

# How can "variations" and "constants" coexist?—A Study on the Policy Change Process of Chinese Independent Colleges Based on the Framework of Initiative Coalition

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**Abstract:** China's independent colleges have gone through a trilogy of creation, development, and conversion, which has resulted in several important policy changes, but now the policy implementation of "merger and conversion" has been blocked, accompanied by the coexistence of multiple social crises. Based on the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the development and transfer process of independent colleges can be divided into policy exploration, policy advancement, and policy deepening stages according to the landmark policies introduced in each period, and the interaction between advocacy coalitions and changes in external or internal conditions of the system in each stage lead to different policy adjustments. The "changes" and "unchanges" in the process of policy change reflect the policy meaning of "seeking change in stability" in higher education development and reform. The study found, there are "changes" in the process of policy changes in terms of the establishment of independent colleges, policy attitudes and contents, and policy effects, and "unchanges" in terms of policy goals, policy attributes, and policy styles, which coexist and are unified in the logic of "seeking change in stability" in governance. Future work should reconstruct the policy or promote the policy change with the governance logic of "Seeking change in stability", promote the high-quality development of higher education and realize the transfer of independent colleges. In order to achieve the smooth transition of independent colleges and universities.

## 1. Introduction

In 1997, independent colleges came into being against the background of the popularization of higher education and market-oriented reforms. A comprehensive review of the process of policy change reveals that since 2003, when independent colleges were recognized by the central policy, their development has been in a process of interactive adjustment. The emergence of problems and controversies in independent colleges led to the regulation of the central policy, while the regulatory requirements of the central policy triggered structural changes in independent colleges, which then brought new norms and new problems, indicating that independent colleges as an organization are facing the problem of how to achieve institutionalization, which means independent colleges have not yet been able to become a stable institutional model that is widely accepted as a matter of course<sup>[1]</sup>. From the perspective of policy analysis, this indicates that independent colleges as policy makers are also facing the problem of how to realize the organic unity of policy stability and progress, i.e., independent colleges have always been in the process of policy change.

Thus, we propose a pair of relationships between "changes" and "unchanges" based on the policy change of independent colleges in China, analyze the relationship between the two that can coexist, and point to this pair of relationships to the policy logic of "seeking change in stabilizing". By analyzing the coexistence of the two, this paper points to the policy logic of "seeking change in stabilizing". Based on this issue, this paper chooses the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) in

the Western policy process theory as an analytical tool, which is conducive to telling the story of China's governance from a systematic and specialized perspective on the one hand, and on the other hand, it also helps to synthesize the advantages of the two mechanisms of top-down and bottom-up in the implementation of policies, so as to construct a policy process and its changes with Chinese characteristics. On the other hand, it also helps to integrate the advantages of both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms in policy implementation, construct a local model of policy process and change with Chinese characteristics, and effectively explain the process of policy change.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. Literature review

Change is the fundamental characteristic of things, there is no static state of policy, policy has been in flux since it was formulated. ACF is an analytical tool specifically designed to reveal the policy process and the law of change, and its research can be summarized in the following three aspects:

(1) Theorization of the framework: Sabatier and others firstly publicized the theoretical framework of the ACF at the Ludant Conference in 1983.<sup>[3]</sup> Later on, based on the six criticisms of Lasswell's theory of the stages of the policy process, such as "the stage-analysis model is not a causal model; because of the lack of causality, it does not provide a clear theoretical basis for the empirical hypothesis testing", etc., Sabatier and Smith formally proposed the Initiative Coalition Framework in 1993. In order to evolve it from its initial basic framework to a scientific theory, the ACF's framework theorization has gone through roughly three phases, with the landmark outcomes being Policy Change and Learning: an Initiative Coalition Pathway and two editions of Theory of the Policy Process, published in 1993, 1999, and 2007. Modern scholars such as Jonathan Pierce remain committed to testing the applicability of the ACF's assumptions, for example, by applying the ACF to the analysis of U.S. foreign policy and the creation of the State of Israel, validating the contemporary validity of the framework's principles.<sup>[4]</sup>

(2) Interpretive validation. Based on the inclusiveness of the ACF framework, scholars in North America, Europe, and Asia have conducted work on interpretive validation, which encompasses both the use of the ACF and the review of ACF research results, with the former being a commonly conducted study in the academic community. For example, Jane Olson used ACF to analyze the debate over whether a nature reserve should be established or exploited on a lakeside land in Sweden to help understand the concept of belief systems and subsystem actors,<sup>[5]</sup> emphasizing its purely explanatory validation feature. The latter, e.g. Pierce, Peterson, et al. coded their analysis with a sample of 148 policy process studies applying the ACF in 67 articles published between 2007 and 2014, exploring the linkages between primary pathways and policy domains, the linkages between primary pathways and secondary elements, policy change and stabilization, and pointing to threats to the inherent validity of the core concepts of the Initiative Coalition Framework.<sup>[6]</sup>

(3) Applicability Expansion. Many researches in the western world are centered on the evaluation of the theory itself, the choice of direction for future application, the response to questioning and the summarization of research; while Chinese scholars are more likely to apply the ACF to different policy domains and different policy scenarios (countries). 2020 Weber, Ingold, Smith, etc. once again put forward the five major evaluations and improvements of the ACF such as combining the coalition of initiatives with its context, and they expect that "Empirical research to clarify the attributes of coalitions, determine the minimal conditions of coalitions, identify types and sub-types of coalitions, and generate knowledge that contributes to political and social sustainability." <sup>[7]</sup>Pierce found that ACF was applied mainly in the field of environmental and energy policies, while the research of Chinese scholars extends to several policy areas such as education, transportation, healthcare, and economy, e.g., Wang Gang and Wang Yuxiao's ACF analysis of several neighbor avoidance cases introduced initiative coalitions into a new field, and proposed a study on the reconstruction of policy subsystems in the Chinese context.<sup>[8]</sup>

The article follows the following explanatory chain: (1) use ACF to explain the whole process of the transfer policy and clarify the evolutionary stages of the policy text; (2) analyze the "changes" and "unchanges" in the policy change on the basis of the static textual analysis, and extract the

manifestations of both; (3) analyze the belief system to understand the deeper meaning of "seeking change in stability"; (4) Under the premise of understanding the deeper mechanism of "Seeking Change in stability," we serve the long-term goal of modernizing the country's governance capacity and expanding the effectiveness of governance, and put forward a proposal for the formation of a good governance pattern.

### 3. The process of policy change for independent colleges transferring

Taking 2020 as the time node, the academic community generally divides the policy change of independent colleges into three stages: the exploration and innovation stage (1998-2003), the standardization and development stage (2003-2008) and the transformation and development stage (2008-2020).<sup>[9]</sup>In order to construct a coalition of initiatives at different stages, we stipulate that the emergence of private second-level colleges in 1998 and the introduction of the Ministry of Education's Opinions on the Establishment of Ordinary Colleges and Universities during the Eleventh Five-Year Plan Period (hereinafter referred to as Document No. 17 of 2006) in 2006 are the exploratory stage of the transfer policy; and the period from 2006 to 2020 is the exploration stage of the transfer policy. From 2006 to 2020, the Ministry of Education's "Implementation Plan on Accelerating the Work of Transferring Independent Colleges" (hereinafter referred to as the "Plan") was introduced as the stage of promoting the transfer policy; from 2020 to 2021, the Ministry of Education's "No. 10 of 2021" was introduced as the stage of deepening the transfer policy.

According to the ACF paradigm, participants in the policy process of transfer policy can be categorized into three groups: higher education supply coalition, higher education demand coalition and policy intermediaries. The higher education supply alliance includes the providers of higher education and the publishers and supporters of related policies, including provincial and municipal education departments, provincial and municipal governments, the leadership of independent colleges, parent universities (universities that help built the independent colleges), and independent colleges investors, etc.; the higher education demand alliance includes the demand side of higher education, with the main members being the students of independent colleges, their parents and some of their teachers, experts, scholars and members of the public who are highly concerned with the direction of certain development or policies of independent colleges, etc.. The policy intermediary is a special collection of value-neutral functional units such as news media, network platforms, book and journal editorial boards, etc. The policy intermediary transmits information and demands of all parties in the process of interaction between the two coalitions, and promotes information exchange between the two sides, in order to reach a consensus and facilitate the realization of the policy change. The specific model of the ACF is illustrated in Fig. 1.

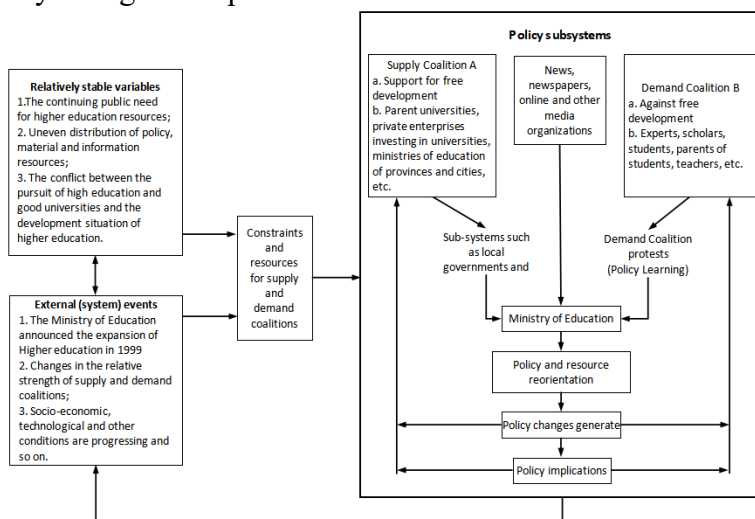


Figure 1 Coalition Framework for Policy Change Initiatives in the Independent College Transfer Process

### **3.1 1998-2006: Exploratory phase of the conversion policy**

In particular, there are four main paths to policy change in the ACF: external events, internal subsystem shocks, policy learning, and negotiated compromises in the event of a policy impasse. The first policy change originated from the significant impact of external events. 1999, the Ministry of Education decided to expand the enrollment scale of higher education, which created a huge contradiction between supply and demand of higher education, and the rapid growth of the number of graduates and its long-standing difference of nearly one million with the enrollment provided the market demand for the rapid development of the secondary colleges, and the strength of the supply coalition, which received the policy signals, grew very rapidly, and the number of secondary colleges reached 360 in 2003. By 2003, the number of secondary colleges had reached 360. <sup>[10]</sup>At this time, the demand alliance opinion expression channel is not smooth, bottom-up information transmission is very slow, also therefore the ministry of education until 2003 to release "a number of opinions" and has a measurable impact, "half of the provinces and municipalities of the local independent colleges of the predecessor of the cleanup, reorganization, in the name of independent colleges re-submitted for approval or apply for new independent colleges amounted to more than 200." <sup>[11]</sup>The Demand Alliance expanded after this: the practical utility of "a number of opinions" led to the conversion of second-level colleges to independent colleges, and the conversion of semi-public and semi-private to fully private, but not detached from the parent university, i.e., partially converted. Students, parents, teachers, etc. in the independent colleges after conversion became members of the alliance. The demand alliance still needs a suitable communication medium after its strength has been strengthened. During this period, due to the influence of external events such as the continuous progress of socio-economic conditions, the rapid development and popularization of network technology; the news, newspapers and other policy intermediaries also intervene in a timely manner, and the cognitive gap generated by asymmetric information has been eliminated under the dual effect. The Demand Alliance used policy learning to reconceptualize independent colleges, express their own interests through the channels of policy intermediaries, and push the issue into the policy agenda, and the second policy change came about, when the term "transfer" was formally introduced in "Document 17 of 2006."

### **3.2 2006 to 2020: conversion policy advancement phase**

The central issue in the interaction of the Initiative Coalition is the progress of the implementation of the conversion of the independent colleges. In terms of the framing components, the relatively stable variables remain consistent with the first stage. Specifically analyzing the landmark policy changes in the advancement stage, the growth of the demand coalition strength as one of the external events is reflected in the coalition composition and the comparison of the two sides' strengths: if the number of independent colleges is used as the supply coalition size marker, it can be seen that the supply coalition has reached its maximum size in the advancement stage, and is even gradually shrinking; whereas, if the number of students enrolled in the privately run independent colleges is used as the demand coalition marker, it can be seen that the demand coalition in the advancement stage The strength of the demand alliance in the advancement stage can be seen to be increasing, as shown in table 1. Another external event, i.e., the continuous progress of socio-economic conditions and other conditions, has also had an additional impact, as a sufficient amount of public opinions have flooded into the central government from the bottom up through new development technologies and platforms, such as social media and online political inquiry. The dual role contributed to the introduction of "the Management Measures", which have two major significance: first, the independent colleges became independent private undergraduate institutions after the conversion, detaching themselves from the aura of the mother school; and second, a five-year transition period was stipulated, within which the conversion of independent colleges needed to be completed.

Table 1 Number of independent colleges vs. number of students

year	Number of independent colleges	Number of students enrolled in private independent colleges (10,000)	year	Number of independent colleges	Number of students enrolled in private independent colleges (10,000)	year	Number of independent colleges	Number of students enrolled in private independent colleges (10,000)
2008	322	-	2012	303	278.40	2016	266	-
2009	322	241.37	2013	292	275.85	2017	265	248.47
2010	323	260.32	2014	283	269.06	2018	265	-
2011	309	267.44	2015	275	259.42	2019	257	-

"The Management Measures" had different impacts on the two sides of the alliance, generating a second source of major policy change: alliance behavior. If the transfer is carried out in accordance with the regulations, the interests of independent colleges will inevitably be damaged, losing the strong support of the parent university, losing the former high tuition income, losing the old policy support, reorganizing the faculty, equipment and so on will require a huge sum of money, and the problems of transferring the assets and reviewing the higher level will also be endless. The interests of the supply alliance represented by the stakeholders of independent colleges were damaged, so they adopted delayed and crippled policy implementation in response to the central policy throughout the whole period. The demand alliance, represented by students, parents, teachers, etc., unanimously demanded that the development of independent colleges should be standardized and the identity of independent colleges should be clarified. During the policy promotion, experts, scholars, teachers, etc. in the alliance published more than one hundred related documents through academic journals to promote the policy learning degree in the alliance, deepen the public's understanding of the policy of transferring, and alleviate the variable restriction of asymmetric information, so as to promote the government's agenda and establish speed. The 2020 "Implementation Plan" was promulgated, further refining the criteria for the implementation of the transfer and clarifying the next development goals.

### 3.3 2020 to the present: a deepening phase of the conversion policy

In 2020, "the Implementation Program" and the "Problem Statement" were released successively, "making the transfer of independent colleges the top priority of the work of setting up colleges and universities, and actively creating conditions to promote the completion of the transfer. By the end of 2020, all independent colleges will have formulated a work plan for transferring, and at the same time promoted a number of independent colleges to realize transferring." This has driven the conversion policy into a deepening stage. The core issue in the interaction of the Initiative Coalition so far is the way the transfer policy is implemented. "The Implementation Program" and the "Problem Statement" for the implementation of the transfer policy has brought about significant changes, the role of the supply alliance in this is more in the policy supply, to provide more detailed local specific transfer policy, to ensure the smooth implementation of the transfer work; demand alliance needs is the detailed information on the transfer policy, the need for their own interests are effectively safeguarded, when the reasonable demands can not be met, it leads to a strong internal vibration. i.e. the strong opposition of the Demand Coalition to the "merger and transfer", and even eventually causes social security problems. When external events do not coincide with the direction of the internal shock, there is a contrast in power, and the external events are more powerful, which drives the positive change of the transfer policy and the promulgation of the "No. 10 of 2021".

More detailed description of this policy change, the "implementation plan" mentioned the transfer of three paths: (a) to private undergraduate colleges and universities; (b) to public undergraduate colleges and universities; (c) suspension of school; and for the social organizers of the "school inside the school" is recommended to explore the integration of the province's higher vocational and post-secondary education resources merger and transfer. Combined with the foregoing, whether in terms of time or operational space, the Implementation Program has made detailed provisions, and at the same time, five policy initiatives to promote the transfer of work in a comprehensive and rapid manner, the transfer of work into the provincial people's governments to fulfill their responsibilities for the evaluation of the scope of education, but also at the same time, two major external events: the accelerating effect of the policy program and the government

departments of the long-term involvement of the policy program clearly brought about. In terms of data, the accelerating effect of external events on the transfer is very significant: as of the end of 2020, a total of 137 independent colleges, accounting for half of the total number of colleges, had been transferred to private or public institutions by the Ministry of Education's public announcement. Among them, 68 independent colleges were announced by the Ministry of Education to be transferred in 2020, more than the total number of independent colleges in the past ten years.

Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces' policy subsystems in the operation is not smooth sailing, produced by the internal shock can not be ignored, the interests of the demand alliance including academic qualifications, quality of learning, social acceptance, etc., so part of the independent colleges "merger and transfer" of the path of the question has been triggered. However, the role played by the demand alliance in the transfer did not play its due role: it did not do a good job of publicizing and discussing the transfer plan before announcing the plan; it did not do a good job of popularizing and pacifying the plan after announcing the plan; and it did not do anything to answer the questions of the students and their parents. As a result, the Demand Coalition opted for radical policy tools, such as restrictions on personal freedom and collective protests. The transfer policy in all three provinces was suspended to ensure social stability in the face of strong internal unrest. The impact of external events is more important in the context of the country's deepening transfer, and the transfer of independent colleges to promote the healthy development of higher education is a long-held policy goal, so "Document 10 of 2021" still proposes to actively and steadily promote the transfer of independent colleges as the first policy point. Ultimately, a positive policy change is formed.

#### **4. The "changes" and "unchanges" of policy change**

The basic strategy of the Initiative Coalition Framework is to anticipate possible belief shifts and policy changes over time based on the structure of the belief system.<sup>[12]</sup> Throughout the process of transitioning independent colleges, the fundamental issue is the interests of the respective coalition. Cohesion of belief systems is about digging deeper into "change" and "unchanges".

The belief system consists of three levels: deep core, policy core, and secondary aspects (table 2), which on one hand explains the deep reasons for the coalition's behavioral changes and policy changes in the three phases, and on the other hand reveals the underlying meanings of the "changes" and "unchanges" of policy change and the coexistence mechanism of these three phases. Combined with the belief system, the "three changes and three unchanges" of policy change can be condensed.

"Changes" include: (1) changes in the establishment of independent colleges. Independent colleges were born as semi-public and semi-private secondary colleges dependent on their parent universities, and then became independent colleges still dependent on their parent universities but fully privately-run, as stipulated in the Several Opinions of 2003. After the introduction of the "Management Measures" in 2008, it has become a "purely independent college" which is detached from the parent university and is completely public or private in nature.<sup>[13]</sup> After three steps of change, the pure independent colleges have become higher quality and higher standard undergraduate colleges and universities. (2) Changes in national policies. To observe this change, it is necessary to pay attention to both policy attitude and policy content, and the academic community mostly takes the attitude of the policy applicant as the research object,<sup>[14]</sup> while the attitude of the state towards the policy issue is also reflected in the implementation of the policy. The first two stages of the supply alliance policy response degree is low, independent colleges free development and think no need to transfer, negatively delay the transfer policy, indicating that the attitude of the state policy easing. In the third stage, the core and secondary aspects of the supply union policy have changed, the degree of policy response has increased, and the transfer work has been actively carried out according to the policy requirements, reflecting the firmness of the national policy attitude. In general, the national policy has experienced a change from moderate and vague to resolute and precise. (3) Changes in policy effects. Changes in policy attitude and content illustrate the state's policy intention to promote transfer in general. According to the secondary

aspects, in the first two stages, the demand coalition also supported the transfer, while the supply coalition chose to delay the implementation of the policy, hoping to maintain the status quo of independent colleges; in the third stage, the demand coalition turned against the "merger and transfer" in order to ensure the rights and interests of independent colleges, while the supply coalition turned to actively implement the policy in order to ensure the performance. This corresponds to the changes in national policy, where the transition from ambiguous and vague to resolute and precise policy means that the policy effect has evolved from slow transfer to rapid transfer.

Table 2 Transition to full process inter-union belief system comparison

belief system		Transition policy exploration phase		Conversion policy advancement phase		Conversion policy deepening phase	
		Development Alliance	Demand Alliance	Development Alliance	Demand Alliance	Development Alliance	Demand Alliance
deep core	fundamental goal	Obtaining benefits wherever possible	Seeking entitlement to higher education	Obtaining benefits wherever possible	Seeking entitlement to higher education	Obtaining benefits wherever possible	Seeking entitlement to higher education
	value orientation	Prioritization of interests	Prioritizing equity in education	Prioritization of interests	Prioritizing equity in education	Prioritization of interests	Prioritizing equity in education
Policy core	Definition of the problem	Conversion of independent colleges not necessary	Independent colleges undermine educational equity, etc.	Conversion of independent colleges not necessary	Independent colleges undermine educational equity, etc.	Independent colleges need to convert	Transfers move forward but transfer paths should be redesigned
	development approach	Allow independent colleges to independently set up their own mode of operation, etc.	Regularizing independent colleges	Freedom to develop under existing normative conditions	The regularization and conversion of independent colleges should be completed according to policy requirements	Should be converted as required by policy	Opposition to the merger and conversion path for independent colleges
Subsidiary aspects	Activity Methods	negativity	active support	negativity	active support	rapid response	partial objection
	Tool Selection	Delays in policy implementation	Policy learning	Delays in policy implementation	Experts present papers and the public brainstorm	Government intervention and positive response to the conversion policy	Bringing public opinion to protest and prevent mergers and conversions
	desired effect	Maintaining the status quo of independent colleges	Keeping independent colleges in check	Maintaining the status quo of independent colleges	Accelerated conversion of independent colleges	Fulfillment of higher-level mandates and improvement of government performance	Stop mergers and transfers and reconfigure new pathways

"Unchanges" include: (1) No change in policy objectives. After a general analysis of the conversion history of independent colleges, we find that, as a new organizational form in the reform of higher education, the future development of independent colleges is a process of gradual change and transformation. [15]The deep-seated goal of the founding of independent colleges is to promote the development of higher education and to cultivate high-quality and high-level talents in an innovative way, and so far this original intention has not changed. (2) No change in policy attributes. (a) policy responsiveness, that is, the government in public management, the public's needs and the issues raised by the process of responding and replying to the public, government response to the policy issues of the effective carrier is public policy. Each policy change appears to respond to the demands of the times, the requirements of economic and social development. (b) The change is gradual, and the progressive policy style in policy change is remarkable. Faced with the ability to obtain complete decision-making information is always insufficient as well as in the overall economic and social mobilization and use of resources is limited, any policy decision is always gradual. (c) Policy flexibility, or interactivity, the policy system is full of two-way circular communication and interaction with the social environment, and policy decision makers accurately identify the policy needs of the society according to the changes in the objective environment, and policy changes in the process of transference are content adjustments to different ways of realizing the same policy goal, and do not affect the overall policy utility. (3) No change in policy style. From the viewpoint of the transfer process, the policy experiment style of "crossing the river by feeling the stones", "taking one step at a time" and "learning by doing" exists at every stage. The steady progress of policy change by doing is also related to the progressive nature of the policy attributes.

## 5. Conclusion

The study finds that based on process analysis and belief system coupling, the change process of transfer policy reflects the "three changes" in the establishment of independent colleges, policy attitude and content, and policy effect, as well as the "three unchanges" in policy goal, policy attributes, and policy style, and "changes" guaranteeing the "unchanges" can realize, and finally achieve the policy goal with "stability". And this is known as "seeking change in stability" governance logic, under which independent colleges have realized a smooth transition and stable transfer despite major changes.

First, the fundamental policy objective of the change in transfer policy is to "seek change while stabilizing and make progress while stabilizing". In fact, some scholars have already pointed out that higher education needs to adhere to the principle of seeking progress while stabilizing and promoting internal development.<sup>[16]</sup> From a holistic perspective, we interpret the Ministry of Education's fundamental policy goal to use stable governance means to regulate and guide the development and transfer of independent colleges, ultimately realizing an effective supplement to the supply of higher education, which is also summarized as the pursuit of "change" through "stability".

Secondly, the goal of the transition policy change is to be realized by "accumulating small changes into a big change". This is actually a generalization of the relationship between quantitative change and qualitative change, "the expansion of university student enrollment leads to a quantitative change in higher education, then the recently reflection on higher education and the insistence on reform will accelerate the process from quantitative to qualitative change in higher education".<sup>[17]</sup> Due to a particular social development period and the level of public awareness, the policy objectives at each stage are consistent, but the means to realize the objectives are diversified. And one of the most important ways is through policy change, with high frequency of small adjustments eventually leading to qualitative change, that is, the mode of policy change of "accumulating small changes into a big change".

And there are at least three areas that need to be emphasized in future conversion efforts: (1) the issue of publicizing the policy program. The information gap between the supply and demand coalition is a great obstacle to the smooth implementation of the policy. The public's lack of understanding of the transfer policy program and the misunderstanding of non-undergraduate education such as higher vocational colleges and universities have led to the suspension of the transfer. (2) Rationalization of transfer programs. Applying the governance logic of "seeking changes in stability", the design of the transfer program process should avoid too fast, rationalize the policy program, and carry out policy changes while seeking changes in order to achieve the policy goals. (3) Policy support implementation issues. To form support policies to ensure the stability of the transfer work, the stability of the school work after the transfer, we need to make assignment of supervisors, establishing timely communication and feedback channels in order to open up and transparent support, to attract colleges and universities to take the initiative to complete the transfer. In short, the governance logic of "seeking change in stability" is not only a characteristic of the policy process, but should also be used for the promotion of the policy. Proposing this logic of governance is not only a theoretical necessity to summarize and condense the characteristics of China's policy process, but also a practical concern to help modernize the country's governance capacity and expand the effectiveness of governance in the pattern of good governance.

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