



Understanding the twists and turns of academic leadership in higher education institutions

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Submitted: 29 October 2021

Revised: 1 February 2022

Accepted: 19 February 2022

Abstract

Managing academic affairs embraces vast array of responsibilities. Aware of the remarkable and challenging position occupied by the program chairs, this paper shed some light to help illuminate the way our academic leaders face their struggles in managing the organization in a higher education institution. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of academic program chairs of Quirino State University, Cabarroguis, Campus as they faced struggles, dilemmas, and tensions as academic managers. Driven by the question, -experience?, a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Further, seven interesting themes emerged on the struggles experienced by the academic leaders, namely: a.) tardiness and absenteeism of subordinates; b.) disobedience & disrespect from subordinates; c.) defiance to work; d.) student-related issues; e.) young in the position; f.) self-sacrifice for the sake of position and responsibility; and g.) lack of support from the administration. This study has implications for academic leadership practice in that it enables other academic leaders to analyze and relate their own management roles, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and values in order to dynamically maximize their organization's success and ensure its survival through harmonious and sound relationships with superiors and subordinates.

Keywords: *struggles, twists and turns, dilemma, tension, program chairs*

1. Introduction

Department chairs occupy key decision-making roles within their colleges and universities. They are the pivotal midpoints of the administrative and communications systems as information and instructions flow up and down, and to and from, individual faculty members, faculty governance bodies, deans, provosts, and, ultimately, presidents and governing boards. Thus, chairs are simultaneously respected peers in the senior faculty where they serve as spokespersons for their concerns, and front-line administrators responsible for implementation of campus missions and policies within their departments (Gappa & Trice, 2010)

On the other hand, faculty taking on the position of chair experience abrupt changes in their work life, adding to the stresses of their academic career. The challenges are compounded by the fact that chairs come out of their teaching roles in disciplines that may be a far cry from management and leadership, thus leaving them underprepared. For instance, in the study conducted by (Amstrong et al. in 2017), they stressed that academic program chairs experienced challenges as they manage organization. Further, they identified three related areas of challenge: managing people, managing position, and managing self.



Moreover, they have a very strategic and challenging position since a great deal of work at universities is completed at this level. They are tasked with curriculum planning, performance reviews, fiscal oversight, advocating for and representing their department to the university at large and to external constituents. Clearly, department chairs require skills different from those that originally attracted them to the independent life of a scholar and require leadership responsibilities that differ from those of their predecessors (Weaver, 2019).

Furthermore, career transition and organizational socialization theories, which strive to explain how role changers adjust to evolving professional and organizational norms, have an influence on the investigation of program chairs' issues, dilemmas, and conflicts. A career transition is a period in which people's positions or attitudes toward their existing roles change. Individuals may encounter surprises, shocks, and contrasts at this time as they cross unexpected personal, professional, and organizational borders while seeking to make sense of their new positions, connections, and locales (Amstrong, 2017). It is on the above data that this study is conceptualized. It presents a phenomenon of academic program chairs' struggles in managing organization. Findings in this paper serve a valuable lens through which the academic program chairs' attitude as organizational managers could be understood and observed. Specifically, the emerged struggles/dilemmas will help academic leaders manage effectively their organizations.

The overall objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of academic program chairs of Quirino State University, Cabarroguis Campus as they manage their organization. It specifically explores the struggles faced by academic deans and program chairs as they manage their organization.

This research is based on Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard's "situational theory" of leadership, which claims that no single leadership style is preferable. Instead, it all depends on the context, leadership style, and approaches that are best suited to the task at hand. The most effective leaders are those who can adapt their leadership styles to get the most out of their employees. They must be adaptive in their approach and understand the need of being situational. Further, according to the theory, the most effective leaders are those who can adapt their style to the situation and take into account cues such as the kind of task, the team, and the individual, the degree of risk, the environment, and other factors that may contribute to getting the job done. This theory is best suited to the current study since the academic deans and program chairs were able to adapt in their own situations, despite the difficulties they faced, they were able to survive and successfully run their own organization.

2. Methodology/ Materials

This study used qualitative design employing phenomenological approach to describe and interpret the struggles of program chairs in managing their organization. A phenomenological research is a strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by the participants. Understanding the lived experiences marks a phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method and the procedures involve studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell,2009).

The study was conducted among seven program chairpersons in all colleges in Quirino State University, Cabarroguis Campus. The purposive sampling method was used in identifying the participants.

In order to acquire the essence of the phenomenon under investigation, a letter of request was sent to the Campus Administrator and purposely to the selected participants informing them of the nature of the research, the topic to be discussed and the extent of their involvement. Once their consent was obtained, an appointment was scheduled for a one-on-one interview based on their convenience and availability. The interview meetings were conducted in the respective offices of program chairs and lasted for one to two hours.

The interview guide was prepared by the proponents and validated by an expert in the field. Further, the proponents conducted personal interview with informants in order to get the data required for the study. Prior to the interview, the researchers advised the informants that participation was fully voluntary and that they might terminate the discussion at any point. The in-depth and semi-structured interviews which lasted 1-2 hours were conducted in English but they were allowed to answer in Iloko or Filipino as their mother tongue or lingua franca to ensure the fullness of data. The said interview primarily focused on struggles of program chairs in managing their organization. Their sharing revolved around the following key questions in the interview guide: (a) What are the problems/struggles that you have encountered in your organization?; and (b) How do you solve or manage those problems? The flow of conversation was determined by the participant, although in some occasions, the researcher needed to ask questions for the purposes of clarification and to probe deeper on certain responses.

Additionally, participants were advised that their identities would be kept strictly confidential. The interview transcripts were thoroughly transcribed and coded, and they were double-checked. The audit trail was utilized to route interview transcripts among informants in order to check their articulations were accurate. The audit trail is a thorough means of establishing that the transcripts are accurate representations of the participants' stories. Additionally, it includes a description of the techniques for data collecting and analysis (Carcary, 2009). Thus, the data are deemed confirmed and valid (Malterud, 2001).

Furthermore, the data was analyzed thematically in order to get a conclusion about the research objectives. Themes were generated based on recurrent assertions made by informants, which formed the basis for an inquiry-based study. Further, the analyses of data were done through familiarization and arrangement, coding and recoding, summarizing, and interpreting (Nowell et al., 2017).

3. Results and Findings

Results in this study explored the essence of the lived experiences of a group of academic program chairs as they manage their organization. Based on the responses given by the participants, the six interesting themes appeared on the struggles they experienced as they assumed their roles as academic managers. The themes include: a.) tardiness and absenteeism of subordinates; b.) disobedience & disrespect from subordinates; c.) defiance to work; d.) student-related issues; e.) young in the position; f.) self-sacrifice for the sake of position and responsibility; and g.) lack of support from the administration.

Theme 1. Tardiness and Absenteeism of Subordinates

The academic program chairmen in this study were confronted with major concerns from their subordinates. This includes late report submission, tardiness, and absence from classes. As articulated by one of the participants:

“Of course, for my shared instructors, I don’t have any control with them especially in terms of submission of reports like grade sheets. For the core faculty, there is one who is always late in submitting reports and seldom meets her class. I told her that I will inform the civil service on the grounds of her absenteeism. Actually I endorsed her issue of being absent to the Campus Administrator but no sanction at all. Most of the time, she submits her reports very late.” Interviewee 2

Other participants also shared:

“Yes, I had a big issue with her teaching performance. She is usually late, and the worst part is that she sometimes misses class. Furthermore, she is inconsistent in making judgments, such as when administering quizzes. Most of the time, students complain about their grades because she can't settle on the correct answer. It's really a big issue

because we are a board course and we should not sacrifice the quality of instruction. For how many years, our graduates passed in the board examinations, and then the quality of instruction will suffer just because of this instructor. Yeah so stressing! ”
Interviewee 4

Notably, the verbalizations above indicate that serious problems committed by subordinates, specifically on teacher-related issues, were encountered by academic program chairs in their respective programs, putting them in a difficult position to investigate so that the quality of instruction is not jeopardized. This result is consistent with the findings of (Castillo & Mallillin, 2016), who concluded that lecturers' performance in the classroom has to be improved in terms of presentation, interaction, and the development of students' critical and analytical thinking. Additionally, they discovered that when instructors are absent, late, or understaffed, students' performance in the classroom suffers. The significant effects for lecturers include important recommendations and the perception of their instructional output by students who are recipients of the instructors' professional skills.

Theme 2. Disobedience & disrespect from subordinates

Respect has been described as "the single most potent factor in nurturing relationships and building a just society" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000, p. 13). Respect may be the glue that ties people together and one's self-concept together (Shwalb, 2006). In this study, the majority of participants stated that they gain disobedience and disrespect from their subordinates. They openly confessed that there are subordinates, particularly "seniors," who exhibit similar unpleasant behaviors against them. According to them, this negative experience had a significant impact on their self-esteem as leaders. As one of the participants expressed:

"It's simply that I don't think of myself as respected since they are in the service ahead of me." I cry sometimes because they don't seem to be insensitive. Whatever reminders I tell them appear to be useless. For example, hitting below the belt (absent without any permission.) Most of the time, they are just absent when they want to. They don't let go. Even if they are like that, I still have to respect them even if they don't do it to me for nothing." Interviewee 7

Other participants also mentioned:

"Sometimes, they don't believe in what I am saying. They discuss things at my back. I feel that I was by-passed by my subordinates. Of course, I feel so lonely whenever they talk negative against me. I can't confront them about my feelings. I just forget the issue and let it fade naturally so that everything will run smoothly because if I retaliate against them, nothing will happen. I just look into the welfare of the students and the whole department and those are my priorities." Interviewee 3

The above statements from the participants emphasize that program chairs manage people with different attitudes and behaviors in their organizations. On the other hand, they still manage themselves and at the same time they know how to deal with their people despite of these misbehaviors their subordinates displayed.

This is consistent with Yukl's (2012) assertion that the essence of leadership in organizations is influencing and assisting individual and group efforts to achieve shared goals. Leaders may enhance a team's or organization's performance by influencing the processes that influence performance.

Theme 3. Defiance to work.

Workplace deviance is described as voluntary activity that contradicts important organizational values and jeopardizes the well-being of the organization or its members (Griffin & Lopez, 2005). In this study, academic program chairmen face resistance from their subordinates. As one of them voiced:

“They really don't want to do their responsibility. In fact, they were especially hard to get along with and they were ahead in the service than me. Most of the time, I just go to their level so to avoid a fight. I always remind them of what they should submit but still nothing. I often make their reports like IPCR. It's ok, I'm used to that trend but in other things like teaching I can count on them.” Interviewee 4

The above statements from the participants signify that academic program chairs still communicate to their subordinates regardless if they resist doing some of their tasks and they found it very effective. This is in congruent to the idea of Wińska (2010) who emphasized that interpersonal interactions involving the exchange of information and affect between co-workers and between employees and their supervisors can have significant effects on the employees' psychological job outcomes, including job satisfaction.

Similarly, Dewydar (2015) posited that employees found an opportunity with their manager to express about their ideas. Further, they can communicate with their manager by all channels because he is a good in communicating.

Moreover, it is remarkable to note that the lives of the participants as academic leaders in an institution is not only focused toward achieving tasks but also engrossed on managing relationships. Their ability to build a climate of understanding depends on their skills on how they portray their roles. In this paper, the participants are able to motivate their subordinates to collaborate with them in achieving their goals in their organization despite of the struggles they encountered in dealing with them. As they articulated:

“For some of my senior instructors, it's really hard to deal with them especially in requiring them to submit reports, but it's tolerable and manageable. We just prepare their IPCR and then, they just affix their signatures. What I usually do is applying what is known as “reverse-psychology”; in this way, it is effective. During intramural meet, they helped in the planning, so still we have a smooth relationship despite of their weaknesses. I can still say that I can able to motivate them to collaborate and support whatever plans we have in the department.” Interviewee 3

The above verbalizations from the participants support the claim of Hitka & Balážová (2014) that motivation is an important to encourage people to carry out the assigned work with sincerity, dedication, and enthusiasm. Hence, in this study, motivation is used as a powerful weapon to motivate the subordinates to help and cooperate in achieving a common goal of the organization. Further, the academic program chairs honestly admitted that in order to establish and maintain good rapport with their people specially those “seniors”, they need to influence or motivate them.

Theme 4. Student-related issues

Academic dean is a unique position at the forefront of institutional reform as a result of the growing management culture in higher education (Guzman & Hapan , 2013). It entails enormous obligations, such as managing subordinates, directing the curriculum, and focusing nearly entirely on the students.

In this paper, the respondent-program chairs shared their dilemmas in managing student-related issues in their respective departments. As one expressed:

“There was a student who texted me about a negative issue and it is about ‘lived-in issue’ of students in the department. Well, I told the student that my office is open for her query. Yes, I investigate first before I make decision. ” Interviewee 5

Other participants also mentioned:

“On sensitive issues, I investigate first. For example, some students complained to me regarding their grades in one of their subjects. What I did was I called the children first and then the instructor concerned. Of course, it's not easy to decide because I need to balance also between the students and the instructor.” Interviewee 1

“I have a bad experience with my OJT students. When I deployed them, I didn't know that one of them was pregnant and we all know that before deployment they should have undergone pregnancy test to ensure that nothing bad would happen to them once they were deployed. It was really very risky to decide at that time whether I would pull out the student or not, but everything went right. I also solicited the opinion of my colleagues.” Interviewee 2

The statements from the participants emphasized that they successfully managed and solved student-related problems in their organization through wise decision-making.

In support of the claim mentioned above, according to Alhawamdeh & Alsmairat (2019) strategic decision-makings and managers cannot be separated. They go inline together. Moreover, with the organization's concern on the performance, strategic decision-makings are considered crucial to managers that manage the organization.

Theme 5. Young in the position

Some of the participants shared their difficulties in managing their organization since they are new to the position. They mentioned that they experienced many challenges as illustrated by the following direct statements from the interviewees:

“My situation is very difficult; imagine I was just over a year as Program Chair after a lot of work. Add the reprimands from other members of the department!” Interviewee 1

Other participants also shared:

“There are lots of challenges. As a manager, it's really a tough position. Since I don't have enough preparation for this position, it's really difficult on my part especially on how to manage people and students.” Interviewee 6

Honestly, I didn't expect that the nature of my work is like this. For me, I am still young at my position as a program chair, young at age and young as a leader. I believe my knowledge and skill in managing the department is not enough so, maybe I need more training and more experiences.” Interviewee 3

The statements above imply that academic leaders who are new in their positions struggled as they manage their organization since they lack enough experience, training, and preparation to assume the role of deans and program chairs.

The findings support Bellibas' (2016) contention that program chairs require leadership training and orientation in order to effectively manage their administrative responsibilities.

Theme 6. Self-sacrifice for the sake of position and responsibility

Singh & Krishnan (2008) has stated that self-sacrifice has been defined by as the “the total/partial abandonment, and/or permanent postponement of personal interests, privileges, or welfare in the division of labor, distribution of rewards, and exercise of power.”

"It's really difficult especially how to manage day-to-day work and how should I balance my family and my work as dean that sometimes, I come to the point that I almost gave up. Actually they witnessed how I suffered...I got sick maybe because of stress and I almost gave up. I went to the doctor and really my immune system bog down. In fact, I almost abandon my son in terms of his academic activities. Interviewee 6

"Being a program chair is a great opportunity and challenge at the same time. It takes a lot of pressure and determination to be able to do the task of being a mother and a PC at the same time. Sometimes I bring my problems at home and school and vice versa. To manage people is a great task and be a model at the same time. I mean you cannot teach what you do not know. But to be able to accomplish big task every day is very fulfilling. I hope that they will also add honorarium to all PC. That will be an added inspiration to work harder." P-7

Remarkably, the participant's direct statements emphasize that they cannot separate their roles as managers both in school and at home. In fact, they said that becoming a leader takes a lot of self-sacrifice.

The result of the study confirms the idea of Singh and Krishnan (2008) that true transformational leaders are those who make sacrifices for the greater benefit. Self-sacrifice fosters trust, gains followers' approval as a role model, and aids in the development of a leader.

Theme 7. Lack of support from the administration

One source of ongoing tension for academic deans and program chairs is a lack of administrative support. They stated that certain important issues were reported to the administration but were overlooked by higher officials, as follows:

"When I brought the issue on absenteeism and tardiness of one of my faculty member to the office of the administration, there was no action at all, so the problem goes back to me!" Interviewee 4

"There are even those who do not teach and always miss class and I referred the issue to the administration, but no sanctions were made." Interviewee 6

Notably, the above mentioned dilemmas of the participants focus more on the administrative concerns. In fact, they fairly admitted that there were some problems brought to the office of higher authorities but remained as problems when they go back to their respective offices. Hence, these responsibilities exacerbated their stress as leaders in their departments.

This is consistent with Combee's (2014) assertion that administrative support is critical to special education teachers' self-efficacy. Furthermore, he underlined the need of education leaders and policymakers understanding the link between improved administrative support and teacher self-efficacy.

4. Conclusions

The academic deans and program chairs experienced struggles as they manage their organizations. Further, the seven interesting themes emerged on the struggles experienced by the academic leaders, namely: a.) tardiness and absenteeism of subordinates; b.) disobedience & disrespect from subordinates; c.) defiance to work; d.) student-related issues; e.) young in the position; f.) self-sacrifice for the sake of position and responsibility; and g.) lack of support from the administration.

This study has implications for academic leadership practice in that it enables other academic leaders to analyze and relate their own management roles, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and values in order to

dynamically maximize their organization's success and ensure its survival through harmonious and sound relationships with superiors and subordinates.

On the other hand, academic deans and program chairs' struggles should be given attentions by the administration and that their efforts as academic leaders should be recognized. Further, academic leadership development opportunities should be provided to help them in becoming more competent and responsible leaders.

While the limited sample size and unique university environment of this qualitative study restrict the generalization of these individuals' experiences to other department chairs, their experiences do give useful insight into the experiences of others who adopt this role within universities.

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