



## Analysis on the Grass Root Organization of Teaching in Schools of Higher Education in America and its Reference Meanings to China

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### Abstract

The grass root organization of teaching in schools of higher education is the elemental cell in teaching management in schools. With the deepening of managerial system reform in schools of higher education, most colleges have carried out the adjustment of schools and department and disciplines and specialties and have started to design talent cultivation plans according to specialties. Under this situation, how to establish reasonable grass root organization of teaching according to the actual conditions of schools becomes the urgent problem that we are now encountered with. This paper aims at putting forward the reference meanings of American grass root organization of teaching to China.

**Keywords:** Grass root organization of teaching, American schools of higher education, Discipline

The structure and the management of the grass root organization of teaching in schools of higher education belong to the category of research on the microstructure of schools of higher education, which mainly reflect the thoughts and the actions on the value orientation of teaching, the positioning of teaching and the special construction of schools of higher education. The grass root organization of teaching in schools of higher education is the elemental cell in teaching management in schools; it not only shoulders the tasks of making out and executing teaching plans, organizing and checking teaching reforms, and cultivating and assessing and commenting teachers, but also bears the assignment of evaluating, examining, and applying for scientific research projects, and harmonizing teaching and scientific research activities; it is the most basic unit in carrying out and executing the tasks and aims of schools. Therefore, the scientific property, the rationality and the effectiveness of the grass root organization of teaching in schools of higher education have always been among the basic subjects in the researches on the management of schools of higher education.

America is one of the most developed countries in the world. Form its historical development, the fundamental reason for its developed economy lies in its developed science and technology and education. At present, American universities take up a very important position in the world higher education; therefore, the experience on the establishment and the development of grass root organization of teaching of America is worthy our reference.

### 1. The structure and the features of the grass root organization of teaching of schools of higher education in America

#### 1.1 The organizational structure of higher education system in America

The grass root organization of teaching in American universities is department. If the higher education system in America is to be put into layers, the detailed layers are as follows:

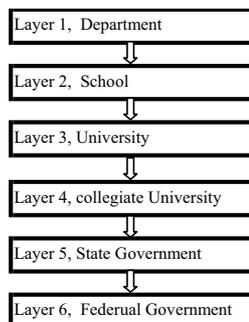


Figure 1. Higher Education System of America

### *1.2 The emergence and the development of grass root organization of teaching*

Department, the grass root organization of teaching in American universities, emerged with the emergence and the development of universities and the change of the functions of universities. American universities originated from the colleges established in colony period. From 1636, the time the first college was set up, to 1819, the time Federal Supreme Court made judgment on Dartmouth College Case, the number of specialties in American colleges was small, scientific researches were not carried out, and teaching task was simple, therefore, the organizational form of colleges was simple too. During that time, American colleges mainly adopted the management mode under the leadership of director board with the prexy as the responsible person. The prexy is the only full time teacher in the college, who at the same time also performs all the administration and maintenance function of the college. No administration organizations were set up under the position of the prexy and the decisions were made by director board of the college.

From 1819 to 1915, American universities underwent revolutionary changes, where the main features of modern system were formed. The enlargement of universities, the introduce of scientific education, the starting of postgraduate education, and the expansion of university functions make university organizations growing complicate and make the inside management layers continuously being divided. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Harvard University and Virginia University started to set up departments. However, that the status of department in American universities was actually recognized and that department became the grass root organization of teaching in universities were the outcomes of America's learning from Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eliot, the president of Harvard University first developed elective course system. The establishment of elective course system, to some extent, enhanced the position of department. Department then exerts functions in the setup of courses, making out and executing teaching plans, employing and promoting teachers, and research activity plans.

From 1915 to the present, almost one century, American universities have developed towards collegiate and complicate universities. The statuses of postgraduate education and scientific researches become increasingly important. Department, as the basic operation unit in schools, has fully exerted its agility and management vigor and becomes the unit that combines the lower stage of higher education (graduate education) with the higher stage (postgraduate education). Department organizationally and structurally combines the graduate education with postgraduate education and creates combined environment for the education of the two stages.

### *1.3 The structure of grass root organization of teaching*

Department is the grass root organization of teaching in American universities and is at the same time the basic administration unit. The dean of department is the lowest class in administrative management system. The dean of department is a non-personal post. The dean of department will altered every three years. Generally, the dean is elected among professors, authorized by prexy and appointed by president. The dean of department usually reports to one or several prexies and at the same time reports one or several university academic administration leaders, such as president, academic vice-president and educational administration. Large sized department generally has vice-dean, who is mainly in charge of teaching and scientific research. Under the layer of dean, there are the assistant for dean and the secretary for dean, who are in charge of detailed administrative affairs. Within a department, the dean shall respect the rights of professors and other personnel, cooperate with various committees of the department, and execute relevant decisions of the committees.

Department is also an academic administration organ. Department is a teaching and scientific research unit that is composed of scholars of certain discipline or field. In vertical structure, the department does not have so strict grade sense. The function grades of department are professor, associate professor, assistant professor, and lecture. The professor assessment and comment committee formed by teachers and administrative organ formed by administrative personnel work separately and cooperatively and bear teaching management task together.

## **2. The reference meanings on the reform of grass root organization of teaching in schools of higher education of China**

At the beginning of 1950s, in the reform process of China on establishing socialist university system according to former Soviet Union mode, the distinctive feature in the inner organizational structure of universities was that two layers structure, "university-department", was adopted. According to the experience of former Soviet Union, under the layer of department, teaching research group(room), grass root organization of teaching was established. After the conclusion of the reform, the form of "university-department" and teaching and research group (room) within department has maintained to be the inner organizational structure in universities of China.

With the deepening of the reform on the management system inside schools of higher education in China, almost all universities have carried out the adjustment of schools and departments and disciplines, and have restructured and conformed the course system. Specialties of each discipline also broke the original pattern and the specialty structure was adjusted. The universities started to design talents cultivating plans according to specialties. Under this situation, teaching and research room, a grass root organization of teaching which is set up according to one or several courses of

similar properties and is attached to certain specialty, cannot meet the demands of the discipline construction and scientific research development of schools of higher education. To constitute reasonable grass root organization of teaching will set up basic platform for teaching reform, which makes it necessary to enable discipline theory system and concept frame system to adapt to the development of science, to systematically combine theoretical thinking pattern with science and technology knowledge, to conform science and culture with humanist culture and to realize cross-discipline combination. Through analysis and research on the grass root organization of teaching in schools of higher education in America, we can learn the following experience:

### *2.1 The grass root organization of teaching in American universities underwent a process of inheriting, reference and innovation*

The development of the higher education on America, from imitating Oxford and Cambridge to set up the first school of higher education, Harvard University, to set up higher education system of perfect layer structure, underwent a process of inheriting, reference and innovation. The primary colleges in America almost copied the teaching mode of British classic universities and inherited the traditional teaching mode, self-regulated university. In the process of setting up grass root organization of teachings, although America referred to the lecture system of Germany, America did not totally copy Germany. Rather, America started from the realistic demands, to combine universities with society, to serve the society, to provide university education of students of large number, to be easy for developing scientific researches, developed department system. From the development of the higher education of America, we can sense the important meaning of combining reference with innovation. How to closely combine them and harmoniously development them? This is task easy to say and hard to do. We need to try constantly and accumulate and develop gradually.

### *2.2 To set up grass root organization of teaching based on the first class discipline*

The Classification of Instructional Programs of America was developed in 1980 by NCES and was issued by the Ministry of Education. Because the text form of the CIP is similar to the discipline and specialty catalog of China, some will call the CIP the discipline and specialty catalog of America. The CIP underwent three amendments respectively in 1985, 1990 and 2000. The final version of CIP-2000 was fixed in April 2000. Let us take CIP-2000 as an example. CIP-2000 classifies disciplines and specialties into three layers, which are respectively represented by two digit code (such as 01), four digit code (such as 01.02) and six digit code (such as 01.02.03).

Two digit code refers to a group of disciplines that are closely connected, that is discipline group, equal to the discipline type of China. Four digit code refers to discipline, that is a group of specialties that are similar in contents and cultivation aims, similar to the first class discipline of China. Six digit code represents a independent specialty, equal to the second class discipline of China. The grass root organization of teaching in American university is department, which is established on the basis of what is similar to the first class discipline of China. (Bao, 2004)

Because many universities in America place common education as the core position, in the first to second years, students almost do not contact the departments. Rather, students will study a series of basic courses in schools divided according to discipline types. During the study in this stage, students can study extensive knowledge and build a solid knowledge foundation in human science and natural science. At the same time, because the department is established on the basis of first class discipline, the department can put forward the requirement to center on teaching within a frame of wide discipline knowledge and even a cross-discipline scale. The teaching plans of universities are executed by departments. Various scientific researches are mainly organized by departments. The department does not set up organizations according to specialties (such as the specialty teaching and research room of China). The Department takes into account the different study aim and demands of students and makes out different teaching plans for students. For example, the Mechanical Engineer Department of Massachusetts Institute of Technology designs three teaching plans for their students: one is designed for students who will be engaged in mechanical engineering work and the other two are designed for students who are interested in mechanical engineering and still hope to extend specialty knowledge so as to have more choices in finding jobs or double-specialty study. (Mechanical Engineering at MIT) The teaching plans of different aims prescribe the core courses that must be completed. Students are encouraged, on the basis of diligently studying the compulsory courses, to reasonable design their own course according to their own demand, interests and tastes under the direction of supervisors in the department. From the above analysis, we can find that American universities establish departments on the basis of first class discipline, which is beneficial to students to learn wide knowledge background and gives a rather big free space for students to study comprehensively and fully shows the cultivation concept "student-oriented".

### *2.3 The harmonious development of teaching and scientific research in department*

Scientific research is the one of the main task of American universities. The Departments in American universities, from the time they were established, have born the double tasks, to develop teaching as well as scientific researches. Department is an organized teaching environment and is also a scientific research environment. The scientific researches of department are mainly shown in the innovation of knowledge, techniques and thoughts on the basis of

basic researches and actual application. With the comprehensive exploration of knowledge field, the department plays the basic role in harmonizing the development of teaching and scientific researches. In organization structure, department provides a teaching platform for large sized application knowledge. The members of scientific research groups are also members of departments. The teaching group and scientific research group are integrated in the departments. The close combination of teaching and scientific researches within the department makes it possible that the teaching of the same course inside the department, due to covering different discipline category, is carried out by teachers from different scientific research groups in the same department so that students can further and profoundly understand the structural system, course arrangement and innovation practice of the discipline. At the same time, the flourish development of scientific research in the department will not only improve the innovation capacity of teachers and enrich the teaching contents, but also be good for enlightening and guiding students to participate in extensive scientific researches and developing the creative thinking capacities of students.

#### *2.4 The balanced development of academic power and administrative power*

Under the influence of the tradition of European universities, America universities insist that academic affairs be determined by scholars and professors participate in the management of schools. In the departments of American universities, teachers and administrative personnel work separately and cooperatively and should the task of teaching management together. In the departments, usually, there are standing committees and special committees formed by professors, such as official business discussion committee, academic planning committee, science and research committee, teaching committee, and academic policy committee. Each committee is formed by 5 to 8 members, with 15 being the most. The tasks of the committees are, according to the entrustment of the dean of the department, to discuss the academic affairs, such as teaching and scientific researches and to make decisions. (Zhang, 2002). The existence of the committees provides a organization guarantee for university teachers to participate in teaching management.

The teaching reform, course setup, teaching plan, teaching assessment, teacher employment and the promotion and life time employment of teachers in a department, as the grass root organization of teaching in university, shall all be determined through the discussion of department professor meeting. The administrative personnel mainly exert functions in executing teaching policies and plans and harmonizing teaching and scientific research activities. Therefore, to some extent, in the teaching management in America universities, teachers control the teaching policies, which shows the management thoughts “professors manage the university”. (Zhang, 2002)

In the department of American universities, because of the mutual restriction, mutual harmonizing, and mutual supervision between academic power and administrative power, the academic power and administrative power are balanced within a department, which creates a equal, free, efficient and proper restricted environment within the department.

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