pressures being brought to bear on Bonfire, including a shift in both the custodians and key constituents. The first major change had to do with the declining presence of the Corps on campus. Enrollment in the Corps was no longer compulsory and women and minorities were given access to the University, resulting in the composition of the student body becoming increasingly diverse. There was an increased focus on academics and the introduction of new scholarly traditions such as a focus on graduate education (Jacobs, 2002: 21). Changes in curriculum and the University's desire to become one of the nation's premier universities brought important changes to it. The University launched an initiative called Vision 2020 with its goal to become one of the top 10 public universities by the year 2020. The traditions were no longer effective in binding together the student body and, to a large extent, were consumed more by a minority on campus and widely consumed by another key constituent and emerging custodian, the Association of Former Students or alumni of the University.

Thus, important changes in the University's internal and external environment led to political and social pressures that eventually changed the character, composition and structure of Bonfire. However, critics of Bonfire and Aggie traditions were always actively managed by the custodians of the University. For example, a strategy to manage critics included an elaborate replant program

to overcome increasing challenges from environmentalists. The challenges and contests around the legitimacy of Bonfire and its value and appropriateness as a tradition began to surface on a more visible and global scale, as opposed to the more limited challenges that previously occurred both in terms of visibility and frequency. These included the increasing size and diversification of the student body, as well as changing goals and aspirations of the University more generally.

To summarize, during this period we can clearly identify aspects of Bonfire that fit onto its various antecedents and constructs in our extended framework of deinstitutionalization. In terms of political pressures, we see a reduction in the dependence on the institutional constituents that have encouraged or enforced continuing procedural conformity with their expectations. Over the years, the University started to depend more on different stakeholders. Initially, the focus was on the students and former students. While there was a continuous focus on the student body, the intensity of this focus began to diminish relative to the focus on the academic and research goals of the University. Vision 2020 and other initiatives clearly demonstrated the shift towards becoming a more research-intensive, world-class institution. Furthermore, there was a growth in the criticality of organizational stakeholders whose beliefs may not have been consistent with the status quo as a result of the shift from a local focus on students to more global focus on institutional impact. As result of the buildup in these pressures, the legitimacy of institutionalized practices such as Bonfire was being called into question.

With respect to functional pressures, Vision 2020 and its goal to make Texas A&M University a world-class research institution brought about a change in the criteria for success. The benefits of the new criteria, now primarily dependent on outside constituents, were neither fully understood nor widely shared by the student constituency, who previously relied on more social criteria (i.e.,

quality of student life, sacredness of traditions such as Bonfire, etc.) as a basis for evaluating the success of the institution. Consequently, the perceived utility of institutionalized practices such as Bonfire was slowly being subsumed by the perceived utility of other practices more closely associated with achieving the goal of becoming a world-class research institution.

There were also social pressures that were acting on the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire. The new goals of the institution as a result of vision 2020 represented a disruption to the institution's historical continuity. As a result of these proposed institutional changes there was increasing fragmentation within the institution. One way in which this fragmentation manifested itself was through the splitting of identities among stakeholders and the conflicts that took place within the many layers of these nested identities (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001).

From the simple analysis above, it is clear that several of the antecedent pressures for the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire were already in play during this period previous to the time of the collapse. In addition to these antecedent pressures, we find several entropy pressures that were also pushing for the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire. These included groups opposed to Bonfire on the basis of the environmental damage associated with the cutting of the trees used in Bonfire, as well as institutional concerns about safety associated with the size and height of Bonfire.

Also affecting the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire were inertial pressures associated with the long-standing institutional culture that embodied a resistance to change and the central role of traditions in maintaining the culture.

While all of these pressures were mounting, it became more and more clear as to what role the custodians of Bonfire had in counteracting the political, functional and social pressures as well as the entropy pressures. Through their reactions, the custodians were able to manage the entropy pressures and tip the balance in favor of the status quo.

When the Corps was the sole custodian of Bonfire, these rituals and their associated activities were carried out like a military operation. As the nature of participants evolved from the Corps of Cadets to incorporate of a greater number on non-Corps participants, Bonfire took on a more casual and laissez-faire atmosphere. In fact, towards the end of this period, while Bonfire continued to be an embodiment of the Aggie Spirit, the processes and decision-making were more like a party. This dilution of a core element of Bonfire contributed to its eventual dissipation. Furthermore, the challenge faced by the University during this period was to find ways to simultaneously continue the momentum towards strengthening its academic programs without compromising its traditions and school spirit (Jacobs, 2002: 200).The presence of competing traditions served to challenge the adherence to the tradition as well as the University's resolve to consider them as a defining feature of the University.

Period 4: erosion, the fall and beyond (1999–present)

> A tradition is in trouble: twelve Aggies are dead, the campus is still in mourning, and experts are questioning whether the Bonfire collapse was just a freak accident. Now A&M officials must decide whether keeping an Aggie icon is worth the risks. (Burka, 2000: 117)

In the early morning hours of November 18, 1999, the Bonfire stack collapsed with approximately 70 students aboard – 12 Aggies died and 27 more were injured (Tang, 2000). As students and other members of the University and local community struggled to make sense of this event, the Bonfire tragedy drew national attention. There was a strong call for action – How could this happen? Who was to blame? Why was there no oversight? Several narratives began to emerge, ranging from calling the tradition into question to providing support for the tradition and its continuation. In fact, according to a student injured in the collapse, continuation of Bonfire would

be a way to honor those who died (Tedesco, 2000) while others noted that they would be willing to accept small changes as concessions as long they could keep Bonfire.

Some news stories pointed to the mysticism of the accident and the students as 'fallen heroes' who gave their lives for the tradition (Tang, 2000). The discourse turned from tragedy to celebrating and memorializing the dead.

In the days following the Bonfire, the University distanced itself from the event by claiming that Bonfire was a student-run event. However, under enormous pressures the University launched its own internal investigation. Until this catastrophe the University was 'unable' to publicly challenge or penetrate the myth as well as the boundaries of the tradition. However, a catastrophe invokes the need for action, sense-making and reflection.

The collapse was investigated by a Special Commission requested by the University. The Special Commission on the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire concluded that the collapse was a function of a combination of physical and organizational factors. The physical factors included structural stress caused by problems with log placement and inadequate containment and binding strength. However, the Commission squarely put the blame for the physical deficiencies upon the organizational factors that caused them. Cited as key organizational problems were the cultural bias, the absence of a plan, and the lack of proactive approaches towards the management of risk (Special Commission on the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire Final Report, 2000).

The University President at the time, Ray Bowen, made a number of key decisions six weeks after receiving the final Commission report. First, he placed the Bonfire on hold for two years. This led to several reactions and an outcry from current and former students.

> Concerned that a hallowed tradition will turn into a hollow gesture, a group of students is circulating a petition urging Texas A&M University administrators to reconsider the limitations placed on future Aggie Bonfires. (Garcia, 2000)

Second, he set up a task force known as Bonfire 2002 to assess the fate of Bonfire. Bowen claimed that future Bonfire was no longer the defining activity for the future of the University.

On March 5, 2001, the Committee for Bonfire 2002 posted a document outlining some myths and facts about the future and past of the Bonfire tradition (source: Bonfire 2002 Committee Homepage). The Committee proposed key changes that substantively altered the nature of any future Bonfire held on the Texas A&M campus. Leadership positions were now to be selected based on a process outlined by the recommendations of a Student Leadership and Participation Task Force committee. Future Bonfires, while student constructed would now have to be administered by and follow plans prepared by licensed professional engineers. Previously, the Cut and Stack phase lasted over two months. Now, the core ritual of Cut was eliminated from all future Bonfires with a recommendation that logs would now be cut and delivered by a professional firm.

Further, the construction core ritual of Stack was to be limited to a total of two weeks. The site would now be fenced in and monitored by video cameras (Brown, 2000). Bonfire participants would now have to undergo training certification in preparation with any roles associated with planning and construction. Interestingly, one of the notions the Committee sought to dispel was the myth that Bonfire as a tradition had remained invariant over time. The Committee provided key facts about the extent to which there was variation in ancillary elements such as the structure and length of time involved in construction.

In 2002, Bowen announced that there would no longer be a Bonfire burned on the Texas A&M campus. In order not to challenge the essence of Bonfire, the University proposed a new tradition, a Bonfire Memorial and went to great lengths to promote and develop this project of re-invention. The fallen would now be honored with an everlasting memorial flame and Bonfire is still listed as a core tradition of the University on its website. So, while several core and ancillary elements were removed the University successfully reinvented the tradition.

The remnants in terms of collective memories drove the re-emergence of the tradition in a new place. The tradition migrated off campus and former students became even more fervent custodians providing resources, land, and cash to support its re-emergence. Groups such as the 'Bonfire Coalition' and 'KTBF – Keep the Fire Burning' emerged to revive, protect and preserve the tradition. As recently as 2004, Bonfire burned off-campus and it was claimed that over 10,000 individuals turned out to watch it burn (Nauman, 2004). Thus, the tradition took on a life of its own and was no longer embedded in the context or place in which it was once created.

Our analysis of the previous period of Bonfire through the lens of the extended deinstitutionalization framework clearly suggests that several antecedent and direct pressures for dissipation existed prior to the fall. However, these pressures were being strategically kept in balance by the custodians through various types of reactions that were aimed at preserving and further entrenching the tradition of Bonfire.

The events of 1999 were horrific, yet they did not serve to distract the custodians (those who worked on the stack) from their goal of maintaining the tradition. Their reactions were consistent with previous periods and they fought hard to counterbalance the growing political, functional and social pressures as well as the pressure for entropy. In essence, their actions were aimed at maintaining the dominance of inertia over entropy that they managed over the previous years of Bonfire. However, in this case, it was clear that entropy gained the upper hand. As a result of the crisis, the reactions of the University were able to overcome the entropy. The University reacted in a number of ways. They disembedded and dismantled the core elements of the tradition by no

longer allowing for Cut (the logs being delivered), and the Bonfire was now to be supervised and monitored, eliminating opportunities for 'groding' and other forms of hazing. The University recommended a further dilution of custodianship in that they would now run and largely control the tradition. In sum, the University's decisions significantly altered the value of the 'inherited resource' for the custodians of the tradition while not directly challenging the myth of Bonfire. Bonfire was now to be over-engineered, costly, over-monitored and uninteresting. It was now diluted to the point that it ceased to have value for its custodians.

In 2002, when Bowen announced that Bonfire would no longer be held on campus, he erased the core element of place for the rituals of Stack and Burn and this directly affected dissipation and erosion of the tradition. The crisis allowed the University to penetrate the boundaries of the tradition. Bonfire was no longer needed to tell the new narrative about the University. This raises interesting future questions about the role of place and migration in the process of deinstitutionalization as well as the assimilation of an older element into a newly re-invented tradition. Our observations regarding this period also raise a number of questions regarding the interplay of challenges and mechanisms for dissipation. All at once, a number of mechanisms (assimilation, dilution, disembedding, competition, and erasure) were simultaneously in play, making it increasingly difficult for the custodians to counter forces for entropy impacting dissipation. Thus, the custodians could not deal with everything at once – if challenges or threats to core elements are sequenced or separated over time, then custodians have time to formulate strategies to combat entropy.

We summarize our discussion above in Table 12.1.

Table 12.1 charts the evolution of Bonfire over the four periods described above and provides a summary of changes over time. It tracks the essence, custodians, rituals and physical artifacts, as well as changes in place and temporality. Table 12.1 also provides insights into the changing nature of the organization in which the tradition was embedded by summarizing the character of the organization, its key constituents, key success factors, and strategic arenas.

FROM EROSION OF TRADITION TO UNDERSTANDING DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION

As Shils notes, 'there is a great need in the world for a better understanding of the nature of tradition and for a better appreciation of its value' (1981: vii). We examine the potential contributions of the findings of our case study for the study of traditions and illuminate a number of insights for understanding deinstitutionalization. We do this through mapping case insights onto our extended framework based on Oliver's (1992) framework for deinstitutionalization and propose several extensions of her process model of deinstitutionalization.

Given Oliver's framework, we can clearly identify aspects of Bonfire that map onto its various antecedents and constructs. In terms of political pressures, we see a reduction in the dependence on the institutional constituents that have encouraged or enforced continuing procedural conformity with their expectations. Over the years, the University started to depend more on different stakeholders. Initially, the focus was on the students and former students. While there was a continuous focus on the student body, the intensity of this focus began to diminish relative to the focus on the academic and research goals of the University. Vision 2020 and other initiatives clearly demonstrated the shift towards becoming a more research-intensive, world-class institution. Furthermore, there was a growth in the criticality of organizational stakeholders, whose beliefs may not have been consistent with the status quo as a result of the shift from a local focus on students to a more global focus on institutional impact. As a result of the buildup in

Table 12.1   The evolution of bonfire: 1909–present

Dimension	1909–42	1942–65	1965–99	Post-Fall
University focus	Total Institution	Inward	Inward/Outward More academic	Outward Mainstream Vision 2020

Culture and core beliefs	Military Focus
	'Hazing' common
		Stronger military
		  focus promoted
		  differences
		Emphasis on the
		  'Other'
		Education
			Sub-cultures present
			Multiple identities
			  exist
			Focus on academics
			  and research
				Old Culture is liability
				New culture focused
				  on academics and
				  becoming a top
				  public university

Organization – Tradition Link	Tightly coupled
	  values
		Tradition is the
		  Institution
			Last 20 years saw
			  shift to
			  decoupling
				Tradition is: Questioned,
				  somewhat unwanted
				  yet tightly coupled

Physical composition	Trash and wood
	Stolen materials
	Disorganized pile
	  design 20 ft
		Logs (donated)
		Tepee style design
		  45–100 ft
			Logs (fresh cut)
			Layered cake design
			  110 ft
				Two year hold on campus
				Flame on campus
				Off-campus:
				Logs (fresh cut)
				Layered cake design

Custodians	Cadets	Corps Commandant	Shared custodianship: Cadets plus non- cadets	University Former students Non-cadets Cadets
Rituals	Play	Cut, Stack, Burn	Cut, Stack, Burn	Memorial service Cut, Stack, Burn (Offsite)
Place	On campus	On campus	On campus	Off campus Re-invented on campus
Time	Before 'big game' Once burned after	Before 'big game'	Before 'big game'	Cancelled on campus Off-campus: Before 'big game'
Arenas and contests	State Politics Funding	Football rivalry	Public funding Enrollments	Survival Relative status
Key success factors	Football	Football Traditions	Increasing enrollment	World-class ranking
Audience and constituents	State, Local	Students, Local	National, Public	Global

these pressures, the legitimacy of institution-alized practices such as Bonfire was being called into question.

With respect to functional pressures, Vision 2020 and its goal to make Texas A&M University a world-class research institution brought about a change in the criteria for success. The benefits of the new criteria, now primarily dependent on outside constituents, were neither fully understood nor widely shared by the student constituency who previously relied on more social criteria (i.e., quality of student life, sacredness of traditions such as Bonfire, etc.) as a basis for evaluating the success of the institution.

Consequently, the perceived utility of institutionalized practices such as Bonfire was slowly being subsumed by the perceived utility of other practices more closely associated with achieving the goal of becoming a world-class research institution.

There were also social pressures that were acting on the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire. The new goals of the institution as a result of Vision 2020 represented a disruption to the continuity of the institution's historical identity. As a result of these proposed institutional changes and refocus on academic excellence as a research institution, there was increasing fragmentation among the

institution's stakeholders. This fragmentation manifested itself through the splitting of identities among stakeholders and the conflicts that took place within the many layers of institutional identity

From the analysis above, several of the antecedent pressures for the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire were already in play at the time of the collapse in addition to the presence of several pressures for entropy pushing for the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire. These included groups opposed to Bonfire on the basis of the environmental concerns as well as institutional concerns about safety associated with the size and height of Bonfire.

Also affecting the deinstitutionalization of Bonfire were pressures to maintain status quo associated with a culture that resisted change and nurtured the central role of traditions in maintaining the culture.

Our observations about Bonfire also help us to illustrate how the elements we introduced into the extended deinstitutionalization framework provide additional insight and allow us to capture other important dynamics that appear to be involved in deinstitutionalization. It was our belief, based on our integration of several streams of research, that whether deinstitutionalization represents dissipation or outright rejection is a function of whether the core or ancillary elements of an institution are affected by several mechanisms. In this chapter, we have described those mechanisms and used the case of Bonfire to consider the multiple mechanisms by which dissipation occurs. Focusing on the mechanism of competition has allowed us to better understand the nature of institutional collisions as competing traditions lead to greater pressures to demonstrate legitimacy as well as functional utility.

These mechanisms or strategies include, among others, dilution, disembedding, and buffering or decoupling. By dilution, we mean that the organization ensures there are new institutionalized practices added into the mix or that multiple institutionalized

practices are invented in the beginning so that the reliance on any one of these practices is minimal. Another strategy is one in which the institutionalized practice is disembedded from either ancillary institutions that exist or from other interconnected elements of the organization. Buffering or decoupling refers to the distancing of the organization and the institutionalized practice either cognitively or in its narratives by telling a different story about the meaning of the institutionalized practice. Distancing could also occur in the sense of abdicating responsibility for the tradition.

Beyond our initial extensions to the deinstitutionalization framework based on our integration of several literature streams, our analysis of the Texas A&M Aggie Bonfire case suggests further important extensions. First, the analysis leads us to believe that it is important to extend the framework to explicitly recognize the role of *custodians* of institutionalized practices. In our examples based on Bonfire, we demonstrate that custodians of institutionalized practices can serve as a critical counterforce to entropy. In essence, custodians balance the pressures for entropy and sustain institutionalized practices. The Corps of Cadets or 'Keepers of the Spirit' (Adams, 2001) did much to take a tradition borne out of humble beginnings and make it the center-piece of the traditions at the University. As the tradition faced detractors, the Corps sought to protect the tradition and guard against potential dissipation. They did this by limiting access to and knowledge about the construction of Bonfire. The informal hierarchy of Bonfire kept participation in the core rituals small and elite while participation in the performance aspects of the tradition was much broader. The custodians also countered forces for entropy by providing innovative solutions to critics (such as the response of 'replant' to environmental criticisms) versus going on strike as they did in Period 2 as well as calling on former custodians and other key constituents for support as needed (former students, parents, members of the University Administration).

Second, through our analysis of Bonfire, we suggest that the framework should explicitly recognize the role of *crises* which allow for permeability in the boundary and provide for windows of opportunity to extinguish liabilities and overcome inertial tendencies. Until the fall of the stack in 1999, changes to the core elements of Bonfire were always resisted; critics were managed and when the numbers and power of the Corps began to decline in the third period, concessions were made to share custodianship so as to keep the core rituals, collective memories and other core elements intact.

Third, from our Bonfire analysis, we also believe that whether deinstitutionalization represents dissipation or outright rejection is a function of whether the *core or ancillary elements* of an institution are affected by several strategies that directly impact dissipation. From our analysis we observe that core elements of a tradition also evolve over time but, once in place, they tend to be more or less stable and enduring than peripheral or ancillary elements. Consequently, this suggests that there are both ancillary and core elements that may experience dissipation as a result of political, functional and social pressures. While our case study does not allow us to establish the relative effectiveness and outcome of bringing political, functional and social pressures to bear on the core and ancillary elements, it may be that the core are more resistant to these pressures, requiring crises as a way of breaking down the resistance, and that pressures on specific ancillary elements may lead to the erosion of those specific elements but may not erode, and in fact may serve to strengthen, the core elements.

Fourth, the case of Bonfire clearly illustrates that a tradition or institutionalized practice can be *re-invented* or reconstructed, just as Bonfire migrated off-campus. So, it was re-invented in its original location in the form of a memorial flame and re-incarnated in a new location.

By unveiling and focusing on the process of re-invention we highlight the importance of *institutional remnants*. Mohr (2006) refers to these 'bits' of institutions as institutional litter. Remnants can be useful for constructing new traditions, re-inventing old traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1984; Shils, 1981) or for the re-emergence of institutionalized practices experiencing dormancy (Mohr, 2006; Tucker, 2006; Zerubavel, 1995). Remnants can take the form of stories, physical objects, rituals, temporal connections or linkages to place as well as take the form of sentiments and memories. We propose that to the extent remnants of institutionalized practices remain in place, they are also able to prevent extinction. Therefore, it is rare for us to observe the complete extinction or eradication of deep-rooted traditions or institutionalized practices.

Finally, in this chapter, we demonstrate that traditions do not always arise as a result of institutionalization projects or purposeful action. Rather, they can emerge from humble beginnings or arise out of serendipity. However, we also demonstrate that the processes of re-invention, re-incarnation or re-emergence may potentially require the focused attention of custodians or institutional entrepreneurs (current and/or future).

In summary, the key extensions to Oliver's (1992) framework introduced in this chapter include the clarification of various reactions to the political, functional and social pressures, the unpacking of dissipation, the moderating roles of custodians and crises on entropy and inertia respectively, and the notion of institutional remnants. The extended framework for deinstitutionalization appears in Figure 12.2.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Oliver's (1992) framework for deinstitutionalization brought clarification to an important concept that has entered the everyday parlance of the institutional theorist through numerous journal articles, book chapters and everyday discussions. However, as
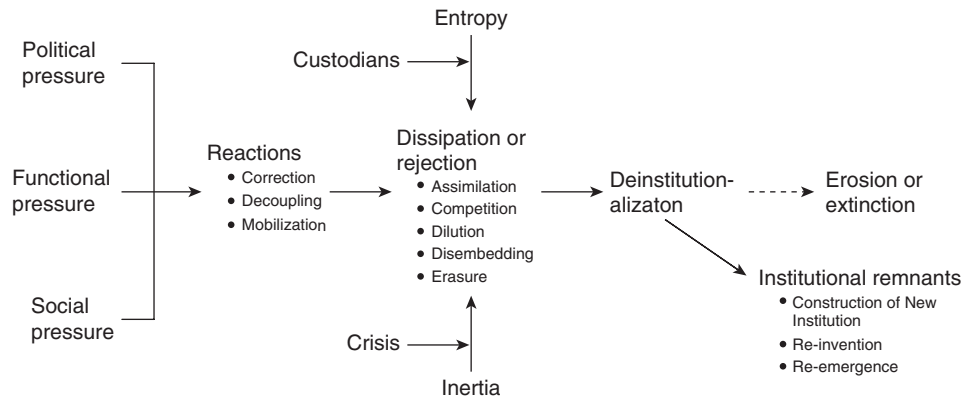
Figure 12.2 An extended deinstitutionalization framework

we note, institutionalized practices are commonly slow to become extinguished. Elements of these practices also often continue in residual forms that serve as reminders of prior strategies and/or as raw material for the construction of new ones. Through our integration of various theoretical approaches, we believe our extended framework explicates important aspects that help us further understand the deinstitutionalization process in the context of a long-standing tradition.

We also believe that our extended framework provides a basis for continuing the important discourse about deinstitutionalization that has emerged since Oliver's seminal work on the topic almost fifteen years ago. Continuation of this discourse is important because many aspects of the deinstitutionalization process have yet to be understood. Following, we present several areas for research that emerge out of the work presented in this chapter. We encourage researchers to pursue any of these future directions.

One promising area for future research would be to examine other key mechanisms leading to dissipation. In this chapter we focus on some of the key mechanisms (assimilation, competition, dilution, disembedding, and erasure) but it is likely that

there are other mechanisms worthy of inquiry. Two mechanisms that might be investigated further in future research include displacement and migration. Displacement occurs when exogenous forces such as changes in technology or the emergence of new knowledge or circumstances result in the tradition being discarded or rejected (Shils, 1981: 258). Migration, according to Shils (1981), occurs when a tradition is transported to a new context where it may have a new or different meaning or become completely irrelevant. An example of this would be wine tasting in a culture where it is forbidden to consume alcohol. In this case, the adherence to the tradition and associated rituals of wine tasting would be largely determined by the receptivity of the recipients. DiMaggio (1988) also discusses institutional migration and local modifications that result from variation in interests and power.

In addition to investigating mechanisms that promote dissipation, it would also be worthwhile to consider various mechanisms that serve to prevent dissipation and eventual deinstitutionalization. This would provide further insights into the strategic management of institutionalized practices. In this chapter we only highlighted a few such mechanisms that became apparent to us through our case study of Bonfire

but we encourage researchers to introduce other mechanisms of this type to the literature.

Our analysis of Bonfire led us to identify a distinction between core and ancillary elements (for example, rituals) of a tradition. While this distinction provided important insights related to the erosion of institutionalized practices such as traditions, we believe that further investigation into a related area for future research is one that focuses on the dimensionality of institutions and the extent to which erosion of one or more core elements results in variable intensity of erosion in terms of both scope and potency. Issues to examine when pursuing this research include whether there are thresholds at which decline is more rapid or slow, and whether there are specific patterns or configurations of core and ancillary elements that once combined increase or decrease the propensity of decline. At a field level, DiMaggio distinguishes between core and subsidiary institutions and states 'under many conditions, the interests of these legitimated, partially autonomous, subsidiary institutions diverge from those of the governors of the core institutional form' (1988: 16). Adopting this to our work, the issue becomes one of understanding how taking over or controlling ancillary elements but not the core elements allows one to launch delegitimating attacks on the core or demand changes in the core. We suggest that much more work needs to be done to fully understand the nature, dynamics, and interaction of core and ancillary elements.

The notion of an 'institutional remnant' is an important one in the extended framework. We argue that extinction is an ultimate yet relatively rare event in deinstitutionalization and that the remnants of traditions often become instrumental in the construction of new institutional practices or the re-invention or re-emergence of what may have been considered an eroded or extinct institutional practice. In this light, an area for future research would be to examine the role of collective memories more fully in

constructing as well as eradicating institutionalized practices. In our case, the tradition of Bonfire took place in an intergenerational organization. By placing the Bonfire on hold for two years the University essentially prevented the core elements of the tradition from being experienced or shared by Freshmen who entered the year of the Fall. Thus, these newcomers did not have shared experiences with which to create 'communitas' (Turner, 1969) or new collective memories, yet the institutional remnants of Bonfire led to its re-emergence as an off-campus event. Future research could examine whether patterns of enhancement and erasure are similar in other contexts. For example, intergenerational organizations such as the military or the field of consulting might also attempt to construct or eradicate institutional practices.

With respect to core and ancillary elements associated with a tradition, a fruitful area for future research would be to investigate the relative role of these elements in the deinstitutionalization process. We speculated that core and ancillary elements differ in their relative resistance to erosion but, because we present only a single case study, we could not further investigate this insight. One way of pursuing this phenomenon would be to consider whether there is a hierarchy of core and ancillary elements. For example, with respect to core elements, one could examine whether there is a hierarchy or ordering of core elements or whether the core elements are themselves interconnected in some meaningful way such that interactions among these elements serve to produce interactions, and crowd out or displace one another. Following this line of thought, interesting questions include: whether one can remove one core element but still have the institutionalized practice survive; or the extent to which core elements would have to be removed to erode the institution.

Finally, while our focus in the current chapter is on institutionalized practices, it would also be important to understand how

institutions change. Institutional theorists note the permanence or stability of institutions but it could be that our belief about invariance is merely an illusion that is socially constructed. In other words, do we make sense of institutional effects by fitting them into the expectations of what we 'want' to experience, or do we consider them invariant because once in place, both violations and sanctions are rare, unobservable, or inconsequential? These are questions that need to be addressed by scholars interested in furthering their understanding of processes of institutional emergence, change, and extinction.

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NOTES

1 A remnant is a 'small remaining quantity' and/or a 'surviving trace/vestige' of something that once existed (Oxford University Dictionary).

2 Sapir (1949) makes a distinction between culture that is genuine versus spurious. Spurious culture is often devoid of meaning and is externally constructed and controlled. On the other hand, genuine culture is internally generated, harmonious and authentic.

3 The remnants transmitted across generations may be large enough so that no significant change in the tradition is perceived by its adherents.

4 While we draw upon and further develop the idea of custodians from Soares (1997), DeJordy and Jones (2006) have recently used the term 'institutional guardians' in their work on the changing meaning of marriage.

5 In several passages, Shils (1981) uses the terms traditions and institutions synonymously.

6 The web page of the University provides great detail about the nature of Texas A&M University traditions.

7 In particular, we draw upon the rich and thoughtful historical case study of Bonfire by journalist Irwin Tang, 2000.

8 In 1966, as an acknowledgement to the war in Vietnam, thousands of gallons of Napalm were poured on Bonfire to assist in its lighting.

9 Texas A&M had declining football performance for much of Period 2 and the early part of Period 3.

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