Challenges for academic organizations’ legitimacy in Colombia’s transition to a postconflict context

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: We explore and explain how academic organizations attempt to establish legitimacy in a transition to a postconflict context, and we examine the ethical challenges that emerge from insightful approaches to formal education in such contexts.

Design: We use legitimacy theory to present a case study of a business school in Medellin, Colombia (herein referred to by the pseudonym BS-MED) in the empirical setting of the end of the most prolonged armed conflict in the world.

Findings: We identify the mechanisms implemented by BS-MED to comply with the Colombian government’s peace process and rhetoric of business profitability and the faculty members’ initiatives in response to social and academic tensions.

Originality: This study identifies the sources of the tensions and discrepancies between the regulatory and pragmatic versus moral and cultural-cognitive criteria of legitimacy in transitions to a postconflict context. This examination advances our understanding of the challenges that organizations face regarding changes to legitimacy over time. The extreme setting of our case positions academics as key players who lead the search for legitimacy. This study challenges the understandings of legitimacy in the literature on organizations, which rarely consider broader sociopolitical transitions to a peace context.

Keywords: Academic organizations, Legitimacy, Armed Conflict, Colombia
INTRODUCTION

Which initiatives by academic organizations respond to the global challenges derived from armed conflict? Research suggests that administrators of academic organizations respond to institutional pressures (Scott, 2014) to obtain and maintain legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017; Sonpar, Pazzaglia & Kornijenko, 2010; Snelson-Powell, Grosvold, & Millington, 2016) by channeling resources to meet the mercantilist legitimacy criteria set by business groups, which emphasize academic expertise and professionalism in response to businesses’ needs for educated professionals (Juusola, Kettunen, & Alajoutsijarvi, 2015; Starkey & Tempest, 2005). However, after long periods of armed conflict, one way that academic organizations could establish legitimacy might be by integrating displaced-by-war individuals into their academic programs to contribute to a transition to peace (Theidon, 2009). Nevertheless, such organizational change might be challenged by the societal norms and values in and outside academic institution (e.g., Alajoutsijärvi, Kettunen, & Tikkanen, 2012; Treviño et al., 2014). We explore and explain how academic organizations attempt to establish legitimacy in a transition to a postconflict context, and we explore the ethical challenges that emerge from insightful approaches to formal education in such contexts. Our study was guided by the following research question: how do academic organizations in a transition to a postconflict context attempt to establish and maintain legitimacy?

Colombia presents a unique context that might be unfamiliar to some scholars; however, it faces some of the “universal” challenges such as peace (United Nations, 2015). Our study is based on the case of a business school in Medellin, Colombia (herein referred to by the pseudonym BS-MED) and expands on the existing theories of legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017; Yin, 2016). Our theoretical framework is based on legitimacy theory and research
(Deephouse et al., 2017; Diez-de-Castro, Peris-Ortiz & Diez-Martín, 2018; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) to explore and discuss conflicts in the overarching system of the symbolism and practices at BS-MED in response to Colombia’s transition to a postconflict country (Lindgreen, Córdoba, Maon, & Mendoza, 2010). The findings suggest contradictions in seeking legitimacy at academic organizations in the transition to a postconflict context. For example, BS-MED seems to struggle to reconcile what it claims to do in its study programs with contextual challenges such as violence and crime (Theidon, 2007).

Our study provides two theoretical contributions. First, we advance our understanding of the \textit{challenged by legitimacy} scenario by identifying the sources of tensions and discrepancies among contradictory regulatory and pragmatic versus moral and cultural-cognitive criteria in establishing legitimacy in the transition to a postconflict setting. Our second contribution is to advance our understanding of the challenges that organizations face regarding how legitimacy changes over time. Our case based on BS-MED offers a dialogue on legitimacy at academic organizations by presenting empirical illustrations of the tensions related to BS-MED’s aspirations for legitimacy by responding to businesses’ mercantilist logic, which conflicts with the local context.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we present the theoretical background, which is followed by our methodology, the context of our case, and our findings. Next, our observations and a discussion of the findings are presented to develop a dialogue on legitimacy theory and research on academic organizations.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Legitimacy

Organizational legitimacy is defined as “the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions” (Deephouse et al., 2017: 7). The literature on organizational legitimacy argues that to survive, organizations must comply with the rules and belief systems of their environment. Furthermore, organizations in the same environment tend to “choose similar strategies to achieve legitimacy” (Hillman & Wan, 2005: 324), which is argued as isomorphism (Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Scott, 2014).

Isomorphism pressures were explored by Deephouse et al. (2017) to reveal the four distinct legitimacy criteria of regulatory, pragmatic, moral, and cultural-cognitive legitimacy.

**Regulatory legitimacy** results from rulemaking and enforcing activities within state agencies (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008: 15). The concept of sociopolitical or regulatory legitimacy involves implied coercive authority (Archibald, 2004). Organizations are institutionalized because they are regulated by governments or other authorities through the establishment of rules, norms, laws, and sanctions that force them to act and behave in a certain way (Díez-de-Castro et al., 2018: 11).

**Pragmatic legitimacy** relies on self-interested calculations about an organization’s immediate audiences (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015). One suggestion is that “immediacy involves direct exchanges between organization and audience; however, it can also involve broader political, economic, or social interdependencies, in which organizational action nonetheless visibly affects the audience’s well-being” (Suchman, 1995: 578). Pragmatic legitimacy is also suggested to rest on discursive evaluations, which results in judgment toward the organization and its practices by stakeholders (Bitektine, 2011: 157). Pragmatic legitimacy is the degree to
which an organization represents the interests of stakeholders or provides them with favorable exchanges (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). According to Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2015), challenges to an academic organization’s pragmatic legitimacy limits its contribution to its nation’s competitive capability and wealth.

*Moral legitimacy* reflects a positive normative evaluation of an organization and its activities (Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimacy depends on judgments that address whether an activity is acceptable, that is, “the right thing to do” (Suchman, 1995: 579). It occurs when the actions of an organization are consistent with social values (Suchman, 1995). Audiences grant moral legitimacy when they perceive an organization as defending and pursuing principles that are accepted and valued as socially positive above private interests (Diez-de-Castro et al., 2018: 9).

*Cultural-cognitive legitimacy* refers to the subconscious acceptance of organizations and their activities that are perceived as “normal” (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015: 279). Cultural-cognitive legitimacy “entails constitutive norms and beliefs that enhance comprehensibility because they create the impression of meaningfulness, predictability and trust” (Archibald, 2004: 177). In this study, academic organizations and associations (i.e., academics and students’ associations) act as cultural authorities that generate either cultural or constitutive legitimacy based on normative and cognitive/cultural schema (e.g., Archibald, 2004). This involves the acceptance of authority according to comprehensibility, necessity, or inevitability, e.g., “taken-for-grantedness” and shared understanding (deephouse et al., 2017; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Treviño et al., 2004; Suchman, 1995).

To assess how academic organizations respond to different legitimacy criteria, we follow the scenarios of *gaining, maintaining, challenged by, responding to, and institutionally*
innovating legitimacy, as proposed by Deephouse et al. (2017). These scenarios reflect evolving situations that can be viewed by considering both academic organizations and their agents, that is, faculty members who exercise limited autonomy as they actively mediate messages about what constitutes “good practice” (Coburn, 2004: 235). *Gaining legitimacy* occurs in a “stable institutional environment” (Deephouse et al., 2017: 22). This implies that the organization must demonstrate its propriety and fit within preexisting regulatory and pragmatic standards, moral values, and cultural-cognitive meaning systems (Deephouse et al., 2017). *Maintaining legitimacy* involves routinely reinforcing stakeholders’ perception that the organization continues to adhere to standards of appropriateness, as reflected by various criteria (Deephouse et al., 2017: 22). The *challenged by legitimacy* scenario “brings to the foreground the existence and point of view of multiple stakeholders” who may “question legitimacy on multiple grounds”—i.e., recognizing heterogeneous sources and heterogeneous criteria. In the same way, challenges by different stakeholders take “unique forms” (e.g., regulatory challenges from the state versus challenges from aggravated stakeholders) that may question legitimacy on multiple grounds (recognizing heterogeneous criteria) (Deephouse et al., 2017: 15). Deephouse et al. (2017) proposed responding to legitimacy challenges rather than defending or repairing them. This is based on the assumption that challenges to legitimacy are institutional pressures to which organizations can respond, and possible responses vary on the reactive/proactive dimension (Deephouse et al., 2017: 22). *Institutionally innovating* scenarios involve actions to conceptualize and create new institutional rules, norms, and meaning systems in the institutional environment, which are “qualitatively different from the actions required to demonstrate the appropriateness of a new instance of an already familiar form within a stable institutional regime” (Deephouse et al., 2017: 24).
These four legitimacy criteria and scenarios might provide academic organizations with a repertoire to design and implement strategies to gain and maintain legitimacy. We concur with Weber (1978) who discussed the importance of social practice being oriented toward “maxims” or rules and suggested that legitimacy can result from conformity with both formal laws and social norms (Weber, 1978). Formal laws are understood as coercive isomorphism pressures imposed by local governments on academic organizations, whereas normative isomorphism pressures academic organizations to meet goals dictated by, for example, accreditation agencies. This stream of research is outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, we aim to explore and explain how academic organizations attempt to establish legitimacy in a transition to a postconflict context and to examine the ethical challenges that emerge from insightful approaches to formal education in such contexts.

We posit that the aspirations of academic organizations’ management teams to comply with coercive national pressures might contradict and partially fail to respond to the needs of local business groups. Alajoutsijärvi et al. (2015: 288) proposed that “academic institutions must concentrate on acting as academic institutions with multiple constituent audiences rather than being driven by market logic and an interest in a few core constituent audiences.” However, we posit that faculty members can also develop legitimacy by implementing innovative practices in classrooms to make sense of course syllabi in the local context. To explore these issues, we use a legitimacy lens that provides a framework to assist in understanding the beliefs and values of the stakeholders in our case study. The following section presents the methodology developed.
METHODOLOGY

Empirical Setting

The setting of this research is the postconflict period in Colombia, following the end of the most prolonged armed conflict in the world. The Colombian government reached a negotiated peace with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] (FARC) on August 24, 2016, which ended five decades of armed conflict that had a significant human impact: more than 220,000 dead, 25,007 missing, 5,712,506 displaced, 16,340 targeted assassinations, 1,982 massacres, 27,023 kidnapped, 1,754 victims of sexual violence, and 6,421 cases of forced recruitment (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013). Higher education organizations have been directly impacted by the armed conflict, which has been described as “part of day-to-day life” (Pacheco, 2013). According to Pacheco (2013), “struggles for the political and economic control of campuses have been bloody and claimed several victims.” Members of higher education organizations have been reported among the “killed, tortured, and disappeared” persons from direct attacks. In one such incident, approximately 50 academics and students were kidnapped by guerrillas. Many public and private organizations, including BS-MED (Observations), have security systems in place, such as fences, armed guards, surveillance cameras, campaigns of self and mutual surveillance, awareness programs and seminars on organized crime and violence, and hotlines and emergency lines.

The former president of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), established a national development plan for 2014–2018 entitled *Todos por un nuevo país* (All for a New Country). It comprised three pillars—peace, equality, and education—and emphasized the aspiration from a society dedicated to building peace, social inclusion, and economic development (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014). President Santos aspired for
Colombia to be the best-educated country in Latin America by 2025 (Reisz, 2017). In practice, Colombia’s private higher education organizations were requested to actively contribute to the All for a New Country plan by accepting displaced persons and ex-combatants into their study programs (e.g., Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014).

Research Design

We began our research with two broad objectives: 1) to explore and explain how BS-MED sought to establish legitimacy and 2) to examine the ethical challenges in emerging approaches to formal education. We wanted to understand the contextual constraints (e.g., Yin, 2016) of integrating heterogeneous students at BS-MED. To accomplish this goal, we held semi-structured interviews and conversations with students, academics, and administrators. Between 2015 and 2016, we interacted with 30 individuals (see Table 1).

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INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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The primary objectives of our semi-structured interviews were to understand BS-MED’s values, strategies, and management programs. We also aimed to learn how different students and faculty members’ perspectives on BS-MED’s daily practices related to the social system in terms of Medellin’s responsible management education, rules, values, and norms. We consulted various BS-MED documents and government reports to identify and characterize the context of our research, as shown in Table 2.

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INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE
We triangulated our empirical material (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018) to develop a broader understanding of the consequences of armed conflict and responses to conflict at the macro, meso, and micro levels. This was an interactive process that moved from the general perspective analyzed in our field notes and observations at BS-MED to specific semi-structured interviews and that advanced our research by modifying our interview approach. For example, in our initial interviews in 2015, some of our interviewees expressed discomfort with discussing armed conflict at BS-MED (Field Notes).

As our research evolved, we redesigned our semi-structured interview protocol and developed a narrative approach (e.g., Czarniawska, 2004) for the continuation of our fieldwork. The narrative approach enabled us to converse with our subjects about their interpretations of their context (i.e., the conditions in which their teaching is performed), their daily routines at BS-MED, and the implications of armed conflict for the people at BS-MED. We also examined the emerging policies and practices that were implemented at BS-MED to create a buffer against the consequences of armed conflict, along with our subjects’ perceptions of these policies and practices; we also reviewed the syllabi from the Bachelor’s-level management and Master’s-level business administration (MBA) programs at BS-MED. Refining our approach in this way helped us to focus on the innovative strategies implemented by faculty members and students instead of directly discussing the impact of armed conflict.

Because the authors are native Spanish speakers, all interviews were conducted in Colombian Spanish. The interviews were held between October and December 2015 and in October 2016 and lasted an average of 80 minutes. All semi-structured interviews and conversations were taped and transcribed verbatim, and notes were taken.
Empirical Material Analysis

We developed an abductive coding method (Larsson, 2010) in NVivo11 (QSR International Pty Ltd, Australia, qualitative software) in accordance with the evoked texts (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and referred to the existing and novel strategies developed at BS-MED as a result of armed conflict. We were aware that our reality as researchers was partial and incomplete in relation to the backgrounds of different stakeholders (students, faculty, and administrators at BS-MED).

Thus, to ensure the quality of the empirical material (Welch & Piekkari, 2017), a detachment procedure (Campbell, 2001) was implemented with the aim of separating ourselves from the informants and individuals’ life experiences and feelings (Davies, 2010) to prevent magnifying their accounts (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Thus, we triangulated all empirical material to develop a broader understanding of the context of our research. The coding yielded an initial scheme with 25 codes, which were redefined to compare topics across our sources and the theoretical background presented; this led to nine redefined first-order codes derived from our abductive method. This means that, for example, our legitimacy codes (e.g., regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive legitimacy criteria and the challenged by scenario) were derived from our theoretical background, whereas local social profiles and the Americanization of the management program codes were developed both deductively and inductively. The nine first-order codes were categorized into nine theoretical themes associated with the following four aggregate dimensions: 1) institutional change/peace agreement; 2) stakeholders’ evaluation criteria for academic organizations; 3) organizational change at academic institutions; and 4) the challenges related to organizational changes.
In the second stage of the coding procedure, we abstracted from the first-order codes to develop interpretations of the empirical material, for example, observations and narratives from the empirical material and past research that referred to guerrilla combatants as rebel-Marxists and nonurban students (e.g., displaced-by-war individuals from rural areas) were defined as retrograde. We grouped such narratives into more abstract second-order codes termed 1) *Seeking to Comply with Legitimacy Criteria*, 2) *Responding in a Transition to a Postconflict Context*, and 3) *Challenged by the Legacy of Armed Conflict*. Finally, we returned to the collected narratives to further analyze them in relation to the theoretical background on legitimacy. This process was interactive, and we moved from the micro level of students and faculty members’ responses to formal education processes and government strategies for transforming Colombia to the best-educated country in Latin America by 2025 (Ministerio de Educación, 2015) within the context of the peace agreement. This process allowed us to conduct a theoretical abstraction to identify *how academic organizations’ legitimacy is challenged by a transition to a postconflict context*. The following section presents the findings.

**FINDINGS**

In this section, we present our findings based on the combined statements collected from directors (D.1–4), academics (P.1–6), students (S.1–11), employers (E.1–7), and administrative staff (A.1–2) at BS-MED in Medellin, Colombia. BS-MED is the business school and management faculty at University-CO, a private Catholic institution that offers educational programs from the elementary level to higher education in health, engineering, and social sciences. BS-MED offers an MBA program and Bachelor’s programs in economics,
management, and international business. The statements were complemented with secondary material (see Table 2).

Seeking to Comply with Regulatory and Pragmatic Legitimacy Criteria

According to the Colombian government, education is both a right and an instrument that “increases social mobility, labor competitiveness, access and quality of employment, improvement in income levels and active participation in a globalized world” (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2018). Based on the governmental framework for education, statements from faculty members at BS-MED suggest that the Colombian Ministry of Education mandated that ex-combatants and displaced people were entitled to scholarships to study at private or public organizations if they met the entry requirements of the school (Respondents, D.4 & P.2). The collected narratives suggest that BS-MED complied with Colombian policy regarding the postconflict scholarship programs by providing such scholarships. The recipients of the scholarships—termed scholarship students in this paper—may be displaced people, victims of conflict, low-income students, or students who excelled in their previous studies.

Given the transition to a postconflict context, University-CO has designed and implemented awareness seminars and conferences in coordination with BS-MED to discuss social issues, such as the peace process in Colombia:

The University and BS-MED have always, always been directed to organize many forums with many guest speakers from other countries, such as Mexico and Guatemala, to discuss conflict in the city [and its implications for our region and country] (Respondents, E.5).
The University-CO system mentors students to help with their academic life at the university in a program called the “stay program.” The stay program is designed to prevent students from dropping out of BS-MED, as explained by a student:

...one hundred percent support comes from the school in all aspects... for example, the initiative [stay program] assesses the reason that I failed to pass a course...or if I had some difficulties... and, thank God, I have the support from the school. [The stay program] has always guided and encouraged me... [for example, they tell me] “ah well... there are other options, do not worry [there are other options].” I have support from the school, one hundred percent
(Respondents, S.1).

We analyzed the syllabi of the Bachelor’s-level management program and the MBA program at BS-MED and compared them with University-CO’s mission, vision, values, and principles (BS-MED & University-CO’s Internal Documents). We found no reference to violence, organized crime, narcoterrorism, or armed conflict in Colombia in either the course descriptions or the assigned readings. The readings assigned in the syllabi are books and journal articles by North American scholars in English or translated into Spanish (Secondary Data). The interviewed faculty members commented that based on the voluntary High Quality Accreditation from the Ministry of Education in Colombia, all BS-MED’s academic programs are accredited by the National Consul for Accreditation (CNA, 2017; Respondents, P.1 & P.4). Faculty members assign readings in English, that is, a different language than Spanish, because they are selected from the EBSCO database, for which BS-MED pays a subscription (Respondent, P.1; Secondary Data). The interviewed faculty members and students also indicated that they were
under pressure from accreditation organizations to provide course content based on BS-MED’s regulations, which left little flexibility for integrating social problems:

I believe that here at the university, everything is well organized and problems related to armed conflict are not discussed. ... “[These problems exist] outside the university, [but] the study programs do not cover such issues (Respondents, S.5).

This quotation illustrates students and faculty members’ concerns regarding the contextualization of the study programs at BS-MED, particularly in relation to security-risk issues. Concerns related to “social change” in Colombia are an expectation of University-CO board members and academics at BS-MED (Field Notes). However, the contextualization of the study programs and faculty members’ work appears to create ethical dilemmas for faculty members regarding whether their time is better spent working on articles and presentations for local organizations or writing journal articles (Respondents, P.2 & P.5; Secondary Data).

According to our empirical data, faculty members felt more rewarded when writing articles for local newspapers or BS-MED’s newsletter than when writing articles for journals:

We need to [make hard decisions]. For example, results from a social project could be published in a high-ranking journal or in a local newspaper. For me, publishing in local newspapers has more impact... Often, I receive phone calls from local [organizations] asking me to give a talk about the social project [that I have published in a local newspaper]... So, if we put too much emphasis on publishing only in high-impact journals, we could accomplish that [but] at the expense of [investing time in disseminating] social projects that are necessary and fundamental (Respondents, P.5).
Our findings suggest that students and faculty members tend to separate issues related to armed conflict from the content of the study programs at BS-MED:

_The study program should not address these topics [armed conflict]. The study program is the foundation on which the student learns and develops different capabilities and knowledge. Faculty members can approach these topics [armed conflict] with the students based on their own perspective. The person [lecturer] makes an impact, but that impact does not affect the study program_ (Respondents, S.4).

We collected statements from students that suggest the complexity of responding to academic rigor and security-risk issues:

..._How can we go to a company and not think about what we can do for the context, for example, as well as economic interests? Firms and students are shaped by everything that surrounds us. We cannot say which neighborhoods in Medellin are safe, but in the neighborhood where we live or study... everything that is going on is affecting me. I do believe that most human contributions are missing [from study programs at BS-MED]... and we only see the economic side_ (Respondents, S.9).

These quotations illustrate some of the moral and pragmatic criteria for evaluating organizational legitimacy according to our informants, given the institutional change in Colombia.

Based on our analysis, students avoid internships at firms in high-risk areas (Interviews). The legacy of the prolonged armed conflict in Colombia appears to present security issues that
are problematic for integrating the local context into academic activities, as explained by a scholarship student:

I think more dynamics, more things that we can provide that are missing. For example, a field trip to a neighborhood that is not so dangerous, but you have the support of others [e.g., security personnel] (Respondents, S.9).

The legacy of the armed conflict appears to engender public and private organizations to invest in security measures to protect their users, which—according to our informants—creates a protective “bubble.” As explained by a member of the administrative unit at BS-MED,

...I believe that sometimes we live in a bubble... while we are on the University’s campus, which is surrounded by anti-theft fencing, “we know” that no one will attack, that a bomb will not [just explode], that a crazy man will not attack. I feel protected...so it is like living in a bubble and “we [the staff members]” tend to forget what’s going on outside... (Respondents, A.1).

We discussed with our subjects the “bubble” metaphor that emerged from our empirical material analysis. A reflection on this metaphor in relation to BS-MED study programs was provided by a faculty member:

...I believe that at this moment, talking about what’s going on here [i.e., the peace process in Colombia], BS-MED’s role is distant, apathetic, and indifferent [toward armed conflict]...it is because BS-MED has not developed a platform from which to discuss these social problems with the academic community (Respondents, P.4).
BS-MED’s attempts to gain and maintain regulatory and pragmatic legitimacy criteria appear to conflict with moral and cultural-cognitive legitimacy criteria. These findings are presented below.

Seeking to Comply with Moral and Cultural-Cognitive Legitimacy Criteria

Legitimacy changes over time as organizations implement change in response to their institutional context. In the transition to a postconflict context, our empirical material suggests that University-CO continues to adhere to its moral values (University-CO Webpage) and implements them at each of the schools within the university system. The university’s moral system is based on Christian humanism principles that aim for the human transformation of students within an integral social formation (University-CO Internal Documents). The interculturality principle is explained as respect for diversity and an opportunity for students and faculty members to “mix” with students from different backgrounds (Respondents, D.2). According to the faculty members and members of the Board of Directors who were interviewed, the interculturality principle promotes “coexistence and social cohesion” (Respondents, D.3 & D.4). Our empirical analysis suggests that University-CO’s main interest is to encourage humanistic values in its study programs, as emphasized by a senior manager:

*We try to develop our students based on Christian humanist principles; we are not going to convert anyone [to the Catholic religion], but yes, we are going to impart Christian humanist values* (Respondents, D.1).

University-CO aims to integrate and encourage humanism among all its students (University-CO Webpage). Students in all segments of University-CO, including the social sciences (of which BS-MED is a part), must complete a humanism course. A University-CO
board member emphasized that “students must complete humanistic courses before graduating from any study program in the university system” (Respondents, D.4); at BS-MED, this is a compulsory module worth 10 credits.

The Christian and humanist principles were emphasized by faculty members as important factors that differentiate University-CO from other organizations:

*I always insist strongly on [humanism], even from employers, because they recognize that the difference between this university and other universities is the human factor* (Respondents, P.1).

Christian principles such as nondiscrimination and humanism also seem to reflect the reality of scholarship students:

*I like the atmosphere at this university. I’m saying this because I’m from a low social stratum, and not many students [of this social stratum] are found here... the good thing is that the enrollment program [when I joined academic BS-MED] helped me [to avoid feeling] discriminated against by anyone or anything* (Respondents, S.3).

The tuition fee for the Bachelor’s management program at BS-MED is US$ 2,434.30 per semester (University-CO Internal Documents). In conversations with faculty members, they explained the difficulties of students who come from households with limited economic resources and who face the dilemma of whether they should buy supplies such as books with the economic support that they receive or whether the money would be “better used” to buy food:

*...for example, in the marketing program, the students are required to buy different materials, but some students [with scholarships] cannot even afford to*
pay for [for example] public buses... therefore, for these students, education is a challenge (Respondents, D.1).

Our narratives suggest different challenges in relation not only to the content of the management programs at BS-MED but also to the legacy of the armed conflict. These findings are presented below.

Challenges from the Legacy of Armed Conflict

The narratives collected indicated that it is challenging to integrate scholarship students at BS-MED, as emphasized by an administrator:

*It has been difficult for us to integrate [students and employees from] different societal backgrounds. For example, when hiring a new employee, we first assess his/her home location. If the applicant’s home is located in an area considered dangerous, we will not hire the candidate—we tend to assume that if the candidate is close to violence and a crime environment, then it [violence and crime] will also come to us* (Respondents, A.2).

This statement was referenced by our informants as an example of the cultural-cognitive perception of scholarship students, which (as reflected by our interviews and conversations) portrays the narrative of socioeconomic exclusion found in the context of our research. Social exclusion based on students’ background or household income appears to make students skeptical of the reintegration program imposed by the Colombian government (Field Notes). As expressed by a student,

*I have family members who were kidnapped or left Colombia... so I do not really understand the rationale behind integrating and assimilating fighters at the*
university. Even if I had a business, it would be very difficult for me to hire someone like that [i.e., an ex-combatant] (Respondents, S.7).

We observed student life within the University-CO campus, including the library, sports facilities, administrative and faculty offices, classrooms, and canteen areas. Our observations provided accounts of different social classes at BS-MED. We observed students with apparently fewer resources, which was noticeable through their clothing, mobile phones, and/or computers, along with the use of public transportation to travel to the campus (Respondents, e.g., S.4). This group of students contrasts with the apparently wealthy students who drive to the campus (Respondents, e.g., S.11).

BS-MED’s scholarship students seem to be subject to rejection by their peers, their parents, and employees, as explained by a faculty member at BS-MED:

I presented [to my current students] an example, “look throughout your study life [at this university]; you may have encountered an ex-combatant student [in your class],” as we [probably have them] in all programs. The university system protects his/her identity... obviously, because many [of you] would say, “No, I do not want to be alongside this former kidnapper, former fighter, ex-paramilitary, or ex-hitman,” or [your] parents would say, “No, then I’ll take my son out of there; how it is possible that [my son/daughter] is studying with such a [reintegrated] person” (Respondents, P.1).

The following section discusses the challenges that BS-MED faces in the attempt to establish legitimacy.
DISCUSSION

Social problems transcend borders, cultures, and geographic limits. For a better world, all countries must overcome “universal” challenges—poverty, hunger, and decent work, among others—as agreed on in the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). This universal character represents a constant tension in the attempt for legitimacy based on standardized rankings and international accreditation agencies. Thus, Colombia provides fertile ground to extend the current theory and research on how organizations seek legitimacy in changing institutional contexts.

Our findings present novel, in-depth empirical material to discuss the challenged by legitimacy scenario in the All for a New Country plan that aims to make Colombia the best-educated country in Latin America by 2025 (Ministerio de Educación, 2015; Reisz, 2017). We present two theoretical contributions. First, we advance the understanding of the challenged by legitimacy scenario by identifying the sources of tensions and discrepancies among contradictory regulatory and pragmatic versus moral and cultural-cognitive criteria in establishing legitimacy in the transition to a postconflict setting.

Our second contribution is to advance the understanding of the challenges faced by organizations when external legitimacy changes over time, whereby the external criteria are decontextualized from the specific reality. We note that in the face of changes over time, the people who make them do so synchronously, while the people who rate them (committees, evaluators, academics, and analysts) do so asynchronously. We expand the theory and research on legitimacy in dynamic and unstable contexts by identifying the sources of tensions such as socioeconomic exclusion and the discrepancies in this process.
Our findings suggest that BS-MED’s external and internal pressures tend to be driven by different constraints and aims among University-CO and BS-MED’s stakeholders, such as the Board of Directors, faculty members, and current and former students. BS-MED is pressured to gain regulatory legitimacy through the All for a New Country program, which is an instrument devised by the Colombian government to facilitate education, social inclusion, and peace building. This means that BS-MED must enroll scholarship students in its business programs. At the same time, in its pursuit of pragmatic legitimacy, BS-MED strives to avoid poor performance to maintain its accreditations and academic programs according to business logics. Our findings show that BS-MED’s management programs are pragmatic attempts at seeking legitimacy with business groups in Colombia by complying with their expectations for academics at BS-MED, such as educating a management elite (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015), in their pursuit of economic interests. This dynamic creates a contradiction in relation to the moral and cultural-cognitive criteria of legitimacy. For example, BS-MED’s study programs are challenged by faculty members and students for being disconnected from the local context.

We posit that individual faculty members’ initiatives to engage students with the local context (e.g., internships in the downtown area) create ethical ambivalence in relation to formal education (Juusola et al., 2015). Scholars argue that academic organizations appear to bow to isomorphism pressures to establish a common cognitive base (Alajoutsijärvi, Kettunen, & Tikkanen, 2012), such as the homogenous Americanization (Juusola et al., 2015) of management education in response to the mercantilist logic imposed by others, including business groups. We posit that this is a source of pragmatic legitimacy. BS-MED’s academic programs are designed based on the North American business literature without integrating Colombia’s changing institutional context. BS-MED complies with normative isomorphism; all management programs
comply with the national accreditation, which appears to be a powerful source of pragmatic legitimacy at academic organizations.

Interestingly, initiatives at BS-MED and University-CO that appear to integrate more than “a few constituent audiences” (Suchman, 1995: 288), such as students with different backgrounds, humanistic courses, and faculty members’ initiatives such as internship programs in security-risk environments, seem to function as a source of cultural-cognitive legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017). This finding advances our understanding of cultural-cognitive legitimacy through innovative activities and attempts to encourage unwilling students to participate in these activities. However, this is challenged by the emerging first-order code: “we live in a bubble.” The direct impact of armed conflict on higher education organizations (Pacheco, 2013) has forced University-CO to invest in security and protection systems, which seems to fuel the sense of disconnectedness among students and faculty members and causes them to understand the world differently. These apparent contradictions challenge the overall guiding ethical principles of the University-CO system. We expected BS-MED to be proactive in designing business programs that explicitly respond to government reintegration programs.

We posit that the unique process of attempting to integrate heterogenous stakeholders at academic organizations by providing scholarships (e.g., to the people displaced by war or with low incomes) is derived from the tensions of “taking for granted” norms and values. For example, the discrimination between scholarship and non-scholarship students emphasizes the contradiction among the regulatory and pragmatic versus moral and cultural-cognitive criteria of legitimacy in this research. There are numerous factors that challenge legitimacy after long periods of armed conflict. We posit that the All for a New Country plan appears to be a symbolic effort by the Colombian government to transition to a postconflict institutional environment.
However, such governmental efforts are challenged by the deep-rooted values and norms of heterogeneous stakeholders in the quest for organizational change. In fact, the *All for a New Country* plan may distract from the goal of establishing legitimacy in Colombia (e.g., Deephouse et al., 2017).

Our second contribution is to shed light on the challenges faced by organizations regarding changes to legitimacy over time. The *All for a New Country* plan might function as an instrument for the evolving process of seeking legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017) based on the peace agreement process. We posit that the Colombian government seeks legitimacy by implementing an institutional *response* scenario to demonstrate appropriateness with the *All for a New Country* plan (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014), which we interpreted as an effort to make Colombians homogeneous. We posit that this institutional *response* scenario, which presents a reactive dimension (e.g., awareness seminars), overlooks deep-rooted cultural-cognitive behavior (e.g., discrimination). According to the findings presented, there is a disconnection between the public policies enacted in Colombia and the reality found in the institutional context.

We posit that BS-MED approaches legitimacy based on regulatory isomorphism pressures by complying with the Colombian government’s scholarship policy for ex-combatants and people displaced by war. Suchman (1995: 573) argued that “the multifaceted character of legitimacy implies that it will operate differently in different contexts, and how it works may depend on the nature of the problems for which it is the purported solution.” A common assumption is that legitimacy operates differently, which is presented in our case. Specifically, in an armed conflict context, civil society might believe that their situation—such as daily security risks—is “normal,” and, thus, they “take for granted” the local context. We interpret BS-MED’s
compliance with the regulatory legitimacy criteria of rulemaking for scholarships to maintain legitimacy as being challenged by heterogeneous students’ profiles in terms of social status and income at BS-MED, both of which appear to be a source of tension. Our analytical generalization is that the contradiction among the regulatory and pragmatic versus moral and cultural-cognitive criteria of legitimacy appears to be a common phenomenon in postconflict settings (e.g., Theidon, 2009).

BS-MED’s structure and activities are directed by University-CO in line with its Catholic and humanist principles. BS-MED appears to comply with moral legitimacy by obtaining and maintaining the voluntary High Quality Accreditation awarded by the Colombian Ministry of Education and by implementing initiatives such as the stay program and compulsory courses in humanism. We understand students’ coerced compliance with standalone humanism courses as a strategy to maintain BS-MED’s moral legitimacy in Colombia. The in-depth qualitative empirical material helps us understand the arguments about the slight impact of standalone courses on students’ learning (e.g., Evans et al., 2006; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015) and compliance with the interculturality principle that aims for “human transformation” at University-CO. High-income students who might be resistant to engaging with scholarship students reveal the naïve performance of BS-MED and University-CO directors based on historical discrimination patterns in Colombia (Lindgreen et al., 2010), which suggests ambivalence toward tensions in an attempt to gain legitimacy. We posit that tensions exist in relation to the communities that receive or reject demobilized or displaced people, as discussed in studies on armed conflicts and postconflict situations (Theidon, 2009). BS-MED’s institutional response scenario, which seeks legitimacy by designing activities that integrate students with different backgrounds, seems to
create social tension among the heterogeneous members of BS-MED. Ultimately, these tensions challenge the overall aim of the *All for a New Country* plan.

Our findings suggest that heterogeneity in students’ backgrounds, which feeds the rejection of scholarship students, creates discrepancies between regulative and moral legitimacies. Heterogeneity appears to precipitate an unanticipated dynamic of ethical contradictions at BS-MED in which students, faculty members, and the Board of Directors are oriented toward contradictory aspirations of 1) humanism aimed at creating harmonious interactions among all stakeholders at BS-MED and 2) a rejection of students with scholarships as fellow students.

We postulate that the social tensions derived from the implications of the *All for a New Country* plan call for an increased awareness of initiatives for higher education organizations and students to develop study programs and syllabi that respond to local needs. We suggest that in our case, faculty members’ conflicting choices reflect ethical and social ambivalence.

Our findings challenge previous work on the legitimacy of academic organizations (Snelson-Powell et al., 2016) because our case presents different legitimacy dynamics. BS-MED seeks legitimacy on a national level by complying with regulatory, pragmatic, moral, and cultural-cognitive criteria. The implication is that academic organizations in the global south, particularly in armed conflict contexts, must confront ambivalence by making strategic decisions.

**LIMITATIONS**

This paper responds to a call for more research on management education beyond the elite business schools in the United States and Europe by using in-depth empirical material (e.g.,
Rasche & Gilbert, 2015). The richness of our case, which involves armed conflict, student profiles, and BS-MED’s guiding principles, presents complexities in an effort to situate the reader in BS-MED’s struggles as it attempts to comply with legitimacy in Colombia.

We present only a single case under the particular conditions of institutional change in Colombia. Thus, further in-depth studies of faculty members’ initiatives and practices are needed from a micro level of analysis to fully understand the institutional complexities that arise when integrating heterogeneous students, which might further inform institutional and legitimacy theory and research. Additionally, we did not analyze the emerging positive effects of the integration of scholarship students. For example, a hidden curriculum in relation to the reflections that faculty members embrace in the classroom, independent of the course, might be a venue for future studies in relation to slow-moving change.

**IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Public policies for institutional change (e.g., transitions to postconflict) could be implemented to move away from the legacy of armed conflict at all levels, which could foster academic development to make Colombia the best-educated country in Latin America by 2025 (Reisz, 2017). An implication of this research is to find the right balance of academic rigor, which reflects the external context at business schools. Education programs must respond to “active participation in a globalized world” (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2018). However, at the same time, educational institutions should integrate local constraints, such as those presented in this study. In addition, integrating heterogeneous students influences stakeholders’ attitudes toward discriminatory behaviors. Thus, public policies are required that allow both collective and individual participation to challenge the existing criteria when evaluating academic organizations.
and shifting public resources and institutional investments toward new educational investment models.

Future studies should explore and analyze whether governmental change creates greater sensitivity to the diversity of classes, both among students and in the educational management programs of private universities. In countries marked by patterns of institutional change, scholarship students appear to be a normal phenomenon that according to our findings, have been overlooked by scholars, civil society, and politicians. Future researchers could be inspired by our findings to, for example, investigate organizational disruption from significant challenges. Future in-depth studies of faculty members’ initiatives and practices are needed to fully understand legitimacy from a micro level of analysis that might inform the theory and research on legitimacy. For example, academic organizations in the global south might challenge prior work that implies that more prestigious academic organizations are less likely to decouple (Snelson-Powell et al., 2016), because our case presents a contrasting dynamic of legitimacy. Finally, the risk of blurring institutional identity and the fear of prejudice (in the case of Catholic institutions such as University-CO) due to institutional interest in defining and implementing programs that contribute to the transformation of their own reality, while they also contribute to legitimacy, can be understood under general principles and common languages. Future research might look deeper into the legitimacy challenges that contrast with the institutional identity.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1995, Suchman asked, “Legitimacy for what?” BS-MED seems to follow the logic of the Americanization of academic organizations (Juusola et al., 2015) by designing academic programs to respond to firms’ needs for elite business people who are familiar with the rhetoric
of profitability (Fornaciari & Arbaugh, 2017). This poses a contradiction among the regulatory and pragmatic versus moral and cultural-cognitive criteria of legitimacy. However, former president Mr. Santos’ Nobel Prize Lecture cited Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s magical realism found in Colombia: “It was as if God had decided to put to the test every capacity for surprise and was keeping the inhabitants of Macondo in a permanent alteration between excitement and disappointment, doubt and revelation, to such an extreme that no one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay” (Santos, 2016). The extreme setting of our case might help place academics as key players at the forefront of academic organizations’ efforts to seek legitimacy. We hope that our case study will inspire academics, practitioners, and accreditation agencies to develop a dialogue on academic organizations’ response to contemporary global challenges.
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Table 2. Empirical material sources

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| Face-to-face interviews | 30 interviews with 4 Members of the Board at University-CO, 2 Directors at BS-MED, 6 faculty members at BS-MED, 6 students without scholarships, 6 students with scholarships, 3 alumni with more than 5 years from graduation, and 3 employers at firms with more than 500 employees. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 2 hours and comprised a total of 732 minutes of audio recordings. | ● Learn history, vision, mission and principles of University-CO.  
● Identify opinions on reintegration program.  
● Identify opinions on accreditation aspirations at BS-MED.  
● Identify strategy implemented by faculty members to meet BS-MED aspirations and contextualization of the teaching.  
● Identify perceptions and reactions of the reintegration program by students, alumni and employers. |
| Direct observations (Site visits) | September 2015 and October 2016                                                                                                                                                                                    | ● Identification of the characteristics of the BS-MED and University-CO infrastructure.  
● Identification of students’ life within the University-CO campus.                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Reports and other documents | University-CO and BS-MED webpage, Current Course Syllabi at BS-MED, National Council for Economic and Social Policies, Government of Colombia webpage, and Accreditation agencies. | ● Development of a historical account of the peace process in Colombia.  
● Characterization of the content of the management programs at BS-MED.  
● Characterization of the reintegration program in Colombia in relation to education.                                                                                                         |