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Bridging the Structural Divide: Dismantling Knowledge Silos and Mitigating Cross-Departmental Conflict in Modern Universities

(A Theoretical and Strategic Human Resource Management Analysis)

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ABSTRACT

Modern research universities are structurally predisposed to knowledge silos and cross-departmental conflict. This paper examines how decentralized budgeting architectures, entrenched disciplinary identities, and fragmented information systems generate territorial behavior among faculty, staff, and administrative units, and it proposes a Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) framework for dismantling these barriers. Problem Statement: universities increasingly operate as loosely coupled federations of departments whose competing objectives undermine collaborative teaching, research, and administrative outcomes. Theoretical Framework: the analysis is anchored in Social Identity Theory, Goal Interdependence Theory, and Information Elaboration Theory, integrated with organizational design and boundary-spanning literatures to explain how in-group/out-group dynamics, competitive goal structures, and impaired information processing sustain silos across micro, meso, and macro levels of the institution. Methodology: the paper adopts a conceptual, literature-integrative methodology, synthesizing peer-reviewed organizational behavior, higher education governance, and SHRM scholarship, and proposes a mixed-methods empirical design for future validation. Key HR Findings: the review identifies four interdependent HR levers with the greatest theorized capacity to reduce silo formation: dual-matrix performance appraisal, cross-functional talent mobility, collaboration-weighted total rewards, and formalized boundary-spanning roles embedded in shared governance structures. Strategic Implications: the paper concludes with a phased executive action plan for university presidents, deans, and chief human resource officers, alongside a discussion of structural constraintsincluding public-versus-private funding models and faculty unionizationand directions for future empirical inquiry into cross-departmental collaboration in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge silos, cross-departmental conflict, social identity theory, goal interdependence, human resource management, higher education, governance.

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1. Introduction and Institutional Context

Universities are among the most structurally fragmented organizations in the modern economy. Unlike single-product firms organized around a unified value chain, a research university simultaneously operates as a federation of semi-autonomous academic departments, a bureaucratic administrative apparatus, and a collection of professional and research units, each with distinct incentive structures, resource claims, and cultural norms (Birnbaum, 2004; Bolman & Deal, 2017). This structural pluralism, while historically protective of academic freedom, has become a persistent source of knowledge silos and cross-departmental conflict that undermines institutional agility, interdisciplinary innovation, and administrative efficiency.

1.1 The Structural Root: Decentralized Budgeting and Academic Autonomy

A principal driver of siloed behavior is the widespread adoption of decentralized financial architectures, most notably Responsibility Center Management (RCM), under which academic units are treated as quasi-independent cost and revenue centers responsible for their own budgetary solvency (Whalen, 1991). RCM was designed to incentivize entrepreneurial behavior and cost discipline at the unit level; however, it simultaneously converts departments into competitors for tuition revenue, indirect cost recovery, and centrally allocated subsidies. Whetten (1978) observed that when organizational subunits face incompatible role expectations and resource dependencies, they develop insular coping strategies that prioritize unit-level survival over system-level integration. In the university context, this manifests as departments withholding curricular collaboration, duplicating administrative infrastructure, and resisting shared service models that could dilute their financial autonomy.

Compounding this dynamic is the long-standing tension between academic autonomy and administrative compliance. Faculty governance norms grant departments substantial discretion over curriculum, hiring, and research direction, while central administration is simultaneously tasked with enforcing compliance, accreditation, and institution-wide strategic priorities (Massy & Zemsky, 1994). The result is a structurally embedded principal-agent misalignment: departments are evaluated locally on disciplinary prestige and enrollment metrics, while the institution as a whole is evaluated on cross-cutting outcomes such as graduation rates, interdisciplinary research output, and student experience outcomes that require the very cross-departmental collaboration the RCM structure discourages.

1.2 Competing Departmental Objectives and the Emergence of Silos

Knowledge silos in universities are rarely the product of deliberate obstruction; they are the emergent outcome of rational actors responding to locally optimized incentive structures (Cross & Prusak, 2002). When departmental prestige, budget allocation, and faculty promotion are all evaluated within disciplinary boundaries, information hoarding becomes an adaptive if

institutionally costly strategy. Cross, Parker, Prusak, and Borgatti (2001) demonstrate that in knowledge-intensive organizations, the value of information is realized only when it flows across network boundaries; in a university, disciplinary and administrative boundaries function as high-friction barriers that suppress this flow, producing redundant research effort, fragmented student advising, and disconnected administrative data systems.

"The persistence of departmental silos in higher education is best understood not as a failure of individual goodwill, but as a rational equilibrium produced by decentralized incentive architecture operating on a professionally fragmented workforce."

This paper argues that dismantling these silos requires more than cultural exhortation toward collaboration; it requires a coordinated redesign of the institution's Strategic Human Resource Management architecture performance management, talent mobility, total rewards, and organizational design operating in concert with structural and governance reform.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The organizational behavior and higher education governance literatures offer three complementary theoretical lenses through which to understand the persistence of cross-departmental conflict in universities: Social Identity Theory, Goal Interdependence Theory, and Information Elaboration Theory. Each addresses a distinct causal mechanism identity-based bias, incentive structure, and information processing, respectively and together they form an integrated explanatory model for silo formation and its consequences.

2.1 Social Identity Theory: In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and that this membership predisposes them toward favorable evaluation of the in-group and comparatively unfavorable evaluation of out-groups, even in the absence of material conflict of interest. Ashforth and Mael (1989) extended this framework to formal organizations, arguing that organizational subunits departments, divisions, professional categoriesfunction as salient identity categories around which employees construct in-group loyalty. In universities, disciplinary identity is unusually strong relative to institutional identity, because doctoral training, professional societies, and scholarly reward systems are organized around the discipline rather than the employing institution (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Faculty in the sciences, humanities, and professional schools frequently self-categorize primarily as chemists, historians, or engineers, and only secondarily as members of a particular university. This weak superordinate identity leaves the university vulnerable to intergroup bias between academic units, and between the academic and administrative "professional staff" identity categories more broadly, producing the classic STEM-versus-humanities and faculty-

versus-staff status hierarchies documented in the higher education literature (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

2.2 Goal Interdependence Theory: Competitive Versus Cooperative Structures

Deutsch's (1949) theory of cooperation and competition, later elaborated as Goal Interdependence Theory by Johnson and Johnson (1989, 2005), holds that the structure of goal interdependence between partiesrather than personality or interpersonal history is the primary determinant of whether interaction produces cooperative or competitive behavior. Under positive interdependence, one party's goal attainment facilitates the others; under negative interdependence, as in a zero-sum resource allocation, one party's gain constitutes the other's loss. RCM-style budgeting, along with fixed faculty lines, space allocation, and merit-pay pools, structurally imposes negative interdependence between departments competing for the same finite institutional resources. Johnson and Johnson (2005) show that negatively interdependent goal structures reliably produce reduced communication, distorted perception of the other party's intentions, and an escalatory spiral from instrumental disagreement into affective hostility a pathway directly applicable to the university department rivalry documented by De Dreu and Weingart (2003) in their meta-analysis of task-versus-relationship conflict.

2.3 Information Elaboration Theory: Knowledge Processing Across Boundaries

Information Elaboration Theory (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004), building on the broader group-information-processing literature (Hinsz, Tindale, & Vollrath, 1997), argues that diverse groups realize performance benefits from their diversity only when task-relevant information is actively exchanged, discussed, and integrated a process termed elaboration. Absent elaboration, diversity produces categorization effects (consistent with Social Identity Theory) rather than performance gains. Applied to the university, this theory explains why interdisciplinary initiatives frequently underperform their stated potential: cross-departmental committees and task forces bring diverse expertise into the same room, but without structured elaboration processes, boundary objects, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), participants default to identity-protective information withholding rather than genuine knowledge integration. Nonaka's (1994) model of organizational knowledge creation similarly emphasizes that tacit knowledge conversion requires shared context ("ba"), which cross-departmental structures in universities frequently fail to provide.

2.4 Integration and Hypotheses Development

Synthesizing these three frameworks yields a layered causal model: decentralized resource structures create negative goal interdependence (Deutsch, 1949); negative interdependence activates and reinforces in-group/out-group identity boundaries (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); and strengthened identity boundaries suppress the information elaboration necessary for cross-

departmental knowledge transfer (van Knippenberg et al., 2004), producing the observable phenomenon of institutional knowledge silos and escalating relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995). From this integrated model, the paper advances three testable hypotheses for future empirical validation:

H_1: The degree of negative goal interdependence between academic departments (operationalized via RCM-style budget competition) is positively associated with the frequency and intensity of cross-departmental knowledge hoarding.

H_2: The strength of disciplinary in-group identification moderates the relationship between structural interdependence and intergroup bias, such that units with stronger disciplinary (vs. institutional) identity salience exhibit steeper increases in out-group derogation under conditions of resource competition.

H_3: The presence of formalized boundary-spanning HR interventions (dual-matrix appraisal, cross-functional mobility, collaborative rewards) moderates the negative relationship between structural competition and information elaboration, such that institutions with higher "HR boundary-spanning intensity" exhibit significantly smaller silo-related productivity losses than institutions without such interventions.

3. MULTILEVEL ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

Understanding the persistence of university silos requires analysis at three nested levels of organizational behavior: the individual (micro), the group or department (meso), and the institution-wide system (macro). Each level exhibits distinct but interlocking mechanisms.

3.1 Micro Level: Individual Behavior and Well-Being

At the individual level, chronic exposure to negatively interdependent, identity-salient competition produces territorial knowledge hoarding as a defensive strategy, consistent with Szulanski's (1996) findings on the "stickiness" of internal knowledge transfer, which he attributes partly to a lack of absorptive capacity and partly to motivational barriers rooted in perceived threat. Repeated intergroup friction also erodes psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), the shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking such as admitting error or requesting help from an out-group colleague will not be punished. As psychological safety declines, faculty and staff increasingly report symptoms consistent with Maslach and Leiter's (2016) burnout framework, particularly emotional exhaustion and cynicism, driven by the sustained effort of navigating unresolved intergroup tension.

A further consequence is the suppression of Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs) the discretionary, non-contractual helping behaviors that Organ (1988) identifies as essential to organizational functioning. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, and Bachrach (2000) note

that OCBs are particularly sensitive to perceived fairness and in-group trust; in a siloed university, discretionary cross-departmental assistance (covering a colleague's advising load, sharing a dataset, mentoring a junior faculty member outside one's unit) is precisely the behavior most likely to be withheld.

3.2 Meso Level: Group and Departmental Dynamics

At the meso level, intergroup bias manifests as durable status hierarchies STEM versus humanities, research-intensive versus teaching-intensive units, academic faculty versus professional/administrative staff that structure resource claims and mutual perception (Kezar & Lester, 2009). These hierarchies are self-reinforcing: higher-status units command disproportionate representation on resource-allocating committees, which in turn allows them to further entrench their structural advantage, a pattern consistent with the intergroup status literature building on Tajfel and Turner (1979). Perhaps most consequential is the well-documented transformation of task conflict into affective, or relationship, conflict. De Dreu and Weingart (2003) demonstrate meta-analytically that while moderate task conflict can be functional for decision quality, it reliably escalates into relationship conflict under conditions of resource scarcity and weak conflict-management infrastructure both hallmark conditions of the RCM-governed university department. Once conflict becomes relationship-based, Jehn's (1995) research indicates that it undermines group cohesion, satisfaction, and willingness to engage in future collaboration regardless of the objective merits of the original disagreement, making relationship conflict substantially more corrosive to institutional collaboration than the task conflict from which it originates.

3.3 Macro Level: Organizational and Systemic Structures

At the macro level, the university's governance and technology architecture actively encode silo boundaries into its operating infrastructure. Decentralized governance structures a defining feature of the RCM model and of shared governance more broadly (Birnbaum, 2004) distribute decision rights across dozens of semi-autonomous units without a correspondingly strong integrative mechanism, consistent with Katz and Kahn's (1978) open-systems observation that organizational subsystems require explicit integrating roles to prevent differentiation from overwhelming coordination. Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) fragmentation compounds this problem: many universities operate separate, poorly interoperable information systems for student records, research administration, human resources, and finance, each configured independently by its owning division. This technological fragmentation mirrors and reinforces the social fragmentation described above, making even well-intentioned cross-departmental collaboration operationally difficult, since basic tasks such as identifying shared students, co-authored grants, or overlapping course offerings require manual reconciliation across incompatible systems. Argote and Ingram (2000) argue that competitive advantage in knowledge-intensive organizations

depends on the transfer of "embedded" organizational routines across units; ERP fragmentation is a structural barrier to precisely this kind of routine transfer within the university.

4. STRATEGIC HR ARCHITECTURE AND INTERVENTIONS

Addressing silo formation requires HR interventions that directly counteract the three causal mechanisms identified in the theoretical model: negative goal interdependence, identity-based bias, and impaired information elaboration. Ulrich's (1997) HR business-partner model and Boxall and Purcell's (2016) strategic HRM framework both emphasize that HR architecture must be treated as an integrated system rather than a set of isolated policies; the four pillars below are therefore designed to be mutually reinforcing rather than independently sufficient.

4.1 The HR Intervention Matrix

HR Pillar	Core Interventions	Mechanism Addressed
Performance Management	Dual-matrix appraisals combining unit-level and cross-unit collaboration metrics; shared cross-departmental KPIs for joint initiatives; joint inter-unit performance reviews for boundary-spanning roles.	Converts negative goal interdependence into mixed-motive structures by making collaborative outcomes personally consequential for appraisal and advancement.
Talent Development & Mobility	Cross-functional job shadowing between academic and administrative units; leadership development cohorts for Department Chairs and Deans; standing interdisciplinary task forces with rotating membership.	Builds superordinate institutional identity and shared context (Nonaka's "ba") that supports information elaboration across disciplinary boundaries.
Total Rewards & Recognition	Seed funding and indirect-cost incentives for joint research grants; cross-faculty recognition awards; tenure and promotion criteria that formally weight collaborative and interdisciplinary service.	Realigns the reward structure so that collaborative behavior is materially and symbolically rewarded rather than penalized under RCM-style competition.
Organizational Design & Culture	Formalized "boundary-spanning" roles reporting jointly to multiple units; restorative, interest-based conflict resolution channels; shared governance structures with cross-unit representation.	Provides structural integrating mechanisms (Katz & Kahn, 1978) that institutionalize cross-boundary coordination rather than relying on discretionary goodwill.

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4.2 Sequencing and Interdependence of the Four Pillars

The four pillars are not independently sufficient. Ferris et al. (2007) note that political skill and structural incentive must align for organizational interventions to produce durable behavior change; a collaboration-weighted appraisal system introduced without a corresponding reward structure is likely to be perceived as unenforced rhetoric, while a rewards overhaul introduced without boundary-spanning roles to coordinate its administration risks being captured disproportionately by already well-networked units. The recommended sequencing therefore begins with organizational design (establishing boundary-spanning roles and governance representation), followed closely by performance management reform and with total rewards recalibration and full talent-mobility infrastructure phased in as trust in the new structures accumulates a sequence elaborated in Section 5.

5. PROPOSED EMPIRICAL METHODOLOGY

This paper is conceptual and literature-integrative in design, synthesizing established organizational behavior theory with the higher education governance and SHRM literatures. To move from theoretical model to empirical validation, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design is proposed for future research.

Phase 1 Quantitative Survey

A multi-institutional survey administered to faculty, professional staff, and department chairs, operationalizing structural interdependence (RCM exposure, resource competition indices), disciplinary identity strength (adapted from established social identity scales), and information elaboration (adapted cross-boundary communication frequency measures), to test H_1 and H_2 via multilevel structural equation modeling that accounts for the nested department-within-institution data structure.

Phase 2 Comparative Case Study

A matched-pairs comparative case study of institutions with high versus low "HR boundary-spanning intensity" (as defined by the presence and maturity of the four HR pillars in Section 4), using semi-structured interviews with CHROs, deans, and boundary-spanning role holders to test H_3 and to identify implementation barriers not captured by the quantitative model.

Phase 3 Longitudinal Outcome Tracking

Post-intervention tracking of institutions that adopt the Section 6 action plan, measuring change over a three-to-five-year horizon in cross-departmental co-authorship rates, joint grant applications, interdisciplinary course enrollment, and staff turnover in boundary-spanning roles as leading indicators of silo reduction.

6. EXECUTIVE ACTION PLAN AND STRATEGIC POLICY MATRIX

The following phased implementation matrix translates the HR architecture in Section 4 into a sequenced action plan for the three executive roles with primary authority over its adoption: the University President, academic Deans, and the Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO).

Horizon	President	Deans	CHRO
Short-Term (0–12 months)	Commission a cross-unit governance audit; publicly sponsor a superordinate institutional identity initiative to counterbalance disciplinary silos.	Nominate boundary-spanning role candidates; identify high-friction inter-departmental resource disputes for restorative resolution.	Redesign appraisal instruments to embed cross-unit collaboration metrics; pilot dual-matrix reviews in two to three willing departments.
Medium-Term (1–3 years)	Reform RCM subsidy formulas to reduce zero-sum competition for shared resources; establish a standing interdisciplinary steering committee.	Launch joint faculty lines and shared indirect-cost pools for interdisciplinary grants; integrate collaboration criteria into chair-level evaluation.	Scale cross-functional mobility and job-shadowing programs institution-wide; formalize collaborative service in tenure and promotion guidelines.
Long-Term (3–5+ years)	Embedcross-departmental collaboration outcomes into the institution's strategic plan and accreditation self-study narrative.	Institutionalize shared governance structures with permanent cross-unit representation on resource-allocating bodies.	Conduct longitudinal outcome tracking (Section 5, Phase 3) and iterate the HR architecture based on measured silo-reduction indicators.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This paper is subject to several important limitations. First, its conceptual, literature-integrative methodology means the hypotheses advanced in Section 2.4 remain theoretically derived and have not yet been empirically tested against original data; the mixed-methods design proposed in Section 5 is a necessary next step rather than a substitute for the analysis presented here. Second, the model does not fully account for the divergence between public and private funding models: public universities operating under state appropriation formulas face different and often more

rigid structural interdependence constraints than tuition- and endowment-driven private institutions, and the HR intervention matrix in Section 4 may require differential calibration across these funding contexts. Third, faculty unionization, present at a substantial share of public research universities, introduces collective bargaining constraints on performance management and total rewards redesign that are not addressed in the present analysis and that would materially affect the feasibility of the dual-matrix appraisal and collaboration-weighted reward interventions proposed in Section 4.1. Fourth, the paper's institutional focus on the university as a bounded organization understates the role of external accreditation bodies, disciplinary professional associations, and grant-funding agencies in reinforcing disciplinary (versus institutional) identity salience actors that lie substantially outside university HR's direct control.

Future empirical research should prioritize: (a) multi-institutional validation of the structural equation model implied by H_1 and H_2 across a stratified sample of public and private, unionized and non-unionized institutions; (b) longitudinal tracking of institutions implementing the Section 6 action plan to establish causal, rather than correlational, evidence for the HR architecture's effect on silo reduction; and (c) comparative international research examining whether the RCM-driven mechanisms identified here generalize to higher education systems with fundamentally different funding architectures, such as centrally funded European universities.

8. CONCLUSION

Cross-departmental knowledge silos in modern universities are not incidental organizational friction; they are the predictable output of decentralized budgeting architecture, strong disciplinary identity, and information-processing barriers operating in concert across the micro, meso, and macro levels of the institution. This paper has argued that dismantling these silos requires a coordinated Strategic Human Resource Management response spanning performance management, talent mobility, total rewards, and organizational design sequenced deliberately and sustained through structural governance reform rather than cultural appeals alone. The executive action plan in Section 6 offers university leadership a concrete, phased pathway toward that outcome, while the limitations discussed in Section 7 underscore that successful implementation will require calibration to each institution's specific funding model and labor relations context. Ultimately, the capacity of universities to address their most pressing interdisciplinary challenges from climate research to public health to workforce readiness depends on their ability to convert structurally competitive departments into a coordinated, knowledge-sharing institution.

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