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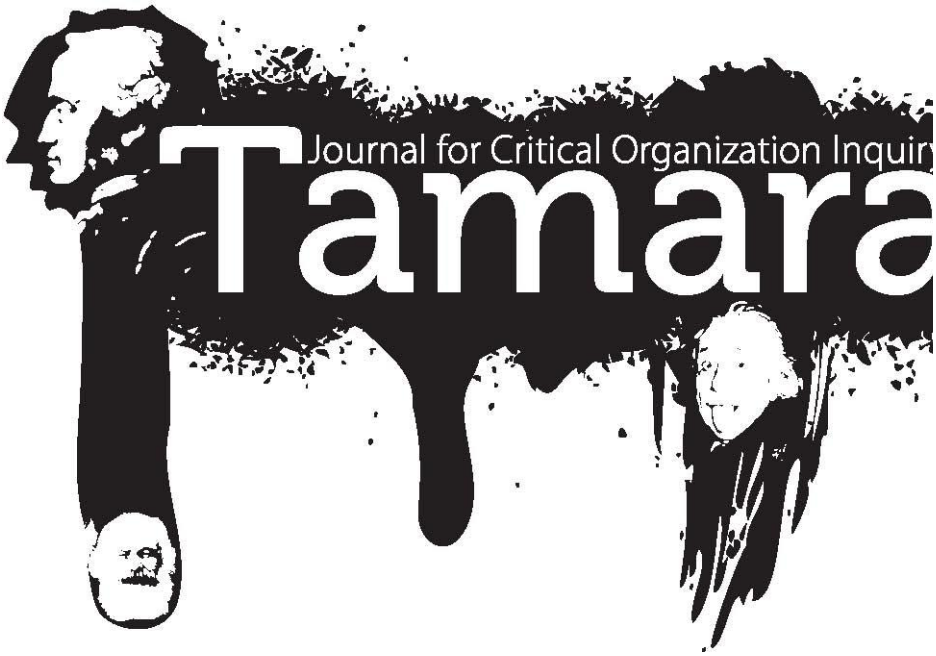

The embodiment of the alternative in an alternative college: an iterative process between repetition, opposition and adaptation

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Tarde

Abstract

This paper proposes a communicative and constitutive theoretical framework to explore the embodiment of the alternative in an alternative university. It responds to a call to deepen the approaches of alternative organizations and to apply the constitutive approach of communication to organizational phenomena. Through the close study of ongoing communicational practices, this paper aims to explore how a communicational approach and Tarde's three rules of repetition, opposition and adaptation could disclose what it means to be alternative on a daily basis. By undertaking an organizational ethnography of an alternative college in the United States, this paper explores how the alternative is embodied.

Introduction

This paper proposes a new way of conceiving alternative universities by focusing on the communicative processes through which they embody a mode of being different from "traditional" universities. Situated at the margin of the higher education spectrum, the number of alternative higher education institutions is significant: a user-generated list of alternative universities counts more than 30 institutions.[1] In the context of increasing competition between institutions and the crisis of their aims and place in our society (see for example, Federici, 2009 or Readings, 1997), these universities brand themselves as 'new,' 'different,' and 'innovative.' But is this really so? And if they are alternative, what does this really mean? Building on these preliminary questions, this paper proposes to unfold what it is to be an alternative university by taking a constitutive

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_alternative_universities

approach of communication and drawing on Tarde's statement that to "exist is to differ" (1895/1992). The research question addressed is: *how is the alternative, as a movement of differentiation, embodied in alternative universities?*

This reflection relies upon several assessments. First, alternative universities are understudied in communication. That makes them interesting, because, as Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren (2009) argue, to develop "communicational explanations" of a phenomenon "provide(s) useful alternatives to other sorts of disciplinary (…) accounts." Furthermore, as Reedy, King and Coupland state: "the everyday organizing practices and lives [of alternative organizations] remain relatively unexplored" (2016, p. 1555). So, there is a need to deepen the reflection of *what it is to be alternative* through a communication-centred lens. Additionally, in literature on alternative organizations, alternative universities tend to be reduced to, or characterized as, oppositions to capitalism and to neoliberal logic (Parker, Fournier, & Reedy, 2007). There is an urge to go beyond this definition, to view the alternative as a movement of differentiation that transcends being "opposed" and "against."

By mobilizing Tarde's three rules framework, this paper shows how such an approach helps to understand the alternative as being embodied. This means the alternative is an ongoing movement that differentiates such universities. The alternative manifests itself through practices, discourses, things, values, behaviours, campuses, etc. Thus, this paper contributes to the literature on alternative organizations (Chatterton, 2010; Cheney, 2014; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014b) and alternative universities (Coté, Day, & de Peuter, 2007; Grant & Riesman, 1978) by broadening current definitions of the alternative. It argues the alternative goes beyond mere opposition to the traditional, or capitalism, to include nuances, such as how the alternative is related to the status quo.

To explore how the alternative as a movement of differentiation is embodied in alternative universities, I propose an organizational ethnography (Van Maanen, 2011; Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009) at an alternative college created in the 1970s, the Different College (DC). In what follows, I first review the literature on alternative organizations and alternative universities. After that, I present my theoretical framework to propose a constitutive view of alternative organizations and the analytical framework of Tarde's three rules. Finally, I draw on my analysis to scrutinize the embodiment of the alternative at DC.

From alternative organization to alternative universities

What is it to be an alternative organization?

Scholars from organizational and critical management studies (CMS) are interested in alternative organizations that include social movements (Fournier, 2002; Polletta, 2002; Sutherland, Land, & Bohm, 2014), anarchist groups (Land & King, 2014) and cooperatives (Cheney, Santa Cruz, Peredo, & Nazareno, 2014; Paranque & Willmott, 2014). Some are interested in alternative forms of education, but this domain is confined to the field of education specifically (see for instance *Other Education, The Journal of Educational Alternatives* or *The Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*).

For organizational and critical management scholars, alternative organizations present alternative forms of being organized: mainly, freed from bureaucracy and hierarchy. Two major characteristics define such organizations: they are motivated by anti-establishment values; and their ultimate goal is to change the world (Chatterton, 2010; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014a; Reedy et al., 2016). Parker, Cheney, Fournier and Land (2014) write that alternative organizations rest upon three principles: autonomy, solidarity and responsibility. Autonomy requires that we respect ourselves and that we feel free in our actions. Scholars (Chatterton, 2010; Kokkinidis, 2014) state that autonomy is the organizing principle *par excellence* in alternative organizations. It is linked with freedom, self-organization and mutual aid (Chatterton, 2005). The second principle –solidarity– implies that: "words like co-operation, community and equality become both descriptions of the way that human beings are, and prescriptions for the way that they should be" (Parker et al., 2014, p. 630). These first two principles, following Parker et al., have to be co-produced in order to be implemented. Finally, responsibility implies that an alternative organization "worth the name must have a responsibility to the future – to the conditions for our individual and collective flourishing" (Parker et al., 2014, p. 632). These principles bring the authors to characterize alternative organizations as political: they are the results of choices that are made that can "encourage us to see that there is always another way of getting things done" (Parker et al., 2014, p. 633).

In the *Routledge Companion to Alternative Organizations* (Parker et al., 2014), the authors further examine what alternative organizations look like by positioning them *vis-à-vis* capitalism. They conclude that even if alternative organizations reject capitalism strongly they cannot exist without it. This dynamic produces a tension between ideals and reality. In a similar vein, Chatterton (2010) brings capitalism's crucial place in social movements, which are a kind of alternative organization, to the fore. He reminds us that when we speak about something that is alternative, we immediately

think about something that is 'anti-capitalist.' But he underlines that this Manicheanism is not valid. Throughout his study of alternative spaces (activists and social centres), Chatterton argues bluntly that:

> While social centres are political projects, there is also a desire to create a space, which is not overtly politicized or confrontational—to create a more complex narrative of the activist self and place by bringing and holding together different identities and practices. One of these convergences is the tension between anti-capitalism as an oppositional and a creative sentiment (2010, p. 1219).

In short, for Chatterton, people live with this confrontation and identities that oscillate between being sometimes capitalist and sometimes anti-capitalist. Having said that, Chatterton concludes:

> Anti-capitalist practice [must be understood] as not actually just 'anti-,' but also 'post-' and 'despite-' capitalists. It is simultaneously *against, after and within*, and so participants problematize alternatives as things which have to be fought for and worked at in the here and now (2010, p. 1221, emphasis added).

Thus, alternative organizations are more complex than mere oppositions to capitalism. Dealing with this same challenge in studying alternative organizations, Parker and Parker assess that: "hunting for alternatives means that you are straight away considering difference as a central criterion for interest" (2017, p. 16−17). That is precisely what I am trying to do here.

As Dorion (2017) proposes in her latest piece, alternative organizations must be seen as "dissonant organizations" which are not merely opposed to a dominant system but are plural and moved by a set of tensions. In short, she proposes to consider alternative organizations as being performatively constructed through actors' actions. Dorion states that alternative organizations are always producing themselves by excluding an "outside." In contrast to the descriptive studies cited above, Dorion proposes an interesting way of viewing alternative organizations which I aim to build on by drawing on a communicational perspective.

To summarize, the literature on alternative organizations focuses mainly on the relationship between alternatives and capitalism. But, I argue this conception is reductive and, following Dorion's proposition, there is a need to broaden the definition of the alternative by blurring this dichotomy.

What about alternatives in education?

Looking at the literature on alternative organizations is important to my theoretical contribution because it permits me to frame the definition I am proposing of the "alternative." Before considering this –which will be the content of the next section– let's consider the literature on alternative universities. Few scholars have been interested in these organizations. Of note, Grand's and Riesman's insightful book, *The Perpetual Dream* (1978) gives a sense of the American reforms that brought to life several novel universities. Indeed, these "telic reforms (…) pointed toward a different conception of the ends of undergraduate education" (p. 15). The authors describe at length four college models: neoclassical, aesthetic expressive, communal expressive and activist radicals. The first model corresponds to the "traditional" one, whereas the others correspond to alternative forms of colleges. In the same vein, reference must be made to Martin Duberman's piece on the Black Mountain College (1972) which tells the story of a college experiment held in the 1920s that played a significant role in the art world. In addition to these historical works, some left-wing researchers are interested in radical (Dyke & Meyerhoff, 2013), utopian (Coté et al., 2007) or critical pedagogy (DeLeon, 2008). These researchers are often activists themselves and are involved in political groups that implement new practices inside or outside the universities. These texts reveal the extent to which the university is a fertile ground for the emergence of counter pedagogy and counter movements. In other words, these researches bring to the fore how the university is first and foremost a place of revolution and resistance. Some scholars (Kanngieser, 2008; Thompsett, 2017, 2016b, 2016a), meanwhile, describe the initiatives of free universities, which are accessible to the greatest possible number of people. Kanngieser, for instance, focuses on autonomous university "alternatives [that] could include processes to emancipate knowledge and learning from the hierarchy, processes that do not immediately equate qualifications with 'legitimate' knowledge or perpetuate the culture of an intellectual elite or vanguard" (n.p). She mentions: Meine Akademie (My Academy), the Freie Klasse (The Free Class), the EB 104, The Informelle Universitat in Grundung in Berlin, the Manoa Free University in Vienna, the Copenhagen Free University, the Free Floating Faculty and the University of Openness in London. To that, Bretos and Errasti's research on the cooperative university in Mondragon (2017) gives an interesting overview of this institution anchored in the well-known long-lasting cooperative community.

Several elements come up from the reading of this literature. First, alternatives are not exclusively emerging *outside* the traditional university; on the contrary, they are also experienced inside the mainstream university through new pedagogy and new streams of thought. In this regard, mention can be made of the Critical Management Stream (CMS) which aims to think anew about how to teach management (Spicer, Alvesson, & Karreman, 2009). Second, alternatives in higher education are always against the *status quo*; they aim to fight a dominant paradigm and are often political (see for example how Stuart Hall speaks about Cultural Studies as a new discipline in Coté, Day, & de Peuter, 2007). Third, while being very instructive on how alternative forms of education are implemented, this literature is also very helpful in outlining a definition of the university. Indeed, grabbing what the university is is quite arduous but necessary for the purpose of my reflection. Indeed, when asking about the constitution of alternativeness, the following fundamental question must be asked: "alternative to what?" If the answer is, "to the traditional university," then it is essential to understand what the mainstream university *is* in order to better understand in what ways alternatives are alternative. Looking back to the university's history (Borrero Cabal, 1995; Coté et al., 2007; Macherey, 2011) leads to a very simple assessment: the university does not have one unique definition. On the contrary, it is a very puzzling organization which, as Angus states in his chapter (2007, p. 64), "has historically played many distinct roles –elite, public, corporate– and has been perpetually haunted by another possibility." He adds that "these roles have defined the relations between the university and capitalist society." Furthermore, the university has always nurtured a complex relationship with outside politics. Indeed, the university tends to both resist merge with outside politics.

The university is thus an entanglement of several things (roles, ideologies, political statements, etc.), often in contradiction. Thus, we can outline a description of the university by saying that: 1) it has a pluralist character; there is no such thing as *a* university so much as there are *universities*, each of which have their own similarities and differences; 2) universities are places of struggle, tension and conflict, which make them places of resistance and of perpetual rebirth at the same time; and 3) contemporary universities are penetrated by managerial values which make them function like private corporations (Angus, 2007; Barnett, 2011; Federici, 2009; Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011; Readings, 1997). *In fine*, there are varieties and diverse modalities of universities. In this landscape, there is an urge to explore the alternative in universities that are said to be, "really different." Unpacking what constitutes alternativeness/how the alternative is embodied will permit to dig into what makes these institutions alternative.

Theoretical framework: the alternative from a constitutive approach

An incarnated movement of differentiation

To take into account the ambiguous and multiple dimensions of alternative universities, which are always performing themselves by excluding some things that are "outside," I propose to view this process as a constitutive *movement of differentiation*. Here, the alternative is not merely a political stance, but it is an organizing principle. Indeed, it includes a movement of revolution (against the other), and a movement of reflexivity (*vis-à-vis* the other).

Adopting a constitutive perspective, I aim to explore how this movement of differentiation is embodied. In saying that the movement of differentiation could be embodied, I argue it is *material*, or incarnated through various things –various "passers" (Cooren, 2013, 2015). For Cooren:

> The materiality of something or someone –whatever it, he or she is– always has something to do with *its, his or her state of being material* (that is what materiality means) and *being material means that this being is itself made of matter, that is, what stands under its, his or her being*. Whether we talk about a computer, hammer, rock, lawsuit, or (…) a discourse or concern, speaking about its materiality thus consists of problematizing what sustains or supports its existence or being (2015, p. 5 emphasis in original)

Cooren argues that everything is material. He does not reject immateriality, but says that even something immaterial is material because in order to exist it has to be materialized. For Cooren, materialization happens mainly through verbalization, so through words. Taking the example of God: it is immaterial, but materialized through words, paintings, prayers, etc. So, God is material. Cooren explains that things are not simply material or immaterial; instead they are more or less material or more or less immaterial. In other words, the difference between the two statements lies on degrees of materiality:

> Materialization is thus directly related to questions of existence to the extent that beings come to exist more or less through what substantiates/materializes/mediatizes them. These materials

> are the means by which these beings literally pass through or come across this presentation (Cooren, 2015, p. 8).

Drawing on this definition of materiality, I argue that the alternative is materialized through various things (again "passers"). Conceiving the alternative as being material leads me to question how this movement of differentiation is embodied. This question implies that the alternative is material and that it is enacted through passers which can be human and non-human.

"To exist is to differ"

To deepen this reflection, I rely on Gabriel Tarde who says that "everything is a society and every phenomenon is a social fact" (1895/2012, p. 58). With such a statement, he redefines the social world in showing that the nature/society division is irrelevant and that the micro/macro distinction "stifle(s) any attempt at understanding how society is being generated" (Latour, 2002, p. 2). Indeed, Tarde is one of the first thinkers in social science to have written that the "small" permits us to understand "the bigger picture" (Cooren and Fairhurst, 2008). For him, the global is understandable first and foremost from the local: "Everything comes from the infinitesimal and everything returns to it" (Tarde, 1895/2012, p. 11). Tarde is concerned with understanding the social world and the nature of sociology while looking much closer at what constitutes reality. His central argument is that *difference* is constitutive of reality; in other words, the nature of things is to differ:

> *To exist is to differ; difference is, in a sense, the truly substantial side of things; it is at once their own most possession and that which they hold most in common* […] Difference is the alpha and omega of the universe; everything begins with difference, with the elements whose innate diversity (which various reasons make probable) can in my view be the only justification of their multiplicity; everything ends with difference, where, in the higher phenomena of thought and history, it finally breaks free of the narrow circles in which it had bound itself, namely the atomic vortex and the vital vortex, and transforming the very obstacle it faced into a fulcrum, surpasses and transfigures itself (1895/2012, p. 40)

Starting from observations in the natural sciences as (biology and astrology), Tarde makes the assumption that sciences paved the way for what the sociological study must be attentive to. Indeed, he states that sciences have given a homogeneous view of reality whereas heterogeneity is fundamental. In making this argument, Tarde deconstructs reality by proposing three rules that he presents at length in his *Lois Sociales* (1898): the rule of repetition, the rule of opposition and the rule of adaptation. All three are a product of each other; they must be viewed as part of an iterative process, a kind of circle (see figure 1).

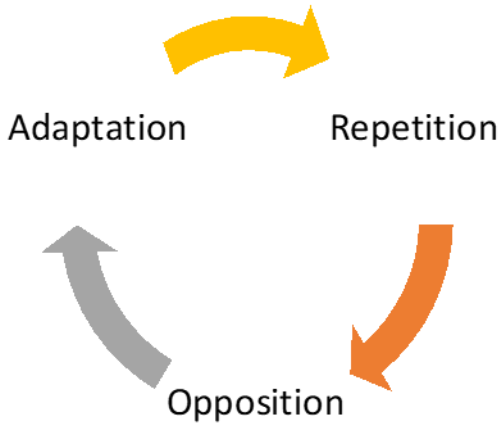


Figure 1 The iterative process

Repetition signifies that things (humans, plants, animals, etc.) emerged first and foremost by copying themselves. Repetition is marked by imitations and similitudes as things emerge in a perpetual restart from what has been done before. Nevertheless, repetition is also moved by differences. So, repetition is not a process of infinite sameness; it always includes nuances that introduce slight differences. Repetition is thus an adaptive and co-creative process: we invent from what already

exists. Repetition echoes my conception of the alternative as a "movement of differentiation" in which sameness and difference are at the same time included.

Oppositions are first and foremost dualities; indeed, pairs or groups of beings that are different and opposable. For instance, hot and cold, pleasure and pain, concave and convex (Tarde, 1898, p. 33). In other words, the elements of the pair are always destroying themselves. For Tarde, real oppositions always involve two related forces: "two tendencies, two directions." Opposition is a dynamic of perpetual incomprehension, competition, polemic, war, concurrence and discussion. Tarde stresses the fact that opposition is "a very special kind of repetition" (1898, p. 34). But, he adds, even if opposition is always a state of conflict, it brings new things: opposition is also innovation and invention. Opposition produces revolution.

Finally, adaptation is the rule through which Tarde carries the "micro" as the locus of the social. Drawing from adaptation in science, Tarde demonstrates how scientific events are adapting to each other. For instance, a mountain adapts to the watercourses that transform the natural environment that surrounds it. Or the sun and soil adapt to each other. Tarde shows that this rule of adaptation leads to a certain harmony. In this harmony, things can live together. The author transposes this reflection to social facts by saying that the social world is made by a series of adaptations between facts, actors, historical events, ideas, and philosophical statements. In other words, Tarde states that adaptation comes from ideas and inventions that are enacted by various layers of actors. Every layer is well adapted. Tarde estimates that adaptation process comes from the brain, in the "inventive spirit": "the invention is a harmony of ideas, mother of mankind harmonies" (Tarde, 1898, p. 56). Adaptation propelled by invention lies in the lowest common denominator: the "micro."

Through these three rules, Tarde aims to disclose the crucial role of the multitudes and of the small. He puts to the fore that the global is made by an infinite number of these "harmonies struggles":

> The disharmony is to harmonies what dissymmetry is to symmetry and what variations are to repetitions. Yet, it's solely in precise repetitions, clear oppositions and tight harmonies that diversity blossoms (Tarde, 1898, p. 66)

For Tarde, the global is made in the local which is constituted by differences and which is crossed by the three rules of repetition, opposition and adaptation. That brings us back to my subject: if the essence of existence of social things is to differ: how is it to *differ* even more? In other words, what does the claim "we are different" contain? Tarde helps to question the very essence of alternative organizations in a world that is constituted by processes of repetition, opposition and adaptation which emerged through infinite and ongoing invention, imitation and struggle.

Empirical Research Design

In order to explore the constitution of the alternative, I propose a methodology inspired by organizational ethnography (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009) in an alternative college in the US. To explore the movement of differentiation that moves this institution, I focus my observations on courses, staff meetings and student life. I conducted interviews with staff members, students and teachers. When entering the fieldwork, I took into consideration three avenues: 1) pedagogy; 2) internal organization/governance and 3) student life.

To select the institution, I started with a Google search using the key terms "alternative universities." The first result was a Wikipedia page listing alternative universities throughout the world – it happens that they are mainly situated in the United States. I took that list as a reference point for looking up universities and colleges. I selected the ones that were still operating and openly different in their discourses and advertisements. In the US, most of the alternative universities appeared around the 1970s. In Europe and elsewhere, including Canada, alternative universities are more recent (created around the year 2000). As I already underlined, there are various ways of being alternative in higher education, including: deconstructing the faculties (e.g. they don't have departments); implementing innovative pedagogy (e.g. experiential learning, project-based learning, etc.); organizing upon a flat hierarchy, or; focusing on the development of a green campus and an "eco-brand." Some are Buddhist institutions, and others combine all or part of the above elements. I contacted 25 universities from this list as a starting point. Fifteen responded and eight accepted me, 'on site.' After some back and forth and due to financial constraints, I picked an alternative college in the US which I will call DC for "Different College".

The DC was founded in 1972. It is a small private college offering a degree in Human Ecology. It is a fossil-free campus with 260 students that owns 300 acres of forest and farmland at the heart of a National Park. The DC is alternative in the sense that there are no departments: students design their own degree and they have courses in art, sciences and humanities. Moreover, on the administrative level, the hierarchy is said to be flat and the president has no voice of total authority. Proud of their democratic functioning, the DC's members take greater pride in having students fully integrated in the college's

governance. Decisions are made collaboratively through majors and minors committees on which students are always represented. All of the committee's minutes are presented and approved during the All College Meeting (ACM) which happens weekly on Wednesday afternoons. The DC is funded partly through tuition and endowments. As all private colleges in the US, a board of trustees oversees the administration and votes the president. The first founders were idealistic young men coming from Ivy League universities who dreamt about deconstructing the university system, which was, for them, corrupted by war. Indeed, they denounced the universities' responsibilities in the Vietnam War. Also, they were very shocked and appalled by the Ken State University shooting that occurred on May 4, 1970, in Ohio. They wished for a democratic university driven by pacifist ideas. Regarding the pedagogy, the founders were influenced by Whitehead's speeches on the renewal of the rhythms of education. The fundamentals of the DC are additionally anchored to an "interpretative inquiry," which views the past as a whole, as a comprehensive system that embodies people and their feelings in its spectrum. To implement this philosophy of education, they chose to have a single, unique major of Human Ecology, a transdisciplinary study of the relationship between humans and their natural and social environment.

I visited the college for one day in January 2017 and went back for more in-depth observations between April 5 and April 22, 2017. I conducted 15 interviews with faculty, staff and students (among them, the president and trustees). I had several informal conversations with students during lunchtime. I observed three days of courses and shadowed a student for one day. I observed at length Wednesday "governance day," during which the minors and major's committees met. It is also the day of the All College Meeting. On my first Wednesday, I selected three committees to observe –several committees meet at the same time so I had to choose. With the help of my informant, the academic dean, I spent the morning observing the Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) that deals with courses and faculty recruitment and the Faculty Meeting (FM) during which all faculties meet to speak about ongoing matters. At 1 p.m., I attended the ACM, the only event at that time on campus. After the ACM, at 2:45 p.m., I observed the Steering Committee in charge of the College's governance and the ACM. I decided to revisit the Steering Committee for the two other Wednesdays I was at DC in order to follow the advancement of the issues they were dealing with. I had the chance to be on site while the winter Board of Trustees meeting was happening on April 6 and 7. As the board is public, I was welcomed attending every session. On April 8 and 9, the College opened its doors to admitted students. I thus observed two events which gave me an interesting view of different facets of the ongoing life of DC. Otherwise, I spent a lot of time strolling around the campus to take pictures and gain a sense of the daily routine.

To summarize, the college is "alternative" because of its pedagogy and internal governance. It aims to be different from traditional universities by offering its students another way of being educated in a higher education institution. Its alternativeness is also anchored to the college's history, which is representative of the 1970s and that era's characteristic winds of change. As I was immersed in the college, two elements really struck me: first, its members are constantly struggling to maintain the radicalness of the college, which is penetrated from the outside by normalizing logic; second, the movement of differentiation is difficult to grab. Hereafter, I am exploring these two assessments in light of Tarde's three rules. I'll do that by focusing on discussions I had with staff members and on some of my observations. In so doing, I show that applying Tarde's three rules is useful for exploring the movement of differentiation.

Unfolding the movement of differentiation: the three rules

Rule of repetition

Let's explore how the college is marked by the rule of repetition as Tarde defines it –things emerge through replication, but there are also differences. I explore how the college follows a rule of repetition, which makes it at once different from and similar to other universities.

To start, the DC relies upon a traditional organization: it is tuition-based and partly financed through endowments. A board of trustees oversees the administration and elects the president. For instance, when I attended the board of trustees' meeting, I was immersed in a group of wealthy people (mainly white men). The board was very formal; people were sitting around a wooden table in the most beautiful room on campus. The day was divided in sessions chaired by different trustees. This particular board meeting was setting up the agenda for the year to come, and the President officially launched the capital campaign. During my discussion with the President, he revealed that the relationship between trustees and faculty has always been somehow tensed:

> *President: The trustees didn't trust the faculty in terms of curriculum. I think I mentioned before: in all the trustee meetings, the academic policy committee meeting is just by its nature the place where there can be a lot of conflict because the faculty correctly believe that it's not the trustees' role to develop the curriculum, that is the faculty role and so I had to support them and push back*

> *appropriately. But then there are other things that, you know, what the trustees make that decision on, you know element(s) of the campaign, and so, it was about advocating for each group appropriately, defending them like telling the faculty that, "Hey, these trustees are working for us voluntarily, they're extremely generous with their time and want only success for us." So, it was defending the trustees to the faculty, defending the faculty to the trustees and then ultimately bringing the two together in ways that they were both enthused by the other group and find excitement and enthusiasm for the other group.*
>
> *Researcher: To sum up you are just creating boundaries between what trustees have to do and (what) faculty have to do and they have to stay in their boundaries.*
>
> *President: I think that's a good way to put it. And also, to admit that there are some areas that are grey. You know. Like the trustees need policies or need to promote policies that kind of bleed into academics, like how we evaluate our members and things like that. (April, 2017)*

This piece of conversation explicitly brought to the fore the role and place of the trustees who are an essential part of the college's organizational sustainability; but at the same time, the trustees are not in line with the college's values which creates some tensions with the faculty. I label this as being part of the rule of repetition because these kinds of struggles between different entities are common to a lot of colleges. Indeed, it is built into the structure of these multiple organizations to be moved by conflicts between points of view and decision-making. In other words, the College is repeating some traits that can be found in other institutions.

Regarding the financial aspect, the president told me that the college *cannot* do differently; for example, it cannot become tuition-free –a long-standing desire– because that could leave staff and faculty in financial jeopardy. The dean of institutional advancement, Lilian, also mentions that she cannot do differently; to be financially sustainable, the College *has to* fall back on traditional ways of raising money:

> *I think how we do what we do is experimental but how we fund it is pretty traditional and I think it almost has to be because there is no… how many different ways can you fund education? You can get government grants as we do, we don't get government funding but we can apply for grants; you can get… tuition; you can sell things, like you know… we sell vegetables which that helps support our programs; we sell T-shirts, we sell blah-blah-blah but, we don't have any other revenue stream except philanthropy, and grants and tuition so… the interesting thing about that is many of our trustees and donors, are fairly traditional people so I think what we do is different but how we pay for it and how we fund it is pretty… our business model is not different than another school and I wouldn't know how to change it at all. I mean, the idea of being tuition free, or for all students to have full scholarship(s) is an idea we have talked about but, we would fund that through philanthropy, you know we would have to grow the endowment to about $300 million and that would all come from individual(s), corporations and foundations, just exactly what we are doing now. (April, 2017)*

For her, there are *no* other *choices*. When it comes to financial aspects, the college follows a rule of repetition that tends to make it traditional. I felt some fatalism in Lilian's words when she was telling me that she wouldn't know how to differently finance the college. In her view, it seems that there is only one to fund an educational institution; even if the DC is quite experimental, its experimentation has to be funded with "traditional" money, repeating "the" one and only way of other, more traditional, institutions.

On another note, the rule of repetition also appears in the presence of traditional universities in the college. For example, degrees from Ivy League universities –sometimes several– are proudly framed in the offices of faculty and staff (see picture 1). Also, at the beginning of one of the faculty meetings, during the time devoted to announcements, a faculty member announced that one of the school's students had won a prestigious grant to go to an Ivy League university. I was struck by how it was so formally announced. The traditional university –the one against which the college was founded– seems nonetheless to be present at various times. The traditional university here encompasses universities that are "mainstream," that follow a more traditional curriculum (with faculties), or are part of the Ivy League. The more oft cited were Harvard and Stanford; very few international universities were cited. It seemed that the college viewed itself as a springboard to the

excellency in the form of the Ivy League universities its founders had wished not to emulate. We get a glimpse here of fuzziness regarding the relationship between the college and the other universities. On one side, the college aims to be different, alternative, opposed to the mainstream universities; and on the other, it tends to encourage its students to pursue further education at the Ivy League universities, even if the founders were radically opposed to those institutions. In this sense, the rule of repetition is moved by contradictory elements that expose the intricacies of being alternative.

Picture 1 - Degrees framed on the academic dean's office

I thus witnessed the repetition of a traditional way of functioning (finance, relations to Ivy League universities, tensions between trustees and faculty regarding academic matters). However, these traditional elements intermingle with very different aspects. Indeed, the traditional is somehow altered by elements that intrinsically differentiate the college; for example, the board of trustees is open to the community and the trustees know the names of some of the students. One student had breakfast with a trustee because he wanted to know more about his work and his involvement in the higher education system. Moreover, the governance is flat, and students are involved in decision-making. Some of the "repetitions" are crucial because they are linked with the survival of the college; but at the same time, these repetitions are structured by things that are intrinsically different and unique. It would be too dichotomous to see the college as being constituted by a rule of repetition from some elements and the rule of opposition (that follows) for other elements. On the contrary, the characteristics of the rule of repetition intermingle with the things that make this college alternative. In that sense, it is in line with what Tarde writes when he says that the rule of repetition is also constituted by invention and novelty. Whereas some of the organizing principles of the college are traditional for the sake of its survival, other elements are quite distinctive, innovative and unique.

In that sense, looking at the college on the premise that it is run by the rule of repetition allows me to explore how the repetitions are altered and drawn by differentiation. *In fine*, the rule of repetition does not only mean that the alternative college replicate a mainstream university; it also means that members are willing to build from these repetitions to do things differently. They are aware of the repetitions (that are sometimes seen as contradictions or tensions) and they always try to go beyond them. In that sense, being different is embodied in this constant struggle. And everyone has to work together towards this end. Before unpacking this further, let's explore the rule of opposition.

Rule of opposition

When I was presenting myself to members as a researcher working on "alternative universities," everyone at the college immediately told me I was in the right place. They often rubbed it in stressing on the college difference and uniqueness. When I arrived on campus, I first dug into the institution's history to understand the alternativeness of the college. To do so, I asked questions to the "elderly". A conversation I had with Bob –one of the first faculty members to join the college, in 1973, and who still teaches there– was very enlightening on the subject of origin. As he was telling me the story of the college's birth, he showed me a framed black and white picture of the first cohort of 1973 hanging on the wall near his desk (see picture 2).

Picture 2 - The first cohort in 1973

With a lot of emotion, which I perceived from the gentle smile on his face while looking at the picture, he told me:

> *All the hippies of the 70s [.] But that's when we decided that we wanted a school that was going to be different and unusual. So, we decide we won't have any department and we work on having no rank, any associate professors or assistant professor, faculty will gonna be equal, the students will gonna be equal to the faculty, we were gonna have, the governance of the school will gonna be democratic and a full-town meeting, and everybody will come and everybody has a vote, people working on the grounds and the president, everyone will have one voice. Very democratic. We were very radical. Students had a voice in their own destiny [.] Students particularly, I mean there were the majority so, we were a democracy so… you guys can vote on any of us and they did. And so we decided to have a democracy, we thought that was the best way, we decided that most universities were not democratic.*

He clarified further:

> *It was against tradition, yes absolutely! There was a powerful negativity [with] the war because… these universities have produced this war and they also produced the environmental problems… you know… something must be wrong with these universities.*

While talking to him, I discovered first and foremost that the values on which the college was founded were absolutely radical at the time. Hence, differentiation is embodied first and foremost in the people who founded this college and in those who chose –and are still choosing– to work in it with the idea of being "opposed to traditional universities." Indeed, they are coming to this college precisely with radical values and hopes to change the world. In that sense, to be opposed to tradition is the very essence and definition of the college. Thus, the rule of opposition was what motivated decisions and actions. I am speaking in past tense here because as the following rule of adaptation will show, the rule of opposition tends to be altered and diminished through time.

The rule of opposition still has resonance today, however, mostly through governance and the life on campus; as Rick, one of the early faculties, told me:

> *Governance here is quite different, quite different from a lot of places but definitely different than most of educational institutions that are pretty administratively structured. Here we do a lot more with groups and committees and stuff like that, the idea of it being I think that it's part of a good education to learn how an institution runs and we trust students to be part of that and they usually do a good job. So, we have this All College Meeting, not all college [members] go but enough people go to keep this sort of thing alive. We [have] almost done it weekly and the faculty meet almost every week and yes not divided by departments but as a single thing and that's,*

> *that's most places don't do that and we also must [be] closer to the trustees [because] students and faculty and staff and everybody know the trustees, and the trustees know the people, we have meal[s] together and stuff like that, that [is] usually not done, but you can develop that in a way that it works and that was developed here from the very very beginning. […] I think the general idea and commitment to participatory governance is still here.*

He adds:

> *I never seen anything like it before[.] You know, and you will see, […] it was very very participatory, it was not really hierarchical, people liked each other and in some way when you enter in a room you wouldn't tell who were the students and who were the faculty, you really couldn't and you couldn't tell in the classroom either sometimes and that's very different from where I came from. You know I came from the place where I lecture, I tell you what you are gonna learn.*

These quotes are interesting because Rick is presenting the college through comparison: it is "quite different *from a lot of places*"; "I never seen *anything* like it before"; these comments exemplify opposition to something that exists elsewhere, in other institutions.

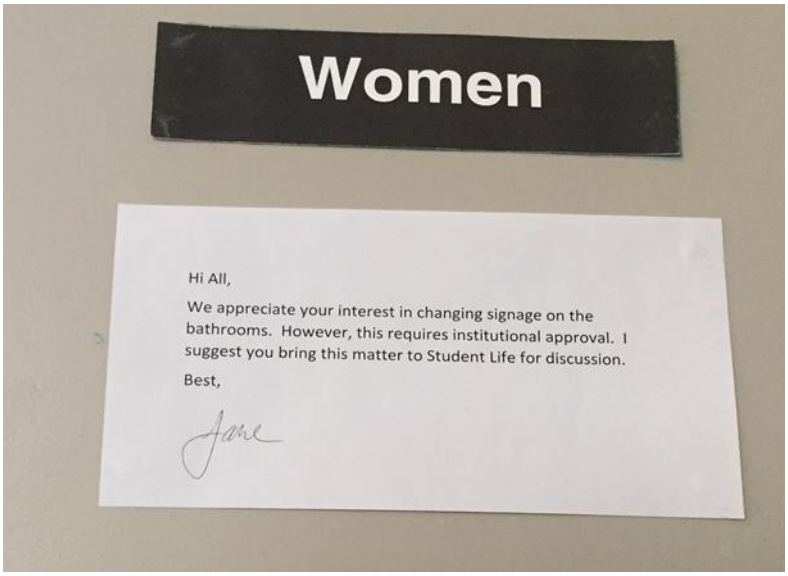
However, this rule of opposition is not as smooth, as it seems when speaking to Bob or Rick. Indeed, here is a very interesting quote from the President that illustrates the intricacies that lie in the opposition from which the College is built:

> *It's funny I had some really interesting conversations with our founding president when XX died recently and XX was very helpful at early stages of the college and I probably mentioned this in the past but we tend to mythologize the earliest days of the college like that, these first ten years huh and hold it up on a pedestal where everyone was, you know, didn't care about money huh didn't care about… all they wanted was to make the institution work and, they were kind of, in lack of a better term, giving their fingers to higher educ-, to the traditional form of higher education and they were turning their backs on the world and we are not, we are not at that stage anymore huh how we be, an experimental institution huh[.] And at the same time be more grounded, we know what we want a little bit more, we have more financial flexibility and stability. Do you have to be in that kind of pioneering mode all the time to be experimental or can you be established and experimental at the same time? That's a really interesting question. (Emphasis added)*

Several things are relevant in the president's quote; first, the "myth" around the early ages of the College as an ideal that cannot be possible anymore. This strong feeling of resistance, opposition and rebellion against higher education has become less and less vigorous as time passes, and has become idealized. The creation of the college is remembered as the purest time of the institution when it was more attuned to its fundamentals and core values. Here it seems that being alternative and different was also supposed not to be established and not properly recognized. What the President introduces in this quote echoes what follows; indeed, it appears that being different is motivated by being oppositional, but it does not exclude adaptation.

Today, some aspects of the college echo the strong oppositional values that lay at the roots of the institution's history. For example, when I visited the campus, the question of gender was central. There was a strong refusal within the college of gender dichotomy. For instance, the bathrooms were neutralized (see pictures 3 and 4). What is interesting is that the students took the lead by putting up signs to suppress the gendering of bathrooms, but then a note was added from staff saying that the matter first needed to be approved by the student life committee (picture 4).

Picture 3 - Ungendered bathrooms



Picture 4 - Ungendered bathrooms

In this example, opposition came from somewhere different: the students. To put it another way, sources of difference are multiple and scattered. Even if the DC's opposition started with the founders' stance, today opposition can emerge from elsewhere. Underlining this showcase the intricacies of being different. In light of the above, the rule of opposition reveals first that the college was founded on strong opposition against traditional universities. We are close here to the definition of alternative universities disclosed in the literature: "we are against *them*"; so, the alternative is embodied in these historical values that are still roaming inside the college's walls. But, the opposition is always renewed. The example of the student's initiative regarding the ungendered bathroom showcases this point: if the college wants to be really different, it needs to have some distinctiveness, and for some ungendered bathrooms are part of that. Being different is thus embodied in decisions that are being made spontaneously by various sources (i.e. students). But, as the last rule, of adaptation, shows, it is not enough to define the alternativeness as being embodied in opposition.

Rule of adaptation

While investigating the history of the DC, it appeared that even if it is grounded upon radical values, a normalizing process has penetrated some of its parts. One interesting example is its accreditation. Since 1974, the federal association of the State has accredited the DC. This association set up standards to recognize colleges and universities and allow them to deliver degrees. To renew their accreditation, educational institutions have to submit a short report every three years, a longer report every five years and a major report every ten years. I happened to be there while the academic dean was writing the first drafts of the major report (the deadline was later in August). On this matter, Bob said:

> *National standards are pushing us in an administrative direction. For example, the accrediting bureau (…) we've got to be accredited if students want to get scholarship[s] and everything, so therefore we have to follow their rules, but their rules are very traditional and they get more traditional all the time so… they are pushing and pushing our classes and our students and our way of life, they [have] not made us have departments though but you know, you could feel the pressure on us to become a normal… a normal institution. (April, 2017. Emphasis added)*

In addition to this accreditation system, Bob also takes the example of the grades:

> *When we start[ed] we didn't have grades at all. And we didn't think that they were good, we didn't think that… people should be there to work for the beauty of their work and not for their grades so we didn't have grades, we used to write students a letter at the end and we still write them a letter but, but then within a couple of years we don't have grades and students say "wait a minute but I can't go to graduate school without grades, I need it," so we say, "OK, you know, we will give you a grade if you want to go to graduate school" and now… but so many students want to go to graduate school that now all courses are graded… and so therefore the compromise has got to be made and I think you could really see this school as compromising in a lot of directions, probably too much because resistance has got to be in there. (April, 2017. Emphasis added)*

He also speaks about bureaucratization:

> *We have been compromised a lot ant I think if you study this college closely, you will find a fine line between the traditional administration, money and [....] you might say solid governance that goes along [with] money and more administrative… I think if you look at the growth of personnel of the school, you will find that the administrative class has grown more and more than the faculty class for example, as we got more… I mean… we use[d] to have as far of student activities and student life because we just let them go in the woods and now we have student life and assistance, student life and director of student life and all that and huh and we are gonna hire a human resources person so, we are getting more… because the College needs a health plan and a… [.] There might be a law of normalization in which radical alternative institutions tend back. You just have to grow very hard to the direction to keep your university alternative. And that's something some of us have tried to do: we have got to keep this up, we got to keep this alternative. (April, 2017. Emphasis added)*

The accreditation process, having grades and the tendency toward bureaucratization are three elements that normalize the college. To use Tarde's words: to adapt the college to something that already exists. This normalization is "pushing from" the outside. So, keeping the college alternative seems to be a challenge. To exist, the college has to compromise. For Bob, no compromising would have signed a death sentence for the college. Maintaining total radicalism thus seems unviable.[2] In that sense, the rule of adaptation is completely linked with the rule of repetition. As it is an iterative process (see figure 1),

[2] Bob told me about the Black Mountain College, from which they had learned a lot. The Black Mountain College was active from 1933 to 1957 as an 'alternative.' Bob told me that at the beginning of the creation of the Different College, all the founders read the history of alternative universities to avoid making the same mistakes. They mostly read Martin Duberman's book: *Black Moutain: An Exploration in Community.*

we see how adaptation intermingles with opposition; the loop is closed. The alternativeness of the college is altered by an adaptive rule that come from the outside and that is "pushing" to enter.

Even if the college is pushed from the outside to be normalized, not every dimension follows the same loop. For instance, the pedagogy and the governance stay the same and tend to deconstruct mainstream ways of doing. As Bob states:

> *The idea was to try to keep the revolutionary spirit alive and so in a way I think we have done that too, we have kept the ACM and decisions are still made in the ACM, the students have power and they will learn how to use it but it's… anyway, I think a lot of it is still going on and I don't think the fundamental purposes of the school have changed at all.*

Also, today the distinctiveness of the college is built mainly through the "green turn" it is taking. Indeed, it was identified as the first green college of the US. Green buildings were built in order to become fossil-free. This ecological turn is very present in the college building (see pictures 5, 6, 7).

Picture 5 - Recycling on campus

Picture 6 - Composting on campus

Picture 7 - Recycling on campus

But for Bob:

> *I think it's very important that this school is green, especially important to getting students, right? We have the kind of students that are going to be part of a green physical campus, with no waste and fossil-free and composting, toilets and […] yeah, I think that's great, I like it […] but*

> *it's not alternative cause everybody is doing that: Harvard is green and Dartmouth is green. All the places are green, even Columbia is green in the middle of NYC! Green, green, green! And so we [are] just going along with the trend and so I am not that excited about it because that just happens to be a trend in a nation but I do see the value of it in every way and I know that our environmental mission is what these people are supporting us for so that's good. (April, 2017. Emphasis added)*

Bob's feeling about the green turn taken by the college is interesting because for him it is more a trend than an alternative trait. For the President, it adds to the distinctiveness of the college. Following Bob's idea, the green part is just another trend; so, in Tarde's words, another adaptation. This discussion brings Bob to say:

> *I think we need a new revolution just as we had before, we have become too traditional and we have to rebel against ourselves. To this point and this is gonna be very difficult to do that and I don't know who is going to do this, it's probably not going to be us, it should not be us. We did that once and I don't know rather what happen but I think it's a need and it's not our fault really, I think it's mostly the fault of the… it's the way of things to go more normal and the changes in the rest of the country have not been helpful, I don't think our vision is as spread to the entire country in any way and therefore we still have to keep fighting against and it's difficult. […] I don't feel negative, I am not a negative person but I think you still have to keep extraordinary critical spirit over what's happening in the world and I think we have not been critical enough. We didn't examine postmodernism enough. (April, 2017. Emphasis added)*

The fatalism evident in this quote echoes that of the above discussion of how to finance the college. It is like the college is another victim of "how things are" and "how things go." Going "normal", lacking a new revolution. Again, resisting adaptation is a constant struggle; grasping novelty that is fundamentally different is kind of a constant rebirth. So, in light with the elements disclosed through this rule of adaptation, the differentiation is embodied in this struggle to keep the alternative alive. Claiming to be "alternative" is not enough to make an institution really alternative. Indeed, being alternative is a constant work. To be born as an alternative does not however mean that you will stay as such. Thus, the alternativeness has to be questioned again and again; people have to fight for it to avoid that the rule of adaptation wins.

Discussion: a multifold embodiment

Drawing on Tarde's rules, the above observations disclose: 1) the iterative process that constitutes existence through difference and 2) the complexity of embodying difference. First, the college is rooted in its history, which follows a strong dynamic of opposition. The college was aiming to be against the traditional universities. At that time, there were "them" and "us"; they were going at the opposite direction of the traditional institutions, tracing a path to new ways of conceiving of higher education. At the same time, as Bob revealed, the college adapts itself to ongoing norms; it has found ways to adapt while keeping some of its "differences." In other words, it found new ways of adapting itself. Finally, while emerging as a legitimate college, it also tends to imitate and to repeat schemes to survive. We can see how the three rules govern the college's existence.

The movement of differentiation seems to be both inside-out and outside-in. A constant dialogue is happening with what is physically outside (the traditional universities, the historical events, the accreditation bureau). But also with what is inside (keeping resistance/radicalness/experimentations alive). In that sense, the alternative/difference as a movement is done and undone by actors. It's a constant flux, which is negotiated and always questioned.

The three rules invite reflection upon the constitution of the alternative. As it is an iterative process of repetition, opposition and adaptation, the overall point is that being alternative means being alternative and non-alternative at the same time. Three elements are put to the fore thanks to Tarde's rule. First, the alternative is an ongoing and constant work in progress by the members through resistance, struggles and tensions. In that sense, it is a work "toward" being alternative. People who are involved in the college have to be committed to ensure that it stays alternative. If this work is not done, the alternativeness diminishes and fades. So, members have to resist the fatalism of the "way things are." Second, the alternative is constituted by a plethora of things that are neither smooth nor neutral; these things (ideas, values, actions, events, governance traits, novel pedagogy, etc.) could be both new and innovative but also traditional. Being alternative signifies going beyond a dichotomous conception of what is different and what is not different. Finally, the potential to be alternative can emerge from several sources; as examples, people (students, staff, faculty, trustees), political events (Trump's election,

law enforcement, etc.), or events on campus. Thus, the alternative is not univocal; it could be voiced from several positions or perspectives and at different scales.

As seen in the literature, alternative organizations and alternative universities are typically studied from an anti-capitalist perspective. In this case study, however, there is no opposition to capitalism. Even if the college rests upon a strong history of opposing mainstream paradigms, capitalism is not at the core of how the college defines itself as being different. So, in contrast with the literature, capitalism is not always the locus of the alternative. Alternatives differ from each other according to their relationship with capitalism. In this sense, the movement of differentiation in the DC is mostly embodied through the pedagogy, the campus, and democratic governance, not through its relation to capitalism. I thus have the beginning of an answer to my research question: the alternative as a movement of differentiation is embodied in a scattered and unpredictable way. Sometimes it vanishes completely; and other times it reappears as if it has never been away. Its embodiments are multifold.

Conclusion

In this paper, I applied Tarde's three rules to the study of an alternative college to explore the embodiment of the alternative defined as a movement of differentiation. The aim was to show how Tarde's premise allows an accurate understanding of this movement. I argue that Tarde's statements permit an account of the complexity of being different. Indeed, it helps to problematize how higher education institutions are alternative. And, it proposes to expand how we reflect on them. From Tarde, assuming that being different is constitutive of reality permits to renew the place of alternative universities. Indeed, the social world is diverse and multiple and penetrated by movements of normalization and uniformization that smooth differences. Thus, to exist differently for a university is not simple. My theoretical premise set my analytical framework from which I could deconstruct and follow the movement of differentiation. It permits to ask at a micro-level what is different, and to follow the embodiment of the movement of differentiation in the organization.

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