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The Student Aid Director's Supervisory Attitudes as Related to the Perceived Understanding of Higher Administrative Officials About the Functions of the Financial Aid Office

by Alvin P. Short and Donald T. Matlock

In recent years a new body of literature about organizations has emerged that is concerned with the assessment of the impact of organizational variables on persons in mid-level and supervisory positions. This literature has emphasized the importance of organizational variables such as communication and opportunity in determining the behavior of those in mid-level staff and line positions within specific types of organizations. Most research about so-called structural variables has taken place in the context of industrial organizations and large corporations in the private sector. Little research has been done on the effects these variables may have on those in other types of organizational contexts. More specifically, little research has been done in relationship to non-faculty and non-student populations in higher educational settings; that is, research on university support personnel in activities such as student services is almost non-existent. Most of the persons with managerial responsibilities who work in these support areas of the university could in reality be considered mid-level managers.

Combining the two interest areas mentioned above, the authors undertook an investigation of the attitudes and perceived problems of financial aid directors in universities of varying size across the nation.

Purpose of the Study

The researchers reporting this investigation are sociologists whose research interests include the study of complex organizations. The fact that the wife of one of the authors is also a financial aid officer undoubtedly contributed to a personal interest in the pressures that must be dealt with in the financial aid office by financial aid professionals.

For this initial investigation of the perceptions of higher administrative understanding about the functions of the financial aid office, it was decided that the survey sample should be limited to directors in financial aid offices. The director of financial aid is responsible for the distribution of millions of dollars in aid during the academic year. The office staff is responsible for the interpretations of a number of sets of extremely complex federal regulations that concern actual financial needs, academic progress of aid recipients, and even the collection of unpaid loans. If financial aid is not properly dispensed, the result could be the withdrawal of aid from the university, and in extreme cases perhaps even criminal penalties. The

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director of financial aid, therefore, has an important position in the organization in the sense that smooth administration of various forms of aid allows students to obtain an education who otherwise might not be able to gain the benefits of higher education. In addition, aid also is important to the institution because student clientele are necessary for the operation of various academic programs. The financial aid director obviously holds a key position in the support program of the university.

Specific Problems Related to Mid-Level Management

Most of the individuals who engage in organizational and occupational research are found in the academic setting. In recent years these researchers have turned their attention to the study of large corporations (Mechanic, 1971; Kanter, 1977), but they apparently have spent little time in the analysis of organizational behavior within their own immediate university environment. In fact, research concerning professionals who work in university support programs is almost non-existent. Exceptions would be the work of Pfeffer and Salancik (1980) concerning supervisory personnel in university housing and the important contributions made by Clement and White (1983) concerning the concept of job satisfaction among financial aid officers in Illinois. At this point we have a very limited understanding of how the financial aid professional relates to the complexity of organizational demands created in the university setting.

Most financial aid directors hold what could be called mid-level management positions within the larger organization called the university. One of the most influential works that discusses the problems of mid-level managers is a book by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) titled *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Although the research setting and examples used by Kanter involve private corporations in the industrial sector, nevertheless, certain findings in her work seem to relate to any large organization with a hierarchical structure. Professor Kanter's main point seems to be that individuals in large organizations can experience a relatively high degree of job dissatisfaction when they perceive that opportunity within the organization is blocked. In addition, mid-level managers may feel a certain sense of "powerlessness" in terms of being held accountable for their decisions and the performance of their work units while at the same time being given very limited chances to make real decisions (Kanter, 1977). Managers who feel they are outside the most direct routes of organizational communication may react by seeming to be overly bossy, protective, paternalistic, and even perhaps obstructionistic in the sense that they become highly oriented toward rule enforcement and somewhat rigid in their decision making toward office subordinates. Kanter has stated that many of the above supervision characteristics have been mistakenly attributed to women bosses. These, in fact, could be the resulting behavior of any mid-level manager caught in an organizational dilemma of having high levels of responsibility with little power to really control organizational policies, procedures, and expectations.

The Director and Mid-Level Management

It would seem that the financial aid director is one kind of mid-level manager that is caught in some of the organizational dilemmas discussed by Kanter. Previous informal discussions by the authors with financial aid personnel have usually indicated that there is often a perception that other administrators in the university hierarchy have a limited understanding of the functions of a financial aid office. In particular, the reporting function of aid offices often seems to be understood in only the most general sense by those who do not face these same stringent requirements within the context of their particular operations.

The potential for alienation exists within any large organization, however, the unique position of the financial aid officer, with both external and internal

pressures, would seem to create an atmosphere that may be particularly conducive to various frustrations. Given the literature about mid-level managers in general and the specific literature about mid-level management in the university setting, the authors developed the following hypotheses concerning the respondents in this investigation — financial aid directors:

1. The greater the perceived difficulty of communicating problems to superiors, the more restrictive the attitudes toward professional subordinates.
2. The greater the perceived difficulty of communicating problems to superiors, the more restrictive the attitudes toward clerical subordinates.
3. The greater the perceived difficulty of communicating problems to superiors, the more restrictive the attitudes toward office rules and procedures.
4. The better the perceived opportunities for advancement, the less restrictive the attitudes toward clerical subordinates.
5. The better the perceived opportunity for advancement, the less restrictive the attitudes toward professional subordinates.
6. The better the perceived opportunities for advancement, the less restrictive the attitudes toward office rules and procedures.

Methods

To test these hypotheses a survey research instrument was constructed. The questionnaire itself was designed to be completed by financial aid directors across the United States. It consisted of three major segments: a descriptive section, designed to elicit information about the characteristics of the sample; a section to tap the attitudes of the respondents regarding their superiors, their subordinates, and their jobs; and a qualitative section providing an opportunity for financial aid directors to comment on problems as they perceive them.

In addition to the usual descriptive information such as age, sex, and ethnicity, questions were included about time in the job, type and size of the university, nature of the reporting line, and size of the financial aid office. The attitude section consisted of four Likert scales which measure (1) perceived difficulties in communicating with superiors, (2) restrictive attitudes toward the director's professional staff, (3) restrictive attitudes toward the director's clerical staff, and (4) restrictive attitudes toward the operation of the office itself. This section also included a single question about the opportunities for advancement as the financial aid director perceived these opportunities. A checklist was included that listed possible reasons for choosing the job, such as salary or a desire to help students.

Our first attitude scale dealt with the problems of communicating with one's superiors and was composed of four modified items drawn from Likert's "Profile of Organizational Characteristics" (Robinson, et al, 1969:276-80). Two five-item scales to measure the directors' attitudes toward their professional and clerical staffs were taken from Stogdill and Coons' "Leadership Opinion Questionnaire" (Robinson, et al, 1969:254-57). The five-item scale designed to measure the rigidity of the director's approach to office rules and procedures was a modified version of "The Rigidity Scale" constructed by Elizabeth Wesley (Robinson and Shaver, 1973:398-400). The single-item measure of perceived opportunities for advancement and the checklist concerning job choice were constructed by the researchers.

Names and addresses of directors were taken from the most recent directory of members of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. In an effort to secure information on the larger operations, all directors who listed two or more professional staff members were included in the sample. This produced a total of three hundred forty-four (344) potential respondents. Of this number, two hundred seventeen (217) or sixty-three percent (63%) returned the completed questionnaire.

Findings

General

Over three-fourths of our respondents were male with over eighty percent identifying themselves as Anglo/white. The median age of directors is just over forty and roughly seventy percent of the directors in our sample held the master's degree. The average (mean) number of years they have worked in financial aid is about seven although as the reader might expect, there is tremendous variation, with some indicating they had been in the field as long as fifteen years and others indicating that they were relatively new to the job. Because of the fact that most had been in the job for several (four to seven) years, it was difficult to develop valid statistical controls for length of time in the job as this might affect the types of attitudes about the job.

We then asked the directors why they had chosen their current occupation. The directors were instructed that they could check as many categories on the questionnaire item as they felt were applicable. The most frequently checked option (checked by over two-thirds of the directors) was the one that indicated that the respondent felt they possessed the appropriate training or expertise to do the job. Interestingly, only one-third of the respondents checked the option indicating that they had initially entered the career field in order to be of assistance to deserving and needy students. The smaller percentage indicating that the career was entered to help students does not necessarily reflect a lack of concern on the part of directors about the current needs of the student clientele. In fact, answers to open-ended questions placed at the end of the survey instrument indicated that the directors in our sample are very concerned about meeting the legitimate needs of the student clientele. These attitudes reflected in the open-ended statements would not be inconsistent with the fact that few directors checked the option having to do with money. In other words, once the director is in the job, he or she seems to be sensitive to the real needs of students, although an idealistic motivation to help students per se does not seem to be a major factor in initial job choice.

The average size of the financial aid office reflected in this sample is about twelve persons, with about five professional staff members and seven clerical staff members. Directors were asked not to include student workers or student assistants in the count of office clerical or professional staff. Some offices reporting had over 20 professional staff members, but this was not the typical situation and these offices obviously reflected a few extremely large state-supported institutions. Very small financial aid operations, by definition, are not reflected in this sample because the sample was drawn using a criterion that several professional staff members were listed along with the director in the NASFAA Directory. Only the larger offices were selected since it was necessary to have staff present in order to test the organizational hypotheses.

The majority of the non-proprietary institutions (three-fourths) reflected in our sample are state-supported institutions, with over half of the schools having enrollments exceeding ten thousand students. The size range of institutions in our sample was between 1,000 and 50,000 students, but the institutions in excess of 10,000 students were more typical. The size of the school was apparently not related to the number of reporting levels that individual financial aid directors would have to utilize in order to reach the chief executive of their institution. Two reporting levels to the president's office was typical of most institutions.

The previously mentioned factors of age, sex, and ethnicity of directors seemed to fit a pattern that was not really surprising given the overall makeup of mid-level managers in our society. When exploring relationships related to our specific hypotheses, it was found that background factors related to age, sex, and ethnicity seemed to make no significant differences in the way in which directors responded to questions about managerial attitudes and/or style.

Testing Specific Hypotheses

As sociologists, one of the main reasons for undertaking our study of financial aid directors was to test hypotheses about the attitudes of mid-level managerial personnel within the university context. Our first three hypotheses predicted a positive relationship between the perceived difficulty the director had in communication of problems to superiors and the degree to which the director's supervisory attitudes toward the professional and clerical staffs in the office would reflect conservatism or restrictiveness. That is, the more difficult it seems to be to communicate problems and needs to higher level administrators, the more likely the mid-level managerial stance should be somewhat restrictive toward subordinates. Only one of these first three hypotheses is supported by our survey data. There is a statistically significant relationship showing that directors who have difficulty in the communication of problems "upstairs" do have an orientation toward rules and procedures. The correlation in this case is not large with $r = 0.24$ indicating that variation in director's attitudes concerning rules is not really predicted by knowing whether or not the manager has problems in communicating difficulties to the boss.

There was really no significant relationship between the perceived communication problems with superiors and general supervisory attitudes (such as the delegation of duties) toward either professional or clerical subordinates on the staff. Apparently, when perceived communication blockages or misunderstandings exist, they do not have a significant effect on how the director perceives that he or she should manage personnel. Financial aid directors do not, therefore, seem to fit a pattern that has been found in research concerning some other types of mid-level managerial personnel. The general response pattern indicated that directors felt they should delegate authority and be willing to seriously consider the suggestions of both professional and clerical staff members. We would expect this tendency to be true for directors who felt that higher administration understood their functions fairly well. The same tendency to agree with more equalitarian supervisory attitudes was also registered in the responses of directors who felt that there was some difficulty in communicating the financial aid function to the administration.

The other three hypotheses predicted a negative relationship between perceived opportunities for advancement and having restrictive attitudes toward employees and office procedures in general. Directors who perceive that they have viable opportunities for advancement should be more equalitarian in terms of taking employees suggestions and input about the office and be less restrictive in regard to rules and office policies. All three of these hypotheses were supported by our data. The correlation coefficients (Spearman rho) were not large, but were statistically significant. The Spearman rho in all three relationships concerning advancement and office attitudes was on the order of -0.15 . Apparently, the perceived chance for advancement is one factor related to managerial attitudes for financial aid directors, but the overall contribution this factor makes to understanding the directors' attitudes is limited.

All in all, four of our six hypotheses are technically supported by analysis of our survey data, although it is obvious to the statistically-oriented reader that these relationships are not impressive. The factors of communication and advancement blockages are related to attitudes held by directors; however, a real understanding of directors' attitudes may rest in factors not systematically measured in this particular investigation. Some of these factors are discussed in the next section.

Some External Pressures

To this point our discussion has centered on an analysis of factors that might be considered internal to the organizational environment itself. We know, however,

that all organizations have to deal with an external environment(s) that may be as important or more important than the internal environment of the employing organization. We can look at the way in which an entire organization attempts to deal with the external environment; however, it is sometimes the case that some elements of an organization may have to deal with external environments (agencies) more than others. The financial aid operation in the university is one element of a total university organization that must respond to extremely complex and diverse external pressures. In contrast, university maintenance must deal with external environments such as suppliers of materials used in the maintenance function; however, the suppliers of materials do not tell the maintenance personnel how to carry out the daily functions of maintenance operations. The external suppliers of financial aid funds, on the other hand, do actually mold, shape, control, and modify the functions of the working financial aid operation. In this case, the major external supplier to which the office must respond is, of course, a federal government possessing extensive sets of bureaucratic rules to be followed and a complicated set of penalties for those who do not conform to expectations.

Financial aid directors are responsible for seeing to it that the total university organization adheres to these regulations created by the external agency. For all practical purposes, this responsibility lies outside the regular university reporting lines on a day-to-day basis. This responsibility, probably the most poorly understood of all the financial aid office functions by outsiders, may subtly influence the director's perception of his or her relationships with both superiors and subordinates in ways that were only touched upon by our initial investigation. As one respondent stated:

We are given inadequate lead time to implement changes. Too often, the changes are dictated by persons who are unfamiliar with the nuts-and-bolts workings of financial aid and who don't realize the burden being imposed.

Time and time again respondents indicated that it was difficult to maintain morale and productivity in a fast changing regulatory environment. Forced to deal with the satisfactory academic progress of students, need assessment, and even the possibility of enforcing draft regulations, financial aid officers are often enmeshed in what one respondent called the "typical paper-work syndrome." In our example, the potential problems of authority vis-a-vis responsibility seemed to be directly mentioned or at least implied by numerous respondents. These types of responses were obtained from the open-ended items of the questionnaire. There were two open-ended questions placed at the end of the survey instrument. The first of these asked about the most important problems facing financial aid operations today, and the second asked for suggestions related to further research about financial aid as a career field. Few respondents really attempted to answer the last question, but the majority made comments concerning the most pressing problems facing financial aid operations today. In the perception of one director:

It is the basic responsibility of the student financial aid office to deliver student financial aid in a timely manner to qualified applicants. We must also be "stewards" of the fund. These goals may at times be in conflict.

This statement may in fact basically sum up the major dilemma of the financial aid director today in dealing with both internal and external environments and in dealing with several sets of basic clientele such as administrators, students, and federal officials to whom the office is responsible.

Some Conclusions with Observations Based on Recent Literature

Today's financial aid director is apparently well educated. A majority of the directors in our sample possessed the master's degree. Possession of higher educational credentials, without a doubt, should bring about a better understanding of the modern managerial techniques and approaches. This should be true whether the training is directly based in management or whether the training is obtained from the fields of education, social science, or the humanities since these latter fields also explore aspects of human relations generalizable to the work setting. Only a small percentage of the directors in our sample actually indicated what could be termed restrictive attitudes toward subordinates and/or authoritarian attitudes toward rulemaking and enforcement. The overall group seems to evince attitudes that would generally, or at least should generally, translate into what we would think of as progressive or more equalitarian office procedures and employee supervision styles. Apparently perceived problems related to interactions with other administrative officials and/or career advancement are not translated into what might be termed narrow attitudes toward employees and office procedures. Clement and White (1983) have indicated that financial aid directors seemed to experience more congruence between what a job ought to be and what a job actually was than those in somewhat lower positions on the administrative staff of the office. Clement and White (1983) also stated that length of time in a position seemed to bring about less disparity between ideal job traits and perceptions of the current job. This relationship comes as no surprise since directors may have been in the field performing similar kinds of tasks longer than assistant directors and others; therefore, both status and familiarity with the job may interact to produce a relatively higher level of current job contentment. The financial aid professionals in our sample were limited to directors and these respondents had been in the job for several years. Although Clement and White did not measure the same kinds of organizational dimensions that were looked at in this investigation, there would certainly appear to be nothing inconsistent in their findings and the rather flexible attitudes evinced by our respondents.

Various professional associations that work with financial aid administration have conducted their own in-house studies of financial aid professionals. In the major study conducted by NASFAA (1983), it was found that a significant majority of financial aid directors did find their job important. In addition, over ninety percent stated that they felt they had enough authority to do their jobs. Even so, roughly twenty-five percent of the directors in the NASFAA study (1983) indicated that they questioned whether their superiors really had a clear picture of the job they were doing at the present time. Looked at from another angle, this would mean that the majority of directors still felt that their superiors had some understanding of the role of the financial aid operation. This same finding was generally true for the majority of directors in our sample.

Bender (1980) has indicated that the majority of her student service personnel respondents thought of their work as important. This apparently was the case even though less than half of this group perceived that others in the university really understood their work or considered their work to be important. Apparently it is possible to have feelings of intrinsic job pride and satisfaction even though there is a general perception that others in the organizational environment may not have a full appreciation of your efforts. This would not seem inconsistent with the significant but rather low correlations that we found between the ability to communicate and possible reactionary attitudes that might result from these communications problems.

As we stated previously in the section related to findings and the open-ended survey items, it was found that external problems created by external forces seemed to

cause more concern than any problems generated within the context of the employing organization itself. It is within this area, with many complex variables to be assessed, that measurement will be most difficult. In other words, attempting to establish valid relationships between the subtle and sometimes not so subtle pressures created by external organizations and the actual behavior of the office staff will be a difficult task. Yet, it is within the context of these difficult to measure and complicated relationships that more research is actually needed.

Two final notes of caution about the interpretation of our findings are in order. The first caution has to do with the fact that we did not measure the opinions of assistant directors and other financial aid professional personnel. We cannot, therefore, attempt to generalize the response pattern that these other financial aid professionals might have had relative to our questionnaire. The final caution has to do with the use of survey instruments themselves. The scales and measuring indicators used to tap the attitudes of directors in this study were modified from studies previously accomplished in different environments by some leading experts in questionnaire design. We, therefore, have reason to believe that these questions are fairly reliable and valid measuring devices relative to work attitudes. Yet, no attitudinal measuring device has fully overcome the questions that arise from the discrepancies in expressed attitudes and the actual real behavior that is observed in the work setting. There is always a seeming tendency for humans to idealize their attitudes while at the same time perhaps behaving differently in routine daily situations. In her organizational studies, Kanter (1977) was able to assess the opinion of not only mid-level managers caught in certain organizational dilemmas, she also measured attitudes of the subordinates who served under them. She could then combine this information with her own general observations to get a picture of what was taking place in the organization. Our study admittedly taps only one facet of the organizational picture, that is, the attitudinal dimension as this applied to the directors who completed our questionnaire.

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