Invisible Roles of Doctoral Program Specialists

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the roles of doctoral program specialists in Big Ten universities. Face-to-face interviews with 20 doctoral program specialists employed in institutions in the Big Ten were conducted. Participants were asked to describe their roles within their work place. The doctoral program specialists reported their work interactions with other administrative offices, faculty and students. Their roles as problem-solvers, bridge-builders and being anonymous were dominant descriptors of their work. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations are offered for administrators, departments, faculty and students. Future research directions are suggested as well.

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral program specialists and their roles are invisible, embedded in the structures of universities. In this paper, we present the results of a study of doctoral program specialists at Big Ten universities in the U.S.

The administrative structure in higher education is distinctive to colleges and universities because no one, including academic staff and administrators, has total authority (Kuo, 2009). Administrative staff members are found from the highest administrative office to individual faculty offices, with a diverse range of work expectations (American Council on Education, 2004; Szekeres, 2006). The largest growth in personnel has been in support professionals, nearly ten times faster than increases in faculty, resulting in greater administrative discretion and growing importance in university work (Rhoades, 2001). Support staff comprise approximately 60% of the employees in higher education (Chock, 2008; Szekeres, 2006).

The increase in administrative personnel is a natural result of the expanding needs and changing roles in the institutions (Chock, 2008; Leicht & Fennel, 2008; Rich, 2006). An existing contradiction remains for administrative staff, viewed as residual employees, who remain invisible in the educational literature although the importance of their positions increases as universities' operational needs expand (DiPierro, 2007; Szekeres, 2006). Support staff professionals' significant role in student improvement and success cannot be ignored (Bensimon, 2007).

Roles within administration have evolved due to increased awareness of graduate student populations and needs. The focus of support systems has been altered as well (Altbach, 2011; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Mills, 2012). Organizational transformations have made the work of professional staff more central to the mission of the public university.

Differentiation of roles based on authority and shared specialized positions, defined by expectations and social structures, help form interactions between non-academic staff, faculty and students (Biddle, 1979; Merton, 1968; Weber, 1947). Consequences of diversification of tasks result in specializations within roles for both faculty and staff in higher education. In turn, this has led to uncertainty about how the defined roles play a part in the mission of the institution (Musselin, 2007; Robbins, 2013). According to Bennis and Nanus (2007), individuals are able to determine their roles within an organization if that organization has a clear sense of its purpose, direction, and future, which are widely shared. The individuals involved need to believe they can make a difference. Each role within the institution has a unique purpose to recruit and retain graduate students, yet the limited discussions about graduate schools restrict topics to those of the umbrella institutions, the key funding agencies, the

departments, faculty or students (Kuo, 2009; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000).

The role for graduate schools is to assist students, collaboratively with programs, in successfully completing their graduate degrees which, as of 2008, was at a rate of only 50% (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008; Ehrenberg, Jakubson, Groen, So, & Price, 2007; Lovitts, 2001). Much has been written about graduate students' success and the impediments to degree completion from the student and mentor perspectives (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005; Rose, 2005). The relationships of students and their departments (Gardner, 2010), the nature of the doctoral dissertation process (Lovitts, 2001), and student characteristics and socialization to graduate school (Golde 2005; Tinto, 1993) have been reported.

Influences affecting student attrition are visible; these include the pressures of and experiences with administrative procedures inherent in institutional programs (Golde & Dore, 2001; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Fundamental to the transition from classroom work to doctoral dissertation completion is the development of supportive networks and institutional programs. Retention efforts include student development and services directly purposed to assist graduate students in completing their programs and developing skills for the job market (Chock, 2008; DiPierro, 2007; West, Gokalp, Vallejo, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011).

In summary, because doctoral program specialists' roles within the graduate school and the larger institution have been absent from the research literature, it is difficult to discern the nature of the specialist's role. The diversity in position titles and job descriptions among institutions, reflected in the Big Ten institutions' websites, suggests the lack of uniformity in the roles of these staff members. Exploring the roles of doctoral program specialists and their professional relationships with colleagues, faculty and graduate students provides a view of their unique position. The findings of this study fill a gap in the research literature about graduate-level doctoral program specialists and their roles in the university.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Doctoral program specialists and their roles are invisible and embedded in the structures of universities. In this paper, we present the results of a research study of doctoral program specialists at Big Ten universities in the U.S.

In any organization, there are roles that help define the work and promote productivity (Biddle, 1979, Merton, 1968; Weber, 1947). Although each role is important, leadership roles are discussed more often than support roles are. Research has focused on the dichotomous groups of "faculty and staff" or "faculty and administration" (Chock, 2008; Kezar, 2005; Szekeres, 2006).

Institutional standards are implemented by doctoral program specialists whose professional relationship is subsumed within the institutional system under the Graduate School umbrella. Although it is important to assess doctoral education through the eyes of the doctoral students (Golde & Dore, 2001) and the faculty mentors (Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006), there is a need to examine the roles of the doctoral program specialists based on their experiences.

METHODS

Exploring the roles of doctoral program specialists and their professional relationships with colleagues, faculty and graduate students provides a view of graduate-level administrative support staff and their roles, couched within the structures of their institutions. In order to examine the unique role doctoral program specialists have in the Big Ten universities, program specialists were interviewed. In 2012-2013, the Big Ten Conference consisted of twelve universities across the United States whose total student body populations, as of the 2013 reporting period, ranged from 17,072 to 63,964. Graduate and professional student populations within the Big Ten institutions had a range of 5,069 students at the University of Nebraska to 16,672 students at the University of Minnesota (University of Minnesota, 2014; University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2014). At the time of the study, members of the Big Ten Conference were the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, Indiana University (Bloomington), University of Iowa (Iowa City), Michigan State University (East Lansing), University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), University of Minnesota (Twin Cities), Northwestern University (Evanston), The Ohio State University (Columbus), Pennsylvania State University (State College), Purdue University (West Lafayette), University of Wisconsin-Madison. The twelfth institution, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), was not included in the study. A purposeful sampling method was used to select participants from the 11 institutions.

FINDINGS

Twenty participants were interviewed. Seventeen were female. Five of these females were employed at the department level. Of the three male participants, one worked at the department level. Ages of the participants were not sought. In Table 1 the doctoral program specialists' years of service are noted. Years of experience in the program specialist position were provided by the participants during the interviews. The average years of experience for the twenty participants were eleven years. All participants were employed in a doctoral program specialist equivalent position at a Big Ten institution.

Table 1
Doctoral Program Specialists' Years of Service

Gender	Number In Study	Shortest Service	Longest Service	Average Years
Female	17	1	28	12
Male	3	2	13	7

Using Weber's (1947) definitions for roles within social and economic structures, semi-structured questions were developed to guide the interview procedure. Weber found there were general rules to govern conduct and create hierarchy within an organization. The rules defined the expected and acceptable behavior for those in the program specialist positions (Biddle, 1986).

As participants described their positions and responsibilities, four themes were identified: change, work interactions, policy and role identification. The themes, work interactions and role identification, were described most frequently by participants and are the subject of the following report. Table 2 includes the two themes and subthemes.

Table 2
Themes

Work Interactions
- Administrative Offices
- Academic Departments
- Students

Role Identifiers
- Problem-solver
- Anonymous
- Middle-person

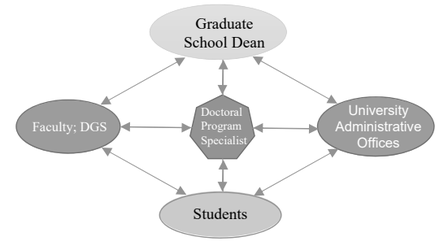
Work Interactions and Role Identification

Participants described their positions as "multi-faceted" and "wearing a lot of hats" as they interacted with academic departments, administrative offices, students and faculty. The general emphasis of their roles, as they related to doctoral graduate students, was to monitor the progress of each student toward graduation.

Participants offered services to doctoral students and to the faculty or departments who worked with the students. One participant summed up the work as, "I guess in a nutshell, I would call us a service center for our students and department as well as our faculty, particularly those faculty who are advisors for doctoral students."

In Figure 1, a visual of the lines of interactions between faculty, students and university administrative offices is presented. University administrative offices included student accounts, financial aid, human resources, university health centers and other support staff whose primary focus was to work with graduate students. Titles for department graduate representatives responsible for monitoring their department's graduate program were varied and included Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) or Graduate Committee Chair. Faculty were identified as being from departments, units or programs.

Figure 1
Work Interactions



As work with other administrative offices was described, the doctoral program specialists noted that establishing good working relationships was critical. One participant stated,

> You grow with the job and people learn to trust you as you grow with it, like any academic office. It takes a lot of people to make things work well. It takes a lot of dedication and willingness to work with outside people, students, faculty, but also within your own little group.

Another individual stated, "I believe that departments view us as just bureaucracy; and, we're just trying to make their life difficult. That isn't the case, obviously, but that's the impression." The program staff and directors of graduate studies were relied on to ensure that students are doing what they were supposed to do so that they could meet deadlines.

Seventeen participants, including the six employed in departments, described their roles as monitoring student progress as well as working with and training faculty, who may be Directors of Graduate Studies, and staff in

academic departments. DGS appointments at the institutions represented in this study were usually non-paid, short-term appointments with delegated responsibility for oversight of the individual graduate programs within their departments. One participant reiterated an experience that was described throughout the interviews, "I've trained many different men to whom I report." The doctoral program specialists who worked in departments described their position as "dedicated to graduate administration. We are auditors working with a student's record. We represent the program in tracking the students' progress and telling the graduate school that all the requirements have been met."

One participant stated,

> The best part of this job is that you have the opportunity to come up with new things, implement or try them then maybe we can be more flexible in accommodating students.
>
> Graduate education is so different and structured different because we're not an academic college. We're strictly administrative. How we deal with departments and students, and what we can and can't do is completely different than how the undergraduate college has to deal with things.

Interactions with students were positive. Participants were involved in problem-solving with students, staff, and faculty. Problem solving activities involved interpretation of policies and procedures published by the graduate school or department. Two participants described their work as "we basically take care of our students from their first enrollment until their graduation" and "try to be as consistent and fair in applying policies to enable this process." Another participant noted, "We feel an obligation to find the answer to their problems." The amount of direct contact with students varied for each office because each institution has different requirements and milestones to document student progress.

One participant stated,

> A student once said to me, when I tell the other students I'm going to see you or that I'm going to the graduate school, they know exactly where I'm going or who I'm coming to see. You're that well-known on campus.

Fourteen participants described themselves as "problem-solvers." One even equated the role to "fighting fires." However, they enjoyed the role because it made them feel good when they "helped somebody move forward." One participant stated, "Of course, we have a lot of problems, but that's exciting to me because you have to solve those. You remember one thing – every problem has a solution. Maybe some are bad solutions but they are solutions. No problems are fatal." Another individual said, "We end up with lots of problems, at our level and stuff. We know we can solve them. Unfortunately, sometimes we solve too many because somebody else didn't do what they should have. We're the problem solvers."

Talking about her responsibility to track students' progress, one participant stated, "I'm in charge of making sure they are academically in good standing, and if they're not, I'm the person that they come to chat with about that." One participant stated, "We're here to advocate for them. That's our primary position." Three participants indicated that their mission was "to facilitate between graduate students and faculty to make sure the students were not focused on the nitpicky, administrative side of their degree." The participants described experiences with new students who would come in and say, "I was told by so and so to see you, that you know all the answers." A participant noted,

> I think getting information to the students, if there is a problem, and getting information out to them as quickly as possible and helping them to resolve it or giving them options, being realistic with them, I think is a big thing.

Providing professional development programs for both students and staff were services offered by the doctoral program specialists. These services were designed to better equip departments, who were considered part of the team, to be the "ground support" for students and faculty.

Participants described how they become the "middle-person – a bridge between student, faculty, other administration offices, and the university." Others used similar terms to describe their role as the in-between person, the person to run interference, the facilitator, the bridge-builder, or the catch-all.

Reiterating the understanding that it is all about student success, one participant stated,

> Anytime you have someone who comes in concerned or upset, who feels like they have an enormous problem, if we can make them feel better about the situation or we can help them find a solution, they leave here happy. Then that's a success.

Participants noted their positions connected the student to answers and services. One described it as: "I feel I'm actually a bridge-builder. Actually, I always feel I'm linking everyone including the data analysis person."

Using the analogy of solving a puzzle, they described their work with other administrative offices working to fit their services all together for the benefit of the student. Those interviewed described asking questions to try and figure things out "because what the student asks for may not be what they are after." Two participants described their primary position on behalf of students as an advocate. One individual said, "I counsel them with their problems. You hang your shingle, hand over the Kleenex and do your 'it's going to be alright' speech." Another person stated. "There's times when we do have to bring in the colleges when we're dealing with the programs [faculty, staff]. We're also dealing with our dean's office too. Because sometimes we have issues with our students so we need to work with the dean's office so they can deal with those unique situations."

There were times when the participants felt they were anonymous in their positions. One participant described her work behind the scenes during a project with her boss, the dean. She stated, "The dean was our institutional coordinator and I was his anonymous sidekick." One participant stated, "The departments and students never know the amount of behind the scenes work unless there is a problem." Another participant said, "It just gives you a good feeling that you can actually do something nice for someone. We didn't want fanfare. We didn't need pats on the back. We knew that it had to be done and he got it and that was all we needed to know."

However, one participant did note, "It's the lack of appreciation sometimes by your bosses, at least I experience that. We do what we can to get things done right and well and avoid problems. I think that they don't realize all the things we do behind the scenes to make them look good. That's one of the frustrations that I've had with this [job]."

According to the participants, the negative aspect of their identity being anonymous was when there was a disregard for staff input with decisions that affected their job (Bray, 2010). Even though they interact with many different administrative offices, these relationships were hidden in their job description. One participant compared the staffs' positions to that of an engine room of a ship.

> It's dirty, it's boring, it's greasy and it's gross and nobody wants to go down there. Sometimes the ship's running and people don't have any idea how it's running. They just don't know what's in the engine room. Sometimes we feel like the engine room – that people have no clue what student services does.

This anonymity resulted in decisions, policy changes and procedure adjustments that affected the participants' positions; the doctoral program specialists, according to these participants were not included in any of the change processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As we began this study, it became clear that there was a void in the literature about professionals in higher education. Examining the roles and issues affecting professionals is essential to understanding the complexion of higher education administration.

The implications from the study are important for students, faculty, departments and administrators. For instance, students would benefit from being given a clear view of the role of doctoral program specialists and the array of services provided by these individuals. A detailed description of the position and the services could be made available to doctoral students so that it could be accessed "just in time" as students approach different deadlines in their program toward the doctorate. Faculty members who are involved in doctoral education and advising would benefit from receiving the same road map of available services provided through the efforts of the doctoral program specialist. By having this information, faculty may be able to help eliminate aspects of student anxiety as they progress through their doctoral programs and direct students toward available resources.

By providing this information to students and faculty, the perceived invisibility of the position of doctoral program specialist could be reduced. Additionally, the description of the roles and responsibilities of the doctoral program specialist could be clarified and standardized. This would provide guidance about job expectations for doctoral program specialists and the individuals who are tasked with their evaluation. This would be beneficial to the hiring process for the position as well (Kuo, 2009).

Our findings and recommendations are compatible with the recommendation provided by Bray (2010) and Szekeres (2004). According to Bray (2010), broad discussions about staffing are not possible because norms and perspectives are not universal across higher education, but can vary by institution and across disciplines. He stated that higher education suffers because of the lack of consistency. The participants in this study provided evidence that their roles were unique to their individual settings.

Szekeres (2004) identified support staff as a hidden population; but showed that the position they hold, not only in the life of the student but of the University, is important for its functioning and mission. The findings of our study of doctoral program specialists provide evidence of the invisibility of this group of university employees.

The doctoral program specialists may benefit from opportunities for enriching their work life experiences through networking and training opportunities provided through

the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC). Their work may be strengthened through sharing best practices for the completing the work of doctoral program specialists.

Additional studies should examine tenure in the role of the doctoral program specialists. The advantages of long and short tenure in these roles could be revealed through such studies.

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