Collateral positions in student affairs

Lisa L. Kidd

University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1998 Lisa L. Kidd

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, and the Education Economics Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/969

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
Collateral positions in student affairs

Abstract
Staff members in student services argue that students have become their responsibility by the default of the faculty. Faculty members, insisting that they are the university, do not want budgets for student support to remain large or to continue growing. Students want both faculty members and support personnel to pay attention to them. Administrators, legislators, and the public want to see budgets cut. The tensions are palpable.

The constant tug of war between faculty and staff for larger budgets places more pressure on universities to allocate funds equitably. In doing so, the use of collaborative positions have increased. By increasing the number of these positions, the quality of service to and outcome of students needs to be examined. This paper examines the efficacy of practitioners in dual positions.
COLLATERAL POSITIONS IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

By
Lisa L. Kidd
May 1998
This Research Paper by: Lisa L. Kidd
Entitled: Collateral Positions in Student Affairs

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

4/23/98
Date Approved
Michael D. Waggoner
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

4/23/98
Date Approved
Larry Keig
Second Reader of Research Paper

4/23/98
Date Received
Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
The 1980s recession brought a new kind of thinking to the forefront of business and higher education. Economic struggles continue to plague both, forcing them to "do more with less." In business, this constitutes downsizing of staff to increase profit margins. In higher education, the goal is to control costs. One solution both business and higher education have used is a combined position to contain costs and maintain service. Though technology has contributed greatly to reducing costs in some areas, many areas still require or demand a human resource to perform a job. This is apparent in the field of student services in higher education. It is within this field that there has been an increase in the use of dual, collateral, or collaborative job positions. Appealing as this strategy is financially, there are human costs and concerns. In addition, there is little research regarding collateral positions.

Dual job positions in the field of student services usually have come about as the result of tight university budgets. Outside political, parental, and industrial consumers are becoming concerned about the cost and services of higher education institutions. "The combined effects of revenue shortfalls over the past five to ten years in many states and the erosion of public confidence in higher education has taken a serious toll on institutional capabilities for providing services for students" (Winston & Creamer, 1997, p. 7). By combining two positions into one, colleges and universities not only free up budgets, but also boast about the services their campus continue to offer. Investigators probably need to determine if collateral positions in student affairs serve students well. In this paper I will review the literature on the topic, present findings of student affairs professionals serving in dual roles, and present implications for this practice.

Authors Ursula Wagener and Marvin Lazerson (1995) accurately describe this constant dilemma institutions face:

Staff members in student services argue that students have become their responsibility by the default of the faculty. Faculty members, insisting that they are the university, do not want budgets for student support to remain large or to continue growing. Students want both faculty members and support personnel to pay attention to them.
Administrators, legislators, and the public want to see budgets cut. The tensions are palpable. (p. A60)

The constant tug of war between faculty and staff for larger budgets places more pressure on universities to allocate funds equitably. In doing so, the use of collaborative positions have increased. By increasing the number of these positions, the quality of service to and outcome of students needs to be examined. This paper examines the efficacy of practitioners in dual positions.

Literature Review

The literature regarding collateral positions can be divided into two categories: the student population and the student affairs practitioner. Within these categories, sub-topics can be targeted and discussed.

Student Population

**Student demographics.** The changing nature of the student population on college campuses creates considerable challenges for college officials. As described by Peter Garland and Thomas Grace (1993), the student population of the 1990s is more diversified, violent, technological, and demanding of services than ever before. These changes in society and student population effect the university’s operation by demanding more service outside of the classroom. To serve these students successfully there is a need for the following: additional quality programming, increased services in multicultural support, improved leadership opportunities, continued assistance with career development, and technological support (Garland & Grace, 1993). This look at the university campus suggests the need for expansion of services and personnel instead of a reduction. “Increasingly, the efforts of student affairs aimed at improving student life, integrating new student groups, and attracting and retaining students are becoming critical to institutions attempting to maintain enrollments of qualified students, ensure academic achievement, place graduates, and develop supportive alumni” (Garland & Grace, 1993, p. iii). In a time of downsizing, it is not surprising that even though positions are eliminated, services still remain.

**Quality staffing.** Garland and Grace also see the need of integration of student services
staff, faculty, and administration in order to meet the university’s mission successfully. Through the efforts of all three groups, the vision and leadership will be carried out by all employees of the university, to ensure more qualified staff and complete service to students. Garland and Grace see advantages and an inevitable transition in the future to collaborative positions in higher education:

The involvement in an increasing number of collaborative arrangements inside and outside the institution will reshape the traditional role of student affairs to a role that will be increasingly central and integrated with institutional roles and priorities, a role that will move student affairs beyond the often isolated management of student life to a partnership with faculty and administrators concerned with the entire institution and its responses to changing conditions. (1993, p. 51)

As student demographics change on campus and universities react to that change, an evaluation of the service and employment environment needs to be conducted. Research has taught us that many factors need to be assessed and included in the environment in order to provide high quality service to students. These factors include: organizational goals, human resources, technology, space, support, and funding. Without one or all of these factors, the employee may not be able to perform the job up to quality standards.

The connection between the quality of staffing practices in student affairs and the quality of educational services delivered to students is direct and powerful. Thus any institutional practice that devalues student affairs will lead to disrespectful treatment of the staff and, ultimately, make it unable to deliver high-quality educational services to either students or the institution. (Winston & Creamer, 1997, p. 12)

Enrollment management. It seems as if higher education institutions are at a crossroads. Quality of service may effect enrollment and retention which in turn, may effect the financial success or viability of an institution. When downsizing staff, they may not be concerned enough if student needs are met fully or if they are retaining adequate staff to provide quality service for recruiting and retaining students.
Student Affairs Practitioner

Attrition rate. Collaborative positions in the field of student affairs may contribute additional role stress and create an unhealthy work environment for the employee (Moeckel, 1993). Higher education institutions continue to open more and more positions with a dual job description. The quality of student affairs practitioners work life may be negatively affected by combining two positions. There appears to be a relationship between the development of dual positions and the attrition rate of staff within the field. Attrition research cites the lack of upward mobility and advancement and the lack of opportunity for scholarly pursuit as the top two reasons practitioners leave the field (Evans, 1988). New information has emerged as additional factors in the rising attrition rates. “Role conflict and role ambiguity act to increase employees’ job-related tension and propensity to leave the organization, and decrease levels of job satisfaction. [In addition,] intermediate linkages suggested that employees’ job-related tensions lowered their job satisfaction which, in turn, increased their propensity to leave” (Klenke-Hamel & Mathieu, 1990, p. 792). The factors of role ambiguity and role stress or conflict appear to be prevalent in a collaborative position, where practitioners must split their time, talent, and self between two departments, requiring them to spend more time in one place than the other. Not being able to spend adequate time and energy in both positions may produce feelings of guilt, stress, and pressure to work overtime to compensate lost hours. The combination of role ambiguity, role stress, lack of upward mobility, and lack of opportunity for scholarly pursuit seem to contribute to a rising attrition rate among student affairs practitioners.

Time management. Additional factors effected by dual positions are time management skills, increase in supervisory responsibilities, and a reduction in personal time. “Time management skills, organizational skills, ability to deal with ambiguity and fragmentation of job responsibilities, and stress management skills will contribute to an individual’s success in a dual assignment” (Moeckel, 1993, p. 183). These factors, in conjunction with role ambiguity and role stress, requires further research.

The challenge still remains for the institution to respond strategically to the changes hap-
pening within society. Student affairs professionals are being asked to increase their responsibilities and their vision to help the university plan for the future. In addition, staff has been asked to do more with less for at least fifteen years. Today, many departments in student services are being asked to fill two jobs with one person. Before the challenge can be met successfully, higher education needs to look at the quality of service it is currently giving students and staff. Since there has been little research in this area, exploratory interviews were conducted to investigate perceptions of student affairs staff in dual positions.

Methodology

In this study, I interviewed and surveyed three student affairs professionals who have worked in collaborative positions. My initial contact with them was in person; at that time I briefed them about the topic and how their personal experiences could contribute to the study. The surveys were conducted via the U. S. Postal Service and electronic mail, and included their responses to four specific questions. Each participant was asked: first, to describe their collaborative position; second, to identify the biggest problems they face both professionally and personally in this type of position; third, to describe how they believe the institution has reacted to their needs (e. g., support, including staff, budget, space, and direction); fourth, to explain how they cope with the stress created by this position. Each participant’s collaborative position is at a small, private, religiously affiliated liberal arts college located in the Midwest. All responses describe their dual positions as consisting of some aspect of residence life in addition to another position. To ensure anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms have been provided for each.

Mary, a 1994 master’s graduate in student services from a regional Midwestern university, currently is employed as coordinator of residence life. She supervises 1 assistant director of residence life, 5 hall directors, and 21 resident assistants. Mary has held this position for 1 1/2 years. In her previous job she held a collaborative position for 2 years. The position was split between residence life and student activities. In these roles, Mary supervised 7 resident assistants, 1 work-study student, and 4 intramural student staff members.

Georgia is currently enrolled part-time in a student services master’s program at a regional
Midwestern university. In her collaborative position, she works as area coordinator and residence hall director. Georgia supervises 28 people: 3 hall managers, 19 resident assistants, and 6 service center workers.

Dorthea received her master’s degree in student services in 1996. She is employed as a career counselor and residence hall director. Dorthea supervises 7 resident assistants and 1 assistant residence director.

Each of these student affairs practitioners offers insight into collaborative positions. Mary offers a “removed” opinion, in that she has not worked in a dual position for over a year. This perspective offers a more unbiased review of the positives and negatives of this type of position. Georgia offers the expectations and apprehensions found early in a collaborative position. In her second year in a dual position, Dorthea is re-evaluating her career choice and considering a new career path.

Findings

The respondents expressed personal feelings and observations of their dual position unique to their institution. It is important to evaluate the similarities and differences in these responses because each dual position poses different challenges. For example, each work setting will be dissimilar because of student demographics, position combinations, budget lines, and technological and staff support. At this point, I will describe the responses of study participants to each area of the interview.

Job Description

When asked to explain the dual position in which she worked, Mary described her situation as this: “The first year I was there I was responsible for a women’s hall of around 170, Homecoming, Student Activities Committee (SAC), and I co-advised the Panhellenic Council. The second year, in addition to the responsibilities I already had, I had intramurals, and, for a time, the volunteer clearinghouse added to my responsibilities.”

Georgia described her position as “consisting of 15 hours a week working in the residence life main office [as the area coordinator]. Specifically, I work with our damage billing system,
advise our residence hall association, and am in the process of setting up a program that will integrate faculty into the residence halls."

Finally, Dorthea describes her work situation as this:

I work as both a residence hall director, and as a career counselor. I have an apartment in the hall I supervise, plus a staff office there, and an office in the Career Services complex which I share with another career counselor/hall director. In the hall...I am responsible for the well being of approximately 180 female residents. I do programming, provide counseling, deal with maintenance and physical plant issues, and am the RD on call approximately 7 days per month. The RD position is considered half time. In Career Services, I provide all types of career counseling, including resume review, job search skills, assistance in locating internships, graduate school searches, and career assessments. I am expected to be in the office 20 hours per week, but I am ALWAYS there more.

In addition to describing their jobs, all of them were asked if the job description and interview were accurate as to the position for which they were hired. Mary and Dorthea responded to this question. Mary's response:

The first year I was [there], the job description I had received in my interview was very accurate. I acquired additional responsibilities throughout the year, but that was to be expected. The second year, the additional responsibilities were not something that I had expected. But, we had had some budget cuts and everyone was expected to pitch in and help.

Dorthea's reply was that "the job description and interviews were fairly accurate, but not enough emphasis was placed on the fact that this is essentially two full time positions which have been condensed into one."

From these responses it appears that institutions have been clear in the job position descriptions and interviews they conducted.
Professional and Personal Problems

This question investigated problems that are specific to work in a collaborative position, including stress-related repercussions the practitioners may have experienced. Mary’s response was:

One of the biggest challenges, professionally, was to be able to switch hats at a moment’s notice and to balance enough time between the Residence Life and Student Activities positions. There are times in the year when one position will take up much more time than the other. Even though it was supposed to be a 50/50 split between the two positions, that did not always happen. It was just a matter of staying on top of things and being extremely flexible. Personally, it was difficult to have a life outside of work. In an effort to do everything “top notch,” I often forgot about my personal health and well-being. It took me awhile to realize that whatever I left on my desk would be there the next day and that I had to leave it and take some time for myself. If you don’t take time for yourself it effects your health, state-of-mind, how you interact with others, and sometimes the quality of your work in negative ways. What’s worse is that you might not always realize it’s happening.

Georgia’s experience echoes some of Mary’s experiences:

Problems, well, I am new to my position as Area Coordinator, so a particularly difficult challenge for me has been learning how to manage three halls, balance my collateral assignment, and continue to attend to my education. I have two offices, one in the Residence Life main office area and one in one of my buildings....Another challenge is that I have not been able to be as visible to my residents as I would like to be. I am in the main office for the first half of the day and then am strapped to my office [in another hall] for the afternoon with meetings and paperwork specifically for the halls. At night I feel like I should be studying, spending time with my husband, and taking time for myself. It is not easy. The main stress for me is wanting to do my best in everything that I do and realizing that I simply can’t do it all perfectly, so some things are not as
good as I would like and that bothers me. I tend to be really hard on myself and it shows some days.

Dorthea said:

By far the biggest problem involves time—there just isn’t enough of it. I could honestly be in the Career Services office 40+ hours a week and not get everything done, and I could be available in the hall 24 hours a day and that would not be enough....If I get behind in either part of the position, it only makes it worse, so I try to never be gone unless it is either convenient or unavoidable. It is stressful to me to watch other people who have time to do for themselves, because I wonder what I am doing wrong, since I can’t seem to do that. Also, my personal relationships with friends suffer, because I honestly don’t have time for them.

The problems all have identified was the lack of time both personally and professionally and managing their time between two positions. In addition, how to balance their personal lives without sacrificing the quality of their work continues to be a challenge.

Institution Reaction to Staff Needs

The aim of this question was to see if institutions are providing any assistance to those employed in dual positions, or if they have to cope with doing even more with even less.

Mary’s response reflects the financial concerns at this institution:

The first year I was at [work] I felt I was very much supported and had the resources I needed to do my job well. The second year was a little tougher. [The institution] experienced some budget cuts at the end of my first year. With the budget cuts many people were doing multiple jobs with no increase in pay from the year before. With the extra work load and no compensation, there were some bad feelings. Moral[e] on campus was low and, at times, it was difficult to stay motivated. My supervisor was very supportive and that helped quite a bit. Whenever I needed direction he was available, approachable, and encouraging. My co-workers were also very supportive. It was a big transition year for [the institution] because many changes took place and many faculty, administrators, and staff decided to leave.
Georgia has had a different perspective on her collateral position:

I would have to say that I have some excellent support here. My department has allowed me the time away to pursue my master’s, and [has] been very supportive when I have needed to do something in my halls and can’t be in the office during my scheduled time. I feel that I have enough space and money to do what I need to do. I do have a few tasks that are pretty ambiguous but they are supposed to be, so that does not bother me. The other things that I do for my collateral assignment are pretty easy and if [they] are not I get the instruction I need.

Dorthea does not receive the support from the institution or her co-workers in her present position:

I don’t feel that I have a lot of support, because I work with people who don’t give me any more direction than to tell me to hang in there, and to take my vacation days. Space is a joke; I don’t even have an office or a desk to myself in Career Services—I even share a computer there. No one seems to be able to understand that having no privacy is very hard to work with. Even when I am in my apartment, there is someone who needs something all the time, and I can’t even take a nap for more than 15 minutes without the phone ringing, or someone beating down the door. And there are no solutions offered.

These responses reflect how space, direction, and support by the institution impact employees’ attitudes toward their jobs.

**Coping Strategies**

The final question contained three parts: how they cope in the dual position, what advice they would offer the institution, and what advice they would give to recent graduates looking into collaborative job prospects. Mary began by saying “that a dual position is a great position to have right out of graduate school. Student affairs professionals need to be generalists and it’s a good idea to get experience in a number of different areas.” Georgia said: “I think that one of the keys for me is staying active and not getting strapped to my office too much....I am starting
to become more realistic at the things that I can actually get done. Having a good attitude and fun people to work with help too.” Dorthea is less fortunate, “I was able to cope better last year, when I had a very close friend who worked with me, but she got so fed up with the institution that she quit after last year. I miss being able to commiserate with someone who understands EXACTLY what is going on.”

Coping strategies vary from person to person, even when they are working in similar environments. Advice to institutions and new graduates from these three practitioners is something with which all student affairs staff should be aware. Mary advises:

One piece of advice that I would give is to make sure you make time for yourself and get off campus (if you live on or in). In this profession it’s very easy to sleep, eat, and breathe work. That’s neither healthy nor encouraged. It’s the quickest route to burnout that I know....Also, when looking for a job really feel out what the people are like and honestly evaluate if you can work with them. You will depend heavily on your co-workers. Make sure it’s a positive relationship. Lastly, don’t let the politics of the institution get you down. You’ll have it no matter what institution of higher education you work for. It’s just another part of the job.

Georgia suggests:

I have some work study students assigned to one of my halls. I am playing around with the idea of making one of them my personal assistant. Someone that will help me stay on top of my schedule and to do list....They may say that they only have you working so many hours in one [office] and so many in the other but I would be real upfront in asking them about how their system works. Ask some of the people that are presently in a similar position. They will be able to tell you what is really expected.

Finally, Dorthea offers this advice: “My solution is to be always on the lookout for a new job. Get the details of dual positions spelled out in advance, and know what to expect. Know yourself, and determine beforehand if you are suited to the kind of work and life described.”

Although these coping strategies are not new to student affairs work, it is important to con-
sider these in relation to the collaborative position. These same strategies will be effective if the work environment is perceived as positive and if the employee is able to give quality service to the students.

Discussion

Collaborative positions in the field of student affairs provide positive and negative implications not only for the practitioner but also for the institution. The personal statements above recount experiences and opinions specific to working in a dual job assignment. Three themes emerge from these testimonies: wellness, management skills, and a supportive staff.

Working in a healthy environment promotes employee wellness. All respondents talked about the additional role-related stress related to this type of position. This stress is in part the result of splitting themselves between two positions and their personal lives. Instead of having only one department's problems, staff, and programs with which to worry and work, they have two. Knowing this, and feeling responsible for quality work in both departments, they cannot justify taking the necessary time for themselves. However, work attitude tended to improve when they realized that there will still be work on their desk in the morning no matter how much overtime they worked. This attitude allows the employee to set specific boundaries to ensure that work and personal life are better balanced. Consequently, the ability to balance two positions and a personal life may improve management and organizational skills of the employee. The ability to balance two positions and a personal life may improve management and organizational skills of the employee with considerable costs. The improvement of these skills is accompanied by additional stress, an unhealthy environment, and the chance of burnout.

Handling the extra stress created by these positions requires good management skills. These skills include time management, organization, and delegation. In order to develop these skills effectively, a person needs to possess qualities such as task orientation and discipline. The necessity to possess such qualities can affect the practitioner in a dual position two ways. One, they will grasp the challenge posed to them and acquire skills and experiences that will expand their knowledge base. As Mary indicated it is important and beneficial for student affairs practi-
tioners to be generalists in the beginning of their career. It also is possible that the stressful environment may alienate the practitioner from the field of student affairs. Their coping strategies and attitude may cause them not to perform up to standard, creating a bad situation all the way around.

The attitude of the institution and staff also contributes to the success or failure of a collateral position. Each practitioner made reference to the importance of having a supportive staff, supervisor, and co-workers who can be trusted, depended on, and enjoyed for their company. Additionally, one’s supervisor will be the leading factor in determining and supporting employees within the department, directly affecting productivity, quality, and attitude. “A good supervisor can inspire and motivate a new employee to use his or her talents for the benefit of the institution” (Kinser, 1993, p. 12).

This study reveals the need for further research of dual or collaborative positions. The implications of increased role stress due to role ambiguity are apparent within the three practitioners’ statements. Additionally, an ever-changing society is forcing higher education to find quick and acceptable solutions to many challenges. By taking a closer look at the positive and negative features of a collaborative position, institutions need to address these issues and probably make some adjustments. These adjustments should strive to create the best situation for all involved: students, student affairs staff, and administrators.

Conclusions

Collateral positions need to be thought of as more than just a job description. They require a closer look and further research from student affairs practitioners and higher education institutions. First, the university must be sure that the two positions are manageable by one person. For example, some institutions currently combine the position of residence hall director and career services counselor. Both positions may require many hours per week, with the residence hall director including additional time at night, weekends, and on-call work. In reviewing this collaborative position, one needs to ask not only how well the student is attended to, but also how healthy the work environment is for the employee.
Second, institutions need to see if the employee’s qualifications match that of a collaborative position. Qualified candidates who are organized, disciplined, and able to handle multiple tasks and ambiguous instructions are sorely needed in student affairs work. Additionally, the institution needs to be upfront, honest, and clear when the candidate poses questions during an interview for a position.

Third, orientation and effective management need to be implemented and maintained constantly to ensure a smooth transition, quality service, and a happy employee (Winston & Creamer, 1997). “Role stress is less likely to occur among people who feel empowered in their work setting. The essence of empowerment—self-directedness, trust, transformational leadership, organizational learning, shared values and responsibilities, and multiple feedback systems—may help reduce the likelihood of role stress” (Ward, 1995, p. 42). Having an orientation provides transition not only for the new employee, but for the office staff and students. It is during orientation that the new employee learns many university policies, procedures, faculty, and staff.

Until another solution is offered higher education institutions need to consider these implications and act to reorganize their strained budgets between faculty and staff. It is this action that will help alleviate the unhealthy addition of role-related stress and ambiguity in collateral positions in the student services field, and improve the quality of service to students.
References


