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**Abstract**

In this article, we apply Max Weber's ideal types of fief and benefice feudalism to elite and non-elite chemistry departments in the USA. We develop a theoretical analogy of academic feudalism in regard to three dimensions: power relations, engagement with companies, and the impact of structural changes on the autonomy of scholars. We use a mixed methods approach to track changes in productivity and industrial collaboration on a departmental level and the researcher's understanding of research autonomy on the individual level. On the departmental level, our findings suggest that scholars located at elite departments are able to utilize federal and industrial resources to increase publications over time. On the individual level, we establish that researchers in both segments perceive their autonomy as being very high, whereas practical autonomy differs according to department. While scholars at elite departments remain relatively autonomous in practice, scholars at non-elite departments often tend to tailor their research to specific requirements to receive funding.

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