Understanding relationships between academic staff and administrators: an organisational culture perspective

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This study attempts to advance the understanding of relationships between university academic staff and administrators through information in interviews with 18 academic staff members and 18 administrators at a large public research university in the United States. Through exploring the first-hand insights and perceptions of interviewees from an organisational culture perspective, the findings suggest three patterns of relationships: professional, differential and fragmentary. The results also address the cultural subjectivity, diversity and complexity embedded in each pattern. Understanding the complex perceptions of relationships between academic staff and administrators should raise the sensitivity and awareness of individuals in their appreciation of how relationships are constructed, and help to reflect upon cultural characteristics in an academic organisation.

Keywords: academic staff; administrators; organisational communication; organisational culture

Academic staff and administrators as two cultural organisations

University academic staff and administrators play critical and central roles in higher education in fulfilling the missions of education, research advancement and public service. From an organisational and systemic perspective, academic staff and administrators can be seen as two cultural organisations that regularly communicate and interact with each other, through which relationships are created and recreated. In general, academic staff and administrators express a high level of respect and collegiality towards each other’s intellectual and professional contributions. Meanwhile, because of different commitments and functions, both entities foster separate and distinct cultures, which influence how they develop and sustain their relationships (Clark, 1983). Although there are both agreements and conflicts between academic staff and administrators (Holton & Phillips, 1995), relational dynamics in the context of higher education inspire this research inquiry: how do academic staff and administrators perceive and construct their relationships from an organisational culture perspective?

Organisational culture in higher education is, arguably, more complex than that of other organisations owing to intellectual purpose and department/discipline-centred structures that are distinctive to colleges and universities (Clark, 1984, 1987; Weick, 1983). As socially constructed realities, ‘academic organisations are rich in cultural meanings’ embedded in everyday communication (Tierney & Minor, 2004, p.93). In particular, individuals and constituencies, including academic staff and

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administrators, are perceived as 'organisationally unique because no one has absolute authority within the organisation' (Perkins, 1973, p.xv). They construct their unique cultures through indispensable roles and functions, diverse perspectives and dynamic interactions with others. In this rich and invigorating organisational context, this research explores the multi-faceted perceptions of academic staff and administrators toward their relationships.

The current literature supports that, in general, academic staff and administrators identify the same academic and intellectual values, but differ in dealing with issues affecting their work and life at the university, such as technological and economic challenges, decision-making processes, teaching and research commitments, conflict management, and/or institutional effectiveness (Swenk, 1999; Tang & Chamberlain, 1997; Totten et al., 2003). Nonetheless, the literature is limited in its exploration of how academic staff and administrators, as two distinct but interdependent cultural entities within a complex system, enact in a relational context.

This research area could be enriched by examining the first-hand experiences of academic staff and administrators, and providing interpretations and insights into their relationships from a cultural perspective. As empirical work, using cultural approaches is necessary in order to improve the understanding of relationships between academic staff and administrators (Kuh & Whitt, 1988), this study seeks to address this demand through making sense of personal and cultural perspectives, and their representation in discourse.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected at a US public research university through face-to-face interviews with 18 academic staff members and 18 administrators across a wide range of disciplines and academic units. The academic staff of the studied university is unionised and follows a collectively negotiated agreement, which delineates provisions for salaries, promotion and grievances. This research site is considered ideal because it represents a complex organisation that is rich in discourse and cultural diversity. The characteristics of this site that are potentially applicable to other institutions are as follows. It is a member of an association of research universities; a large, public-funded research university; highly ranked, but striving to attain a competitive ranking among its peers; consistently reduced budgets coupled with significant increases in tuition fees in recent decades; geographically dispersed campuses; and complex administrative and academic structures.

The 36 participants interviewed were chosen through stratified sampling, but neither those interviewed nor the data collected necessarily reflect the overall campus population, or that of other institutions. The criteria used for academic staff were tenure and representation of disciplines in arts, sciences and professional fields. The criteria used for administrators were that they directly worked with academic staff and held executive positions responsible for the oversight and leadership of academic affairs, such as vice presidents, associate vice presidents, deans, associate deans and the university librarian.

To identify and analyse themes and patterns that emerged from the interview data (Creswell, 2003), four codes were adapted from the literature:
Differentiation – how academic staff are different from administrators in terms of their goals, perspectives and work styles (Cameron & Ettington, 1988; Mohan, 1993);

Fragmentation – how conflicting values or different goals can potentially divide academic staff and administrators (Martin, 2002; Sackmann, 1991);

Individualism – how academic staff and administrators perceive members of academic staff who tend to focus on their own ideas and follow their own principles (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Ruben, 2004); and

Interaction – how academic staff and administrators interact with each other while building relationships (Bantz, 1993; Dill, 1982).

The data were analysed by first developing themes for the data categorised under each code, as shown in Figure 1, and then comparing and clustering the themes into three patterns – professional, differential and fragmentary – as shown in Figure 2.

Professional relationships

The data suggest that, in general, relationships between academic staff and administrators are professional and based on collegiality, interpersonal dynamics, professionalism and open dialogue.

Collegiality and interpersonal dynamics (as perceived by academic staff)

The academic staff interviewed commented that their relationships with administrators are generally collegial, productive and respectful because they consider both academic staff and administrators to be intellectuals who share similar values of education and scholarship. Nonetheless, several viewed their interactions with administrators as social and ceremonial, in which the discussions would not involve substantive issues. As one observed, many administrators ‘are very polished people; they know how to interact personally, easy to talk with. Nothing unpleasant. They are predictable and social.’

Among the academic staff interviewed, some who had more contact with administrators perceived their relationships with administrators as productive, resulting from this increased frequency of interactions. The responses also suggested that a few administrators might have difficulty maintaining effective relationships, and often become isolated from academic staff. As one academic complained, ‘Administrators really seem to be there just to make our lives difficult and [for] some of the administrative stuff I still don’t entirely understand why those regulations exist.’

Professionalism and open dialogue (as perceived by administrators)

Most of the administrators interviewed expressed their satisfaction with their professional relationships with academic staff. They said that while appreciating the creative ideas and fresh perspectives conveyed by most academic staff, they enjoyed interacting with academic staff through learning about exciting research results or by simply engaging in inspiring conversations. One administrator felt excited about ‘learning faculty [academic staff] perspective because it is different. They are smart, talented people, have thoughtful comments. They are so successful in their field, so
esteemed in their field, and so intense about what they do. It’s breathtaking.’ Another administrator described, ‘I like to talk about new projects they’re working on. Listen to their ideas about the research for a new project. If somebody’s upset about something and we have to try to figure out a way to make them not upset.’

Several administrators stressed the importance of initiating personal dialogue with academic staff, whether individually or in small groups. Several stated that they consider email to be an efficient and direct way to contact most academic staff, but they sensed a lack of interpersonal dynamics when using email. They suggested that initiating personal conversations is a powerful tool, especially in order to better understand what priorities, goals or concerns most academic staff have, because
‘face-to-face interactions are the most impactful, so you can adjust and deal and interact immediately.’

In summary, the academic staff and administrators interviewed perceived that they maintained professional relationships because of mutual respect as intellectuals, valued each other’s knowledge and commitment, and shared the same academic understanding of higher education. Most of them appeared to enjoy personal interactions and open dialogue, especially through face-to-face communications. When developing relationships, most academic staff and administrators indicated that they were inspired by each other’s novel ideas and stimulating conversations. The idea of collegiality demonstrated by most academic staff and administrators suggests a synergistic environment that supports innovation and creativity and encourages a spirit of cooperation and collaboration (Godsey, 1983; Zahorski, 2002).

**Differential relationships**

Relationships between academic staff and administrators are, at times, differentiated because there are perceived differences in priorities and work styles, and the extent of autonomy and independence.

**Different priorities and interests (as perceived by academic staff)**

Most academic staff perceived that setting appropriate goals for the unit, such as raising the profile of the college or school, should be most administrators’ first priority, not that of academic staff. As one noted, ‘The administrators have to look at the entire school, the entire university. The faculty [academic staff] tend to be in their own little worlds for their own reasons.’ Many academic staff members emphasised their responsibility for research advancement and student teaching, whereas most administrators are responsible for resource allocation, operational effectiveness, and the reputation of the unit and the university.

Some academic staff interviewed said that most administrators could have immediate access to a broader scope of information about the university, such as
legislative strategies and the financial outlook of the state, which academic staff would not readily access. Because of such differences, one academic noted, ‘There’s difference in responsibility because of their jobs. The administrators have things that they’re responsible for that I don’t have to care about.’ Another observed, ‘The faculty [academic staff] don’t have the sense of what it takes to coordinate all of these complex components in an organisation like the university.’

Different stakeholders and work styles (as perceived by administrators)

Most administrators stated that they need to examine issues globally, whereas most academic staff examine issues from a disciplinary or departmental view and, therefore, pay less attention to the university’s diverse directions. As one observed, ‘The administrators, because of their duties, have a broader outlook than the academic staff. The academic staff have a very clear understanding of exactly what they do, but most of them have no idea how that fits into the university.’ A few administrators said that if a unit needed to strengthen its relationships with alumni (for example), the administrator must be committed to holding meetings or events with alumni. As one administrator pointed out, ‘We’re not a cohesive organisation going in the same direction. Faculty [academic staff] aren’t really interested in, say, overall administrative functions or services. They’re doing their own thing.’ Consequently, administrators sensed a lack of enthusiasm from academic staff regarding participating in affairs not relevant to their research.

Many administrators noted that the stakeholders relevant to most academic staff appeared to be quite specific, such as colleagues affiliated with the discipline, professional communities, and students, whereas the stakeholders relevant to most administrators appeared more diverse, ranging from the central administration, prospective students, the board of trustees, academic and general staff, and students, to alumni, donors, the general public, and the state legislature. One administrator reflected, ‘The administrators would have different values; [there are] things about maintaining the financial integrity of the university, maintaining its reputation in the community in ways the academic staff don’t necessarily think about so actively; for example, maintaining good relationships between the university and the legislature.’

Several administrators commented that the diversity of stakeholders places tremendous weight on their shoulders in ways that might not always be visible to most academic staff. Because of the interdependence of administrative systems, many administrators indicated that they need to rely upon assistance and cooperation from other units and individuals in order to accomplish their job assignments efficiently. Given that some academic staff also collaborate with other colleagues through interdisciplinary projects, most administrators interviewed respected the fact that academic staff structure their work style primarily based on their own priorities and schedules.

Independence, autonomy and individual goals (as perceived by academic staff)

Almost all of the academic staff interviewed perceived themselves as independent thinkers who valued their privileges of independence and autonomy. They stated that they would prefer to highlight their roles as independent scholars, creators, inventors, originators or thinkers, while exercising academic freedom as ‘the value and nature of what they do’, said one academic. They also stressed the idea of
autonomy that allows them to follow their own principles, styles and agenda. They paid little attention to organisational hierarchies because their work is based on individual preferences and schedules. One noted, ‘People who choose to go into academia are people who don’t want to be in a highly structured restraining environment, and want to be their own boss.’

Although appreciating the values of autonomy, some academic staff expressed concern over a lack of cohesion between academic staff and administration in an environment where the majority of academic staff predominantly emphasise their own interests. One remarked that a few academic staff members appeared to demonstrate a ‘cowboy culture’. Another academic was critical of this attitude: ‘Individualism, in a pernicious and negative way, is probably what you hear among people, self-centred, very hard to find, arrogant.’ These individuals, the academic said, would always resist authority and only believe in themselves.

Most academic staff perceived that they had to work hard in order to achieve their individual goals while competing for limited resources. However, a few described academic staff who overtly focus on their individual goals as ‘aloof’ and ‘so concerned about their own research’ that they appear not to be interested in getting involved with students and university affairs. Meanwhile, a few academics expressed their sense of isolation because, as one put it, almost everyone was ‘doing their own things, and there weren’t other people to talk to’. Their responses indicated that some academic staff could not find colleagues to share collegial bonds or sympathies for each other’s research or professional issues. As one expressed it, ‘I feel totally on my own.’

In summary, the findings suggest that relationships between academic staff and administrators appear, at times, to be less cohesive because most academic staff consider themselves to be a different, separate cultural entity from administrators. There seems to be an ‘us versus them’ mentality when their relationships are viewed as infrequent and distant. ‘With a strong wish for autonomy and freedom’ (Sporn, 1996, p. 42), the majority of academic staff prefer to prioritise their individual goals to meet research demands, whereas most administrators focus upon everyday practices.

The notion of ‘individual versus organisation’ implies that relationships between academic staff and administrators could be strengthened if each side would endeavour to recognise and support each other’s priorities and principles. Differential relationships highlight the diverse perspectives and experiences reflected by the academic staff and administrators, resonating separately with different discourse communities in one large organisation. As differentiation is considered to be an organisational value in higher education (Bloland, 1995), these perspectives are the values that both academic staff and administrations should understand and respect when developing productive relationships.

**Fragmentary relationships**

The data suggest that relationships between academic staff and administrators are sometimes fragmented based on their perceptions of insufficient interaction, an ‘I’ emphasis, and administrative bureaucracies.

**Lack of interaction and understanding (as perceived by academic staff)**

The academic staff interviewed expressed concern over finding time or common interests in order to interact with administrators. As one observed, ‘Everyone in the
university is busy, it is the culture of ‘busyness.’ Another described his interaction with some administrators as ‘minimal ... I only interact with them at meetings’. Several pointed out that, especially in large departments, there were few avenues for personal interactions between academic staff and administrators except during routine meetings or social events. One sensed that ‘Administrators are not interested in you as a faculty [academic staff] member unless you can produce large sums of research dollars.’ A couple of academic staff members said that they were neither interested in interacting with administrators nor in understanding what administrative work entails.

Another factor responsible for the seemingly low level of interaction between academic staff and administrators could be frustration over the quality of administrative services; for example, having the grants office approve proposals or handle grant accounting matters efficiently. A few expressed frustration over not receiving effective administrative support when planning scholarly programmes on campus. Such frustration made some academic staff feel reluctant to develop closer relationships with administrators. In addition, several perceived that some administrators neither understood their academic preferences nor listened to them. As one responded, ‘They don’t seem to understand the role that the faculty [academic staff] play and the contributions they have made; that’s kind of the across-the-board reaction.’ Consequently, they stated that they would prefer not to be told what to do. The response to the relationships with certain administrators was, ‘I won’t bother you if you don’t bother me,’ as one put it. Another academic also expressed the same reaction: ‘I’ll leave you alone and you leave me alone.’

These perceptions suggest that without active interactions and mutual understanding, relationships are likely to become fragmented. One academic commented, ‘The relationships range from being friendly to being quite contentious and difficult. Most of the relationships that I see are respectful but lack understanding from both sides.’ In addition, several stated that with minimal contact they could keep their distance from administrators. As one academic observed, ‘Administrators get pretty remote and those people don’t interact very often with faculty [academic staff], and faculty don’t really interact with them, which is a shame.’

**Administrative bureaucracies and skepticism (as perceived by administrators)**

Many administrators interviewed sensed that the authority and structure of administration might cause a degree of fragmentation between some academic staff and administrators. A few stated that because they were authorised to make certain decisions for the unit, if certain academic staff are not pleased with a decision, administrators would be seen as working against academic staff. One administrator noted that some academic staff might have ‘a tendency to ascribe [an unpopular decision] to the malevolence of some kind on the part of the administration’.

These perceptions suggest that the decisions that academic staff do not accept well cause a measure of fragmentation between displeased academic staff and the administrators who make the decisions. Several administrators also perceived that a few academic staff members were sceptical of the administration, regardless of who might be in particular positions. These administrators noted that, in most cases, such sceptical perceptions revolved around how some administrators would undermine academic staff work, and ignore the individual characteristics or needs of academic staff.
A few administrators expressed concern that doubt in the minds of certain academic staff might cause further disconnection from their administrators. One observed that a few academics implicitly had an assumption of ‘I don’t trust you if you are an administrator until you prove yourself to me’. The perception of mistrust is likely to create barriers that affect how academic staff and administrators communicate with each other. One administrator remarked, ‘There’s a gap in understanding that creates all kinds of mistrust, distrust, lack of feeling that anything can be done by the administration.’

‘I’ emphasis and anarchy (as perceived by administrators)

The administrators interviewed were aware that the ‘I’ emphasis and anarchy exhibited by academic staff could influence their relationships. Several administrators observed that a small group of academic staff would emphasise ‘I’ in their communication with others as they try to highlight their unique characteristics. One noted, ‘Faculty [academic staff] tend to feel very misunderstood and unappreciated and they are often critical of….priorities other than their own, so they sometimes approach something in a very chauvinistic manner.’ These administrators sensed a challenge in working with the individuals who constantly emphasise ‘I’ and are reluctant to consider others’ interests. One pointed out that ‘the faculty [academic staff] are trained to be individual thinkers, and team play does not come naturally’. Such perceptions imply that it is harder for an academic division to unite as a holistic entity when there was perceived to be more ‘I’s than ‘we’s.

Some administrators characterised academic staff as anarchists who are especially interested in pursuing their distinctive intellectual interests and following their independent principles. One observed, ‘Faculty [academic staff] are somewhat insulated. They allow themselves to be insulated because they can be in their own world and not need to care about a lot of the details of what makes the university run.’ A few perceived some academic staff as separated from the larger university and less attentive to academic affairs or uniform practices. One administrator noted that each academic staff member is a unique individual: ‘I have 70 faculty [academic staff] members, and I have 70 different personalities.’ It appears that one of the challenges for administrators working with the academic staff who believe in the idea of anarchy is developing cohesion among them.

In summary, the lack of social integration among academic staff and administrators results in isolation and disconnection from colleagues beyond their home department (Dill, 1982). The findings suggest that without adequate personal interactions, both entities could become more distant from one another, less understanding of each other’s work and, consequently, sceptical of each other’s motives. Because trust is paramount to establishing and maintaining positive relationships, the perceptions of mistrust can potentially create hidden barriers that further separate academic staff and administrators. In an anecdotal account of his 20 years of being a chief administrator, Borden (2005, p. B9) reflected that ‘an organisational culture without trust is an unhappy and unhealthy place. And where openness and collegiality exist, even the hardest work can be a joy’.

The responses also suggest that some administrative structures and practices need improvement in order to effectively support the demands of academic staff and students. The literature reports observations of ineffective administration in higher
education. For example, Locke’s (1983) study indicates that the academic staff surveyed rate administrative services as unsatisfactory when asked about their own job satisfaction. Bantz, DeWine and Shockley-Zalabak (2005) stated that there is a tendency in academic organisations that actions sometimes move slowly and in a cumbersome way. As practitioners, Meyer and Kaloyeros (2005, p. B16) viewed administrative culture as ‘stuck in slow motion, blissfully ignoring efficiency and leadership’. This sense of fragmentation appears to arise when some academic staff perceive that administrators are not able to improve inefficient processes or make decisions arbitrarily without academic staff input, which can have a negative impact upon academic staff work and cause the relationships to become strained.

Conclusion

The findings suggest three inter-related patterns of relationships between academic staff and administrators: professional relationships – mostly when academic staff and administrators are able to maintain collegial and constructive relationships in support of each other’s ideas and endeavours; differential relationships – sometimes when academic staff and administrators perceive notable differences in their priorities and work styles and the extent of their relationship appears to move toward separate directions; and fragmentary relationships – occasionally when academic staff and administrators perceive a lack of interactions and understanding among them, a sense of frustration over administrative practices and their relationship becomes divided. The three patterns align with Martin’s (2002) three theoretical perspectives of cultures in organisations – integration, differentiation and fragmentation – that espouse diverse and shifting insights into relationships between academic staff and administrators.

The seemingly growing sense of disconnection between academic staff and administrators reduces their opportunities or weakens their abilities to work collaboratively (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). As universities have high differentiation and low integration compared to other organisations (Weick, 1983), contradictions and cohesion often co-exist in relationships between academic staff and administrators. This organisational cultural characteristic allows academic staff and administrators to accomplish their separate priorities and develop their relationships in various ways, sometimes in a cooperative fashion and occasionally in friendly conflicts.

Depending on the individuals involved and the emerging situations, relationships between academic staff and administrators can change swiftly. For example, when academic staff and administrators engage in intellectual communication, they tend to be collegial and professional. On the other hand, when communicating about resource allocation, their relationships may become differentiated or fragmentary if they do not agree with each other’s perspectives or priorities. The findings suggest that in order to achieve collaboration, academic staff and administrators need to attempt to understand how and why their cultural perspectives are similar, different or divided, and what special contexts, situations or challenges affect their interactions. ‘When both administrators and faculty [academic staff] ignore their cultural differences, the results are generally bad for the institution’ (Swenk, 1999, p. 18).

These findings underscore the importance of appreciating how cultural subjectivity, diversity and complexity can have a direct impact upon the evolution of relationships between academic staff and administrators. This study reaffirms the
role of culture and its manifestations in academic cohorts as they create and shape dynamic relationships. As Clark (1985, p.43) stated, the idea of integration and collaboration is largely ‘unity in diversity’ and built in the spirit of ‘respect for differences and trust in the choice of others’. Individuals in higher education, as in other organisations, should be able to work collaboratively through understanding the complex cultural factors involved in maintaining effective relationships.

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