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; Gardiner, 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
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In this study, we examined the roles of doctoral program specialists in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). These specialists are key members of the graduate school, working closely with faculty and graduate students to ensure the success of their programs.

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 5,869 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 (Minneapolis), Northwestern University (Evanston), The Ohio State University (Columbus), Pennsylvania State University (State College), Purdue University (West Lafayette), University of Wisconsin-Madison. The twelfth institution, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), was not included in the study.

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 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.

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 among staff members. Exploring the roles of doctoral program specialists and their professional relationships with colleagues, faculty, and graduate students provides a view of the unique position. The findings of this study fill in 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). Martin, 1968; Weber, 1947). 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; Keser, 2005; Siekeres, 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 (Gold & Dore, 2001) and the faculty mentors (Puglisi, Green, & Bearer, 2006), there is a need to examine the roles of the doctoral program specialists based on their experiences.

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 specialist’s 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.

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 discussion. Table 2 includes the two themes and sub-themes.

Work Interactions and Role Identification

Participants described their positions as “multi-faceted” and “wearing a lot of hats” as they interacted with a variety of administrative staff, 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 the faculty or departments who worked with the students.

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
You remember one thing – every problem has a solution. Maybe some are bad solutions but they are solutions. No problems are fatal.4 Another individual said, “We end up with lots of problems, at our level and stuff. We know we can’t do is completely different than how the undergraduate college has to deal with things.” 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.

Participants noted their positions connected the student to answers and services. One described it as: “I feel I am actually a bridge-builder. Actually, I always feel I am linking everyone including the data analysis person.” Using the analogy of solving a puzzle, they described their work as “the team, to be the ‘ground support’ for students and faculty.” One participant noted, “The departments and students never know that we are academically in good standing, and if they aren’t, it’s going to be alright speech.” Another person stated. “That’s one of the frustrations that I’ve had with this job.”

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 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 with lots of problems, at our level and stuff. We know we can’t do is completely different than how the undergraduate college has to deal with things.”

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 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.

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.

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 complex of higher education administrators and supporting their work. The implications from the study are important for students, faculty, departments and administrators.

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 expanded and provide guidance about job expectations for doctoral program specialists and the individuals who are tasked with their evaluation. Identifying the hiring process for the position as well (Kuo, 2009).

Our findings and recommendations are compatible with the recommendation provided by Bray (2010) and Sekeres (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.

Sekeres (2004) identified support staff as a hidden population, but showed that the position they held, 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
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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.

REFERENCES


