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Article 25

Counselor Education Doctoral Cohorts: Growth, Reflections, and Success

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In doctoral graduate programs, numerous bureaucratic and interpersonal challenges exist for students, faculty, and administrators in meeting academic expectations in a timely manner. As one means of addressing these challenges, some graduate programs have organized students into groups that remain organizationally (and to a greater or lesser extent, cohesively) grouped together from the first semester through graduation.

For the last 50 years, “cohort” has been the predominant term used to describe these groupings.

The practice of organizing graduate students into cohorts arose and waned in the second half of the last century (Achilles, 1994) and is currently an area receiving scholarly consideration (Groen, Jakubson, Ehrenberg, Condie, & Liu, 2008). Despite the recent attention cohort models have received (Agnew, Mertzman, Longwell-Grice, & Saffold, 2008; Unzueta, Moores-Abdool, & Donet, 2008), our understanding of the philosophical, organizational and outcome factors that make this educational delivery system viable and worthy of future consideration is just beginning to take shape. Because of the potential benefits thought to be linked to cohort model use, Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, and Norris (2000) suggest that capturing and examining the challenges related to the use of cohort models is essential, “especially if this innovation is to become more than a passing fad” (p. 256).

Students enrolled in graduate degree programs face daunting challenges and many students do not reach graduation (Burnett, 1999), thus understanding whether, and under what conditions, cohort models can meet these issues is a valid consideration for students, faculty, and administrators. Estimated commencement rates of graduate students are roughly half of those who begin a program (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006). Combine this statistic with the myriad of tensions produced by graduate studies such as relationship stress (Brown, 2006); lack of support (Mallinckrodt, & Leong, 1992), financial pressure (Cao, 2001) and feelings of isolation (Quarterman, 2008) the need for strategies to assist the graduate student succeed and graduate becomes clearer. Finally, there have been comparisons of universities to factories (Alef & Berg, 1996) with students substituted for the finished products. Using this analogy, faculty and administrators occupy the role of owners and managers working through the complex task of producing a quality product within tight fiscal budgets and under limited timeframes. Cohort models then, to complete the analogy, may serve as one management tool that produces a superior product in a reasonable amount of time and within budget.

For these important reasons, this article will review the literature relating to cohort models in order to better understand and discuss both the strengths associated with their use as well as their limitations and challenges. Through an understanding of these areas, a picture of what might constitute the ideal for future cohort model’s structure and administration emerges along with illuminating the questions that remain unanswered. In addition, a current cohort model for doctoral students in counselor education will be described.

Through the review of previous research (Barnett et al., 2000; Maher, 2005; Smith et al., 2006), an understanding of the shape and character of cohort models emerges. Unfortunately the research is inchoate and suffers from an over reliance on qualitative design as evidenced by the fact that only a handful of the articles referenced here used quantitative data. Support for this position comes from Barnett et al., (2000) who stated “Despite increases in its use, the existing research on cohorts is in its infancy, relying on limited samples, descriptive accounts, and the perceptions of students and faculty who have experienced this instructional approach” (p. 256). Two other deficits in the current research exist. First, the majority of studies in the literature (Barnett et al., 2000; McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2005) come from only one area of graduate studies, educational administration, and second, few studies have come from programs that have

chosen not to follow the cohort model design “thereby ignoring a vast number of universities in which cohorts have been rejected by the faculty” (Barnett et al., p. 256). Although certainly not complete, a general picture of cohort models is possible and begins with an understanding of the terms and concepts relating to cohorts models.

Cohort originally referred to a Roman military unit; specifically “one of the ten divisions in an ancient Roman legion, numbering from 300 to 600 soldiers” (Cohort, n.d.). The use of the term has broadened today to mean “a group or company” (Cohort, n.d.). Cohort has also been widely used in a demographic sense to refer to all members of a certain age group. For the purpose of program organization in higher education, and for this article, cohort model refers to “a group of students who begin and complete a program of studies together, engaging in a common set of courses, activities, and/or learning experiences” (Barnett & Muse, 1993, p. 401). This definition highlights the differences between students who proceed through their studies using a more traditional progression (i.e., in relative isolation) and those that match the cohort model.

Tracking the historical usage of cohort models in general, and in graduate programs in particular, is clouded by the relative limited use of the term ‘cohort’ in published materials prior to the early 1970s. Thus, while use of the term is relatively new; the concept is not, the organization of groups of students, especially in areas such as medicine and the military were described in this way for many years (Maher, 2004). What is clearer is that the use of cohort models in higher education experienced a revival in the mid 1980s (Maher, 2004). Presently, investigations continue (Agnew et al., 2008; Unzueta et al., 2008) into the merits of graduate program cohort models with findings that tend toward cohort endorsement, yet with mixed results (Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2003). This may relate to the specific benefits and drawbacks that Mandzuk et al. (2003, p.170), labeled the “mixed blessing” of cohort model use.

There is a lack of universal agreement as to cohort model’s definitions and practices, while at the same time; graduate programs vary in their stated goals. For example, Maher (2004) offers two models of cohorts; open and closed. Closed models have “one entry point and lockstep coursework”; open models have “multiple student entry points and more student choice in coursework sequence” (p. 19). By comparison, Basom (as cited by Potthoff, Batenhorst, Frederickson, & Tracy, 2001), described three types of cohort structures: open, closed, and fluid. The first two are similar to Maher’s but the third type differs: “students move in and out of a fluid cohort” (p. 36). A further challenge in gaining a clear understanding of cohort models is the absence of universal frameworks, to make standardized comparisons. Huey (as cited in Potthoff et al., 2001) proposed an eight factor framework which included social interaction, common mission, group and individual learning, cohesiveness, collaboration, academic success, interaction with professors, and retention. Huey’s framework as of yet has failed to gain widespread use. Furthermore, many of the powerful outcomes seen in cohort models, such as group support, solidarity, and interpersonal bonding result from the unique mixture of members, and as such, cohort models can not necessarily be expected to behave predictably. The limited degree to which group behavior is predictable makes positing generalizations difficult (McCarthy et al., 2005). These differences in definitions, structures, goals, and blend of interpersonal chemistries deserve future investigation (Saltiel & Reynolds, 2001) and may serve to caution investigators from making declarative statements.

The defining feature of cohort models is that students take most, or all, of their classes together. By design they start, develop, and finish mostly, or entirely, as an intact group as opposed to the method used predominantly in some graduate programs whereby students enroll, progress, and graduate at their own pace. Achilles (1994) described some of the successes of the attempts at grouping students into cohort models used in educational leadership in the 1950s; however, the practice failed to become universally accepted within the world of academia (Barnett et al., 2000).

Cohort Strengths

The understanding that groups of human beings hold power beyond a summation of their individual strengths is a concept that is familiar to counselors and psychologists (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Further, the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA, 2008) suggests that groups are most powerful when they consist of dissimilar individuals in terms of interactive styles, yet possessing similar levels of ego-strength. The demographics of graduate education suggest that cohort models consist of individuals who come from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds yet have similar intellectual and interpersonal capabilities (Golden et al., 2005). Given these factors, an expectation for graduate education cohort models is to generate the type of group cohesion that results in collective unity and strength. Unzueta (2008) found positives described by the non-member students emphasized that cohort model's members receive most of the university's attention. These non-cohort students realized that cohorts have the following opportunities they did not have: (a) to pursue proposals for conference papers, (b) to co-author manuscripts for publication, (c) to serve as guest lecturers for university courses, and (d) to co-teach with professors.

The power inherent in cohorts models leads to some distinct advantages such as mutual support and protection (Weise, 1992). Qualitative studies have captured the heartfelt responses of students who have described feeling buoyed and protected by this solidarity (Basom, & Yerkes, 2001; Teitel, 1997). Cohort model members report incidents of mutual care and shared purpose. One respondent in Teitel (1997) states, "A sense of mutual support also encourages individuals to stay in the program and provides resources for those having difficulties" (p. 69). Potthoff, Dinsmore, and Moore (2001) showed cohort members improved their academic knowledge, multicultural awareness, and preparedness for acting as social change agents compared to non-cohort students.

An important administrative motivation for organizing students into cohorts is to improve graduation rates and a number of available studies indicate that cohort models accomplish this. Groen et al. (2008) researched cohort models in the humanities and social sciences over a ten year period and reported that typical completion rates improved by two percentage points by moving to a cohort model. Reducing attrition and increasing completion rates with cohort models seems promising, yet a need for further research exists to separate variables in order to determine causality.

Membership in an academic cohort improves academic success and members describe cohort participation as being "intellectually stimulating" (Eifler, Potthoff, & Dinsmore, 2004 p. 97). There is a belief that this is born from the unique structure of cohort models, which offers members the opportunity to interact with the material and therefore internalize and globalize the information. Cohort models, whether intentionally

or otherwise, come with logistic and administrative ease. That is, it is easier to schedule and track members as a group. In addition, members have more clarity in the knowledge of courses and timeframes, especially in closed models where there is no room for course choice. Another advantage found of cohort models was that members report a higher positive ethical climate than their non-cohort peers (Schulte, 2003). These findings present part of the advantages of the cohort model.

The improved academic success found in cohort model members translated into improved success in the member's chosen field (Ross, 2001). Thus, cohort model members are more successful as they make their way through their individual program, but graduates are more successful once they begin to practice their craft. Teitel (1997) reports three other positive aspects of cohorts: deeper class discussions, ease of class discussions, and a willingness to explore sensitive issues. Due to the generating of solidarity in cohorts, members feel more at ease debating and discussing controversial or questionable course material. This familiarity also results in the cohort's ability to move from class to class and from semester to semester with the ability to "pick up where they left off" (p. 70). Finally, cohorts facilitate the interaction of students from different cultural backgrounds through more intimate interactions resulting in greater personal meaning (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992). This intensive interaction report in the literature is useful in order to practice the skills students will need when they get into the field. In other words, the nature of cohorts includes the practice with other cohort members of professional collegiality.

Cohort Limitations

Without purposeful faculty nurturance, departmental collaboration, and administrative guidance, the cohort model becomes simply a convenience tool, which may have the disadvantage of sending the message that the student's individual needs are not important. Without collaboration, faculty members (often-uninitiated new faculty) are surprised at the forceful solidarity of cohort model members. Finally, without administrative guidance, cohort model members may feel uncertain as to how much power they should be encouraged to display. Cohort models that are assembled simply as a means of easily identifying who to schedule for which class and when ignores the inherent benefits and does the practice a "grave injustice" (Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1995, p. 20). The result of this type of organization is hardly, or not at all, better than the traditional system of simply offering classes and letting students progress on their own. Thus, while understanding the benefits of cohort model membership is crucial, it is equally important to have a sense of cohort limitations.

Having students grouped together in cohort models for the duration of the program results in personality conflicts that are not a one-class issue. If students have difficult interpersonal conflicts, these may influence the members throughout the life of the cohort. Cohort members have expressed exactly this fear in research studies: "If there was a conflict between students, we would have to deal with that for four years" (Teitel, 1997, p. 71). A literature review (Mandzuk et al., 2003; McCarthy et al., 2005; Teitel, 1997; Unzueta et al., 2008) suggests that this fear rarely materializes, however, the fear related to its potential registers with a significant number of students. In addition, cohort models have resulted in cliques, which can disrupt cohort progress. Although cliques and

subgroups occur in most groups, this one potential negative of cohorts is important to note especially in small closed cohorts where its development has the greatest impact.

There are a number of additional disadvantages described in the literature. For example, due to their inherent power, cohorts have the ability to alter policy or demand concessions. Some research (Mandzuk et al., 2003; McCarthy et al., 2005; Teitel, 1997; Unzueta et al., 2008) has found that the roles that members play or inherit develop permanence over time. Thus, much like life in a family, there are group expectations of behavior that may reduce the amount of growth expected or allowed. Along these lines, Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott (2001) discovered that the tensions between cohort model members can often resemble the unwanted attitudes and relationship difficulties of dysfunctional families.

Reflections and Successes

The following statements are reflections and successes of a cohort model for doctoral students in a counselor education and supervision program in the southeastern United States. The doctoral program in which the cohort model occurs is accredited by The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Following the CACREP 2009 Standards (CACREP, 2009), the size of the cohort model varies from five to ten new additions per year.

The program chooses new cohort members in a purposeful manner to ensure the cohort members can work together in a group. For example, when interviewing prospective students, individuals are given small group projects so that the faculty and doctoral students can observe the prospective doctoral student's potential for working as a group member. The model program is designed to encourage the students in a cohort to work together by taking the same academic classes and participating in the same program activities.

Cohort members take classes together for six semesters. The program is not a totally closed system because it allows cohort members to take different courses at times if needed. Another important characteristic of the cohort model is that the cohort takes classes with other doctoral cohorts within the college of education. This allows for collaboration on projects with other disciplines in the field of education and in essence another cohort is formed.

After six full time semesters, approximately two years, the program is designed for the cohort members who are then doctoral candidates, to work on their dissertations. Although the cohort members are no longer in classes together, the bonds that were formed during previous semesters are still in place. Keeping track of fellow cohort member's progress in the dissertation process seems to provide motivation.

It is believed that full-time attendance in the doctoral program is important for success. The current design of the cohort program allows all of the students to acquire funding from fellowships and assistantships for the program.

Echterling and colleagues (2002) suggest that graduate students in the helping professions need many opportunities to communicate. One benefit of the described cohort model is the ability to have open communication with your fellow cohort members. Since counseling is about being a good communicator, the cohort model allows students to communicate needs, questions, and even personal epiphanies in the program. The cohort

model communication helps the cohort members to realize that their struggles are not unique and are experienced by others in the program. Fellow cohort model members may have suggestions that had not been contemplated.

The resulting cohesion of the group that evolves helps keep the members in the program through the difficulties. Group cohesion allows the members to work through personality conflicts within the group as they occur. Communication within the cohort group allows relationships to develop and this becomes one of the greatest resources of the cohort model program.

Echterling et al. (2002) suggest the importance of communication with faculty members as a help for graduate students in the helping fields. In this cohort model program, faculty members provide stewardship and support to: (a) mentor, (b) co-write manuscripts, (c) complete co-research, (d) co-present at conferences, (e) co-teach with, and (f) supervise in teaching and supervision. To help establish this stewardship and support from the faculty, the cohort model members take two faculty members at a time to lunch as part of their first class. This begins the process of finding faculty members that have areas of research in common with cohort members and begins the relationship building process.

Faculty members are also available for frequent feedback and support inside and outside of the classroom. On an annual basis, the entire faculty meets as a group with each doctoral student or candidate to provide feedback on their progress and to discuss any areas for improvement. Another option to this process is to have the faculty meet as a group to discuss each doctoral student and then one faculty member delivers the feedback to the student or candidate. In addition, students and candidates have the opportunity to provide feedback to the faculty about the program. This information is critical to faculty since it provides important data for programmatic and curricular changes and/or improvements.

In this cohort model program, the cohort members are involved in all the activities they would participate in as a faculty member. The activities that cohort members have involvement in include: (a) research, (b) teaching, (c) supervision, (d) scholarly writing, (e) grant writing, and (f) presentations at conferences. Other important areas of cohort involvement are the interviews of the next doctoral cohorts and the interviews of prospective students for the master's program.

There are many challenges in the cohort model program. In order to grow in a program, it is important to have challenges (Echterling et al., 2002). Members of cohorts are challenged to reach beyond their level in the cohort model program by providing constant challenges that are inherent in the doctoral program. The cohort model can provide motivation to constantly be reaching higher by providing teamwork on group projects and viewing the other members striving to overcome their own personal challenges.

One important aspect in the foundation of the cohort model is rituals. Echterling et al. (2002) write of the importance of rituals for graduate programs. The rituals and traditions of this program have been very helpful. Rituals such as the orientation reception and helping the new cohort model members are very reassuring, as well as being mentored by previous cohort members. Another important ritual is that the first year's cohort model members are responsible for planning receptions at professional conferences.

This program's cohort model's ultimate goal through the use of cohesion, communication, mentorship, stewardship, and opportunities is retention of cohort members and a successful program. By giving the cohort model members the experiences to prepare them for the future, the expected result is the attainment of positions in the professoriate field. The ultimate goal of the program is success in the future for each graduate of the program.

The limitations of this cohort model program are: (a) the administrative support that is needed requires time, effort, and feedback, (b) the financial funding that is needed to maintain full-time students, and (c) the cohort group may cause a struggle between the faculty and the cohort. The limitations could be overcome by: (a) having buy-in of all faculty and staff as to the needed, time, effort and feedback by offering training for faculty, (b) having a process to follow-up on graduates to show the need for full-time funding, and (c) the new cohort could have more in orientation and transitioning them into the program. The cohorts could meet together once a month and go to lunch together. Then, they could meet with the faculty to discuss concerns from the cohort meeting. Cohort members need to go to defense of proposals as well as defense of dissertations to better understand how the dissertation process functions.

The cohort model program that was described has not had any follow-up studies to track its graduates. In order to determine the impact of the doctoral cohort model, there needs to be more research in this area. There are some clear indications that were discussed for using a cohort model for graduate education and in particular counselor education. The increased feelings of support, power to affect program change, group solidarity, cohesion, and the myriad of logistical benefits suggest a continuation of the research that has begun to shape our understanding in order to make purposeful improvements for the future. It may be valuable to keep in mind that cohort model members initially view the cohort as being less important and less influential to having significant consequences and having deeper meaning (Maher, 2005). This suggests that potential students could benefit by being informed as to the reason, methods, and expected outcomes of cohort design.

Groen et al. (2008) produced a quantitative assessment of cohort model impact on retention and found programs using a cohort model experienced reduced attrition, reduced time to degree, and increased completion rates. Effect size in all three areas was modest. Additional quantitative studies are needed to determine which sub-populations of graduate students are served by cohorts; for example, the experiences of minority students enrolled in predominantly non-minority programs. Other important investigations should be conducted on the experiences of other underrepresented populations such as gay, bisexual, and transgender students, as well as differences in socioeconomic background and disability. Many disciplines are not balanced in terms of gender; therefore, for programs with predominantly male or female populations, the experiences of the underrepresented gender might prove useful.

Questions remain as to the need or benefit of informing prospective students of the nature of the cohort model experience. In addition, research is needed to understand faculty perceptions of challenges and benefits of cohort involvement. The bulk of the literature seems to suggest that greater faculty and administrative consistency yields greater cohort model outcomes, which could be further clarified through additional study. More information is needed on how cohort models affect the peripheral members of the

cohort such as family, friends, and program staff. Finally, we make the recommendation that the financial costs and savings deserve some attention in order to make sound financial decisions.

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